

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

**Kenya**



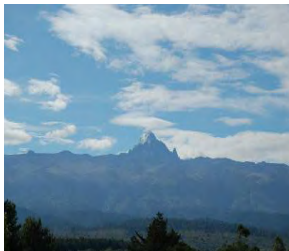
# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 introduces “Culture General,” the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment.

Part 2 presents “Culture Specific” Kenya, focusing on unique cultural features of Kenyan society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC's Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual

symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for



universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

## Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume

that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview— how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

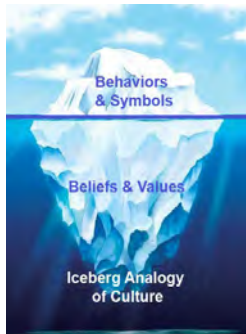
### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the



deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and

wisdom were preserved across generations and ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.

The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it





did not end the European presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue



to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.

Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai,

along with some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states. However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and

reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.

Today, all three of these political organizations still exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by



colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective "national" identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as "tribalism."

This "class versus descent" scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote "greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples" by building partnerships in all segments of "civil society."

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer

individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures, marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.



Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical trajectories of Islamic and Christian

expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity.

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness,



death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families. Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.



First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered

over half the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.



Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of single parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is



defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury

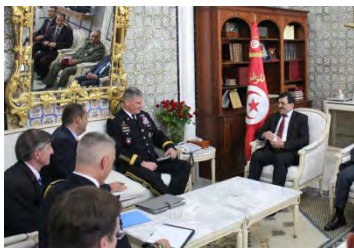
rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to

adopt multilingual practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional “indigenous” languages of their and other ethnic groups. As African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their “release” from colonial rule and to

preserve a sense of indigenous identity.



While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid

confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,

particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also



hamper progress. According to 2023 statistics, about 100 million African children and youth were out of school, of which 35 million were of primary school age.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships



and form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed

human linkage as a core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.



Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome

ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.



Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world’s dominant male and female distance runners,

and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a

growing number of African basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Despite having only 18% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 68% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 95% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.



These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 65% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to basic drinking water, water-born bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This problem is further intensified by lack of federal regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of fastest growing regions in the world.



Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.



International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.

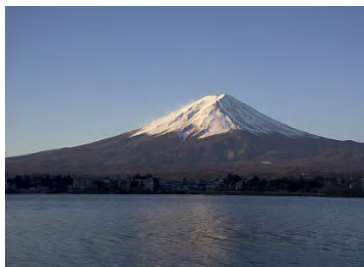
Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Kenyan society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Historical Overview

Located in East Africa, Kenya gets its name from Mount Kenya, the region's dominant physical feature. The resident Kikuyu people originally named the mountain Kirinyaga, which means "mountain of whiteness," because of its snow-capped peak.



According to legend, the British referred to the mountain as Kenya because they were unable to correctly pronounce the original name, thereby establishing an alternative name.

### Ancient Beginnings

While some experts contend that Kenya's Great Rift Valley is the origin of humanity, its current inhabitants are generally believed to have migrated from other places. Consequently, modern-day Kenya is a mixture of Africa's three major ethnicities – Cushites, Nilotes and Bantus.

Cushitic-speaking groups were the first recorded inhabitants of present-day Kenya and are believed to have migrated to northwestern Kenya from Ethiopia about 2000 BC. Primarily pastoralists, a second influx of Cushites began to arrive approximately a thousand years later, and occupied much of current-day Kenya. Existing Cushitic descendants are primarily Somali and other related ethnic groups.

Migrating from the Nile River region and its tributaries through Sudan, Nilotic-speaking groups came to Kenya as early as 500 BC, although the majority of the migration occurred around the 16th century. These pastoralist Nilotes displaced the indigenous groups, mostly the Cushites, with current Nilotic descendants including the Luo, Kalenjin, Maasai, and Turkana.

The third ethnic group, the Bantus, migrated westward and possibly northward into Kenya from areas in Central Africa, likely arriving in the Lake Victoria area sometime between 200 and 1000 AD. Unlike the pastoral Nilotes and Cushites, the Bantus were mostly farmers and cultivators who primarily occupied areas in the Central Highlands and Lake Victoria Basin that remain Kenya's most densely cultivated regions.

### Pre-Colonial Period

Arab merchants began to arrive in Kenya prior to the close of the first millennium, bringing trade and commerce to the East African coast. During the next 8 centuries, the Arabs had a notable cultural influence on the region, converting large numbers of coastal dwellers to Islam. Of note, the local people were agreeable to Islamic conversion, viewing it as a means to escape Arab slave trade. Likewise, Arab and African interaction, intermarriage, and cultural exchanges helped to redefine the indigenous Swahili lifestyle. For example, the Swahili language developed from a combination of Arabic and Bantu dialects,

which Arab traders used to communicate with the indigenous people.

