

Kenya

Facts and Statistics

Location: Eastern Africa, bordering the Indian Ocean, between Somalia and Tanzania.

Capital: Nairobi.

Climate: varies from tropical along coast to arid in interior.

Population: 36,913,721 (estimated - July 2007.)

Ethnic Make-up: Kikuyu 22%, Luhya 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 12%, Kamba 11%, Kisii 6%, Meru 6%, other African 15%, non-African (Asian, European, and Arab) 1%.

Religions: Protestant 45%, Roman Catholic 33%, Muslim 10%, indigenous beliefs 10%, other 2%.

Government: republic

The Language

Kenya is a multilingual country. Although the official languages are Swahili and English, there are actually a total of 62 languages spoken in the country (according to Ethnologue). These mainly consist of tribal African languages as well as a minority of Middle-Eastern and Asian languages spoken by descendants of foreign settlers (i.e. Arabic, Hindi, etc). The African languages come from three different language families - Bantu languages (spoken in the center and southeast), Nilotic languages (in the west), and Cushitic languages (in the northeast).

Kenyan Society and Culture

The Kenyan People

Kenya is not a homogenous country ethnicity wise. The make-up of Kenyans is primarily that of 13 ethnic groups with an additional 27 smaller groups. The majority of Kenyans belong to 'Bantu' tribes such as the Kikuyu, Luhya and Kamba. There are also the 'Nilotic' tribes such as the Luo, Kalenjin, Maasai and Turkana. The 'Hamitic' people include the Turkana, Rendille and Samburu. Around 13% of the population are of non-African descent, i.e. Indian, Arab and European.

Religion

The Kenyan Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Around half the population are Christians, 10% Muslim and there are small Hindu and Sikh minorities. The balance of the population follows traditional African, often animist, beliefs. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west and central sections of the country while Muslims cluster in the eastern coastal regions. Most Kenyans interweave native beliefs into a traditional religion.

Group Orientation

Kenyans are group-orientated rather than individualistic. "Harambee," (coming from the Bantu word meaning "to pull together") defines the people's approach to others in life. The concept is essentially about mutual assistance, mutual effort, mutual responsibility and community self-reliance. This principle has historically been practiced by every ethnic group with its roots in cooperative farming or herding. Harambee took on a more political resonance when used at the time of independence by Jomo Kenyatta as a way to bring people together.

The Role of the Family

As you might expect in a group-orientated culture, the extended family is the basis of the social structure. It includes relatives on both sides of the family as well as close friends. Quite often the husband's parents will live with the nuclear family when they get older and can no longer care for themselves. When people marry, they join their families, thus ensuring that there will always be a group to turn to in times of need.

Ancestors

Like most Africans, Kenyans place a large emphasis on the respect and reverence of their deceased ancestors. This is not ancestor worship per se, but rather a belief that when someone dies their spirit lives on and must be acknowledged. The belief is that the person only really dies completely when their relatives no longer remember them.

One's ancestors are thought to be able to influence events in life since they are in a limbo state and closer to God than the living. Therefore, they may make offerings to them or name a baby after one so that his spirit can live in the child. Demonstrating respect towards ancestors is believed to maintain harmonious relationships within the family, extended family, and clan or tribe.