In the late 15th century, the famous Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, became the first European to arrive in Kenya, landing near present day Mombasa



on the east coast. The Portuguese began to colonize the region, slowly establishing control around the turn of the 18th century, and by the 1720s succeeded in ousting the Arabs. The Europeans eventually discovered Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya in the 1800s, spurring interest in the regions natural resources. Along with mining expeditions came predominantly Christian missionaries who established outposts for converting inhabitants living in the interior, resulting in Kenya becoming one of the most Christian countries in Africa.

## Colonial Period

Concurrently, Great Britain began to exert influence in East Africa, and in the 1880s, the Congress of Berlin (a meeting of European powers who governed the European conquest of Africa) declared Kenya a protectorate of Great Britain. The British constructed a railway connecting Kenya's coastal ports with its Ugandan neighbor to the west, bringing opportunities for further expansion to the region. By connecting remote inland areas, the railway brought economic opportunities, along with establishment of three of Kenya's largest cities – Nairobi, Kisumu, and Nakuru. It also attracted a large influx of British settlers who displaced many native Africans to reservations and occupied their property. While Kenyans, primarily the Kikuyus, resisted the incursion, the British military power prevailed, and by the early 20th century, the British forced many Kenyans into slavery, working them on land they had previously owned. This servitude and abuse at the hands of British settlers only served to promote a movement towards Kenyan independence.



## Independence



The Kenyan struggle for self-rule led to establishment of the Kenya African Union (KAU) in 1944 and eventual independence. In 1946, the Kikuyu leader and advocate for Kenyan independence, Jomo Kenyatta, returned to Kenya following 16 years in England, whereby he was elected KAU president. Rallying for “Uhuru,” the Swahili word for freedom, Kenyatta and KAU sought a peaceful solution to Kenya's political and economic problems, although a radical

segment of this group (the Mau Mau) appalled by their isolation sought violence. In the late 1940s, the Mau Mau, primarily consisting of Kikuyus and members of neighboring ethnic groups, engaged in covert attacks, kidnappings, and sabotage.



This uprising served as a mini-Kikuyuan civil war whereby thousands were killed or maimed.

Although declared an illegal organization in 1950, Mau Mau membership continued to grow, with violence against white settlers and their supporters escalating in the early 1950s. The government responded by declaring a state of emergency, arresting Kenyatta and other nationalist leaders, and charging them with the violence. Kenyatta was sentenced to 7 years hard labor, although it was later revealed that he was actually opposed to the violence.

### Self Rule

In a 1957 historic election, eight blacks were elected to the legislature, and within four years, the Kenyan legislature contained a black majority. In 1960, the British government approved independence for Kenya, which was granted in December 1963 with Jomo Kenyatta, released from prison in 1961, serving as the first prime minister. The KAU was renamed the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and established as the country's ruling party. The following year, Kenyatta was elected president, declaring his intention to defeat tribalism in Kenya. He appointed representatives from the various ethnic groups to government posts, including Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga who were early nationalist leaders and members of the Luo tribe. His slogan, still popular today, was *harambee* meaning "let's all pull together."

Kenyatta was reelected in 1969 and during his presidency, Kenya enjoyed a time of general economic and political stability, although some criticized his favoritism for members of his Kikuyu tribe, as well as growing restrictions placed on his political opponents. Kenya began its transition to a one-party state under



Kenyatta's rule, as individual opposition parties were banned and critics of his regime were imprisoned or killed.

When Kenyatta died in 1978, his vice president, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi from the Kalenjin tribe, assumed presidency and was confirmed in a general election later that year. President Moi initially vowed to further transform Kenya's one-party

government by ending corruption and releasing political prisoners held under the Kenyatta regime. However, corruption generally increased, and like Kenyatta, Moi began to restrict civil liberties, first by enacting a constitutional provision that outlawed all political parties except the KANU. These actions led to an attempted military coup in 1982, and after defusing the coup, Moi proceeded to close opposition universities and churches.

By the early 1990s, growing popular unrest and demands for democracy forced Moi to liberalize the Kenyan political system. The turning point came when Western nations withheld foreign aid until Moi agreed to withdraw restraints and hold multi-party elections. Moi relented and narrowly won reelection in 1992 and again in 1997 against an ethnically fragmented opposition.



### **21st-Century Government**

In 2002, President Moi became ineligible to seek reelection as a result of a constitutional provision establishing a two-term presidential limit. While Moi's nomination for his replacement was Jomo Kenyatta's son, Uhuru Kenyatta, an opposition multi-party coalition, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), united to support Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu

politician, who won the election with over 60 percent of the vote. During the early days of his Presidency, Kibaki initiated a system of reforms, including economic, judicial, and educational reforms. However, stalled progress on ending government corruption and establishing a new constitution led to widespread disappointment with Kibaki.

The outcome of Kenya's 2007 presidential election brought violence and chaos. While early results showed opposition candidate Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) defeating Kibaki, the electoral commission declared Kibaki the winner after Odinga's lead faded later in the election. International observers contended that the vote was rigged. Popular among the poor, Odinga had promised to reform government corruption and tribalism, and following release of the election results, tribal violence erupted between the Luo and

the Kalenjin ethnic groups that had supported the two rival politicians. Fighting escalated in January 2008, and by February, more than 1,000 people died in the ethnic conflict.

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan conducted negotiations that led to a power-sharing deal between the government and Odinga's backers. With Kibaki as President, the opposition agreed that Odinga would become Prime Minister. Kibaki was superseded in 2013 by his 2002 presidential opponent Uhuru Kenyatta. Odinga vacated the Prime Minister position in 2013 with its abolishment. In August 2022, William Ruto won a close presidential election.

### The Kikuyu Creation Myth

Myth is central to Kenya's storytelling traditions and a popular method for sharing wisdom across generations and ethnic boundaries.

A popular myth existing within the Kikuyan tribe is the story about creation. According to legend, in the beginning God (Ngai), who lived on Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya), created Gikuyu, the father of the Kikuyan tribe, giving him a share of God's worldly kingdom.

One day God took Gikuyu on top of Kirinyaga to show him a spot in the center of the country with many *mugumo* (wild fig) trees, where Ngai then instructed Gikuyu to build his homestead. When Gikuyu went to the chosen spot, he found a beautiful woman whom he took as his wife, naming her Mumbi (Moulder or Creator). They had nine daughters and no sons, so Gikuyu asked Ngai for sons to marry his daughters. Ngai told him to kill a lamb under the largest mugumo tree and pour the blood and fat on the tree trunk. God then instructed Gikuyu to burn the meat as a sacrifice. Soon after, Gikuyu would find next to the mugumo tree nine very handsome men who would be willing to marry his daughters. Ngai then said, "your people will increase and multiply and fill all the land."

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Political Borders

- Uganda: 580 miles
- Ethiopia: 535 miles
- Somalia: 424 miles
- Sudan: 144 miles
- Tanzania: 478 miles
- Coastline: 333 miles

Having a population of nearly 58.2 million (2024 estimate), Kenya borders the Indian Ocean and Somalia to the east, Uganda to the west, Tanzania to the south, with Ethiopia and Sudan to the north. Kenya's topography ranges from a low-lying eastern coastal plain, a western plateau, and an arid desert-like northern area, to a central highland region. Its most prominent physical features include the Great Rift Valley, Lake Turkana, and Lake Victoria to the east and the centrally-located Mount Kenya.



### Flag

Kenya's flag has three equal horizontal bands of black (top), red (middle), and green (bottom). The red band is edged in white with a large Maasai warrior's shield overlaying crossed

spears superimposed at the center. The shield and crossed spears symbolize the defense of freedom, with black representing the majority population, red the bloodshed in the struggle for freedom, green the natural wealth, and white standing for peace.

### Government Type

Kenya's government is a republic with separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches whose legal system is a mixture of English common, Islamic, and common law. Multiparty

elections are held every 5 years for members of the executive and legislative branches. A 2010 constitutional referendum radically altered the government structure which included the creation of a Senate, 47 counties to replace Kenya's 8 districts, abolition of the Prime Minister position, and the realignment of some powers from the President to the counties.



### **Executive Branch**

Kenya's executive branch consists of a President (presently William Ruto since 2022) acting as chief-of-state and commander-in-chief of armed forces and a Deputy President (presently Rigathi Gachagua since 2022) who heads the government. The President appoints Cabinet members from among those elected to the Legislature. Both executive positions have 2 term limits.

### **Legislative Branch**

Similar to the US system, Kenya's Legislature consists of 2 chambers, a 350-member National Assembly and 68-member Senate. Voters directly elect 337 of the National Assembly constituency – 47 are reserved for women. An additional 12 are nominated by representative political parties. The last seat is that of the National Assembly Speaker elected by Assembly members. The Senate body is comprised of one member from each of Kenya's 47 counties plus 16 women nominated by Senate political parties. In addition, 2 women representing youth, 2 representing the disabled, and one Senate speaker are elected.

### **Judicial Branch**

Highest judiciary body is a Supreme Court consisting of a Chief, Deputy Chief, and 5 judges. The Judicial Service Commission (JSC) nominates the Chief and Deputy Chief, appointed by the President and approved by the National Assembly. Other judges are nominated by JSC and appointed by the President. Under the new constitution, secular courts take precedence over Kadhi courts, which traditionally heard cases regarding personal

matters (such as matrimony) that primarily involved Islamic law based on teachings from the Islamic holy books. This ruling is based on the principal of a separate Church and State, determining that Islamic courts should not form part of the constitution's judiciary.



## Defense

While some Kenyans view the military as a way to improve their economic or social status, it is not a widespread attitude. Overall, the Kenyan military (all services) totals approximately 24,100 personnel, with Air Force

personnel numbering about 2,500. While small by our standards, the Kenyan Air Force has been described as the most professional air force in East Africa. Although well-trained, the Kenyan military has never waged an external or civil war, yet it does play a key role in security cooperation with neighboring countries like Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan.

Unlike many other African nations, Kenya's military has never acted as ruling body in government, although a group of Air Force officers did launch a coup attempt in 1982 that failed when the other service branches remained loyal to the government.

## Air Force Inventory

The Kenyan Defense Force has a total of 64 fixed-wing aircraft at its disposal; 21 combat aircraft, 10 transport aircraft, 33 trainers, and 33 helicopters. In 2024, the US budgeted for \$512 million in peace and security assistance for Kenya. The Cooperative Security Location Manda Bay remains an operational USAFRICOM base. In 2023, the two countries signed a 5-year framework solidifying the US's security cooperation and military partnership with Kenya.



## Kenyan Air Force Rank Insignia



Commander-  
in-Chief



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Warrant  
Officer  
Class II



Flight  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Lance  
Corporal

# Ethnicity

## Ethnic Groups

Along with family, the ethnic group is the most important political, social and economic organization in Kenya, and for most Kenyans, their ethnic identity is an inherent part of their national character. In a 2008 national survey, 42% of respondents said they identified as much with being Kenyan nationals as being members of their ethnic groups, while only 11% said they identified more strongly with their ethnic groups than with their nation.



Kenya has a diverse population that represents Africa's three major language families – Bantu (67%), Nilotic (30%), and Cushitic (3%) – further subdivided into more than 70 ethnic groups, each having its own language or dialect.



## Bantu

The Bantu-speaking people typically live in the coastal, central, and western regions of Kenya. While they occupy less than a third of Kenya's land mass, they account for more

than two-thirds of the population. The most significant Bantu ethnic groups are the Kikuyu, Luhya, and Kamba. The remaining Bantu people comprise a number of smaller ethnic groups to include the Kisii, Meru, Embu, Guba, Kuria, Mijikenda, Pokomo, and Tharaka.

The Kikuyu, who occupy areas around Mount Kenya, account for 17% of Kenya's population and are its largest ethnic group. Migrating to Kenya from east and northeast Africa around the 16th century, the Kikuyu made their homeland near the Kenyan capital city, Nairobi. With their lands among the most fertile in



the country, they have managed to capture prominent governmental and economic positions. Within their tribal network, a council of elders governs Kikuyu affairs to include mediating group issues.



Their rise to economic and political prominence has been relatively peaceful (with the exception of the 1952-60 uprising between anti-colonial Mau Mau and the British army that set the stage for Kenyan independence – see p.3 of *History & Myth*), featuring inter-marital and intercultural exchanges with other ethnic groups.

Throughout history, they have accumulated power by trading food for land with hunting and gathering groups. Renowned farmers, as well as shrewd entrepreneurs, they consider land ownership key to their success.

A majority of Kenya's world-famous coffee and tea is produced in the fertile Kikuyu homeland where farmers grow much of the food consumed in and around the Nairobi area. They are also known for generating much of the business activity in major urban areas. While the Kikuyu bore the greatest setback from brutal British colonial rule (see p.3 of *History & Myth*), they have experienced great success in business and politics since independence.



The Luhya, collectively referred to as the *Abaluhya*, are the country's second largest tribe with 14% of the population. Traditionally residing in the vicinity of Kakamega in western Kenya, they produce a majority of Kenya's sugar cane crop, although population overcrowding has decreased farmland and diminished the Luhya agricultural economy. This congestion has resulted in many Luhya either migrating to neighboring areas in the Rift Valley or abandoning

their agricultural roots and migrating to cities in search of work.



Comprising 10% of the total population and the country's fifth largest group, the Kamba migrated into their traditional homeland, Ukambani, east of Nairobi over 2 centuries ago. The Kamba are famous

woodcarvers and traders, who historically have played a significant economic role in the region extending from Lake Victoria to areas near Lake Turkana by trading commodities with neighboring tribes in exchange for food. Recognizing the Kamba's exceptional intelligence and warfighting skill, the British recruited large numbers of them to serve in the British Army during WWI.

The Kamba practice a unique tradition of naming newborn babies in commemoration of the time or an event surrounding their birth. The event normally takes place days after the birth, with the parents or a group of tribal elderly women having the honor.



### Nilotic

Traditionally herdsman and fishermen occupying Kenya's Rift Valley region around Lake Victoria, the Nilotic-speaking ethnic groups constitute about a quarter of Kenya's current population – the Kalenjin, Luo, Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu as the most significant Nilotic tribes.

Comprising 13% of Kenya's population, the Kalenjin are a cluster of related ethnic groups who share cultural and linguistic characteristics. They include the Kipsigis Nandi, Tugen, and the Elgeyo ethnic groups, and are believed to have migrated into the Rift Valley from Sudan about 2,000 years ago. The Kalenjin are primarily herdsman but also produce honey and other agricultural products. They are well known for their superior

athletic ability, having many world-renown Kenyan distance runners.

The Luo, who make up 11% of the population, entered Kenya from the Nile region of Sudan sometime in the 15th century. Traditionally herdsman, they became farmers and fishermen after disease destroyed their herds. Unlike most other Kenyan tribes, the Luo do not typically circumcise males as a rite-of-passage, choosing instead to pull the child's six front teeth. The Luo also practice wife inheritance, where a brother or relative will inherit the widow of a deceased family member to fulfill the marital commitment and sustain family unity.



Having a passion for music, the Luo produce unique musical melodies on one-stringed lutes (*orutu*) and an eight-stringed *thum*. They are known to be eloquent English speakers and are highly represented among intellectuals.



Instrumental in Kenya's struggle for independence, the Luo continue to play a significant role in national government. Many prominent Kenyan figures are

Luo, including the late father of US President Barack Obama.

The Maasai, Samburu, and Turkana are the ethnic groups most often identified with Kenya even though they comprise a minority percentage of the total population. Nomadic herding tribes, they have resisted modern influences in lieu of preserving their traditional lifestyle. A majority of their men still dress in their customary bright-red garments decorated with bead, feather, and copper ornaments and use red ochre (clay pigment) to adorn their heads, while the women wear colorfully beaded jewelry. Unlike the Kikuyu who value their land, these groups consider cattle their most valuable possession, as well as their primary source for food. However, they have been known to resist killing cattle for food to avoid loss of wealth. They

traditionally consume a mixture of milk and blood from a cow's jugular vein.

Although they comprise only about 2% of Kenya's population, the Maasai are recognized throughout the world as a symbol of Kenyan culture and continue to be a tourist favorite.



They migrated into southern Kenya and northern Tanzania from Sudan about 1,000 years ago, occupying an area containing some of the most popular game parks. Known as courageous lion hunters and warriors (*morani*), the Maasai help maintain the Maasai Mara National Park.

The Samburu settled in north-central Kenya, where they maintain a migratory lifestyle, moving their settlements



(*manyattas*) among a variety of pasturelands, while the Turkana occupy arid land near Lake Turkana in northern Kenya. It is not uncommon for Turkana men to take several wives and practice a unique 3-year wedding ceremony

that culminates when the first child is weaned. Like the Maasai, the Turkana are known to be ferocious warriors and hunters.

## Cushite

The Cushitic-speaking ethnic groups are mainly nomadic cattle herders who comprise a small percentage of Kenya's population. They tend herds of cattle, goats, sheep, and camels in the dry regions of Northern Kenya, areas around Lake Turkana, and in remote coastal regions. Having strong family and tribal bonds with neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia; the Cushites include the Somali, Boni, Borana, Burji, Dassenich, El-Molo, Gabbra, Orma, Sakuye, Rendille, Wata, Yaaka and Dahalo tribes.

## Ethnic Tension

Since ethnicity plays a central role in daily Kenyan living, ethnic tensions are commonplace. Prior to colonialism, these hostilities were based largely on control of internal resources (primarily

land and cattle), with disputes easily resolved through social interaction and inter-marriage. For example, the Kikuyu and Maasai maintained an antagonistic relationship expressed through raiding and plundering, although they also shared inter-marital transfer of wealth and tradition. This



sort of relationship is representative of many ethnic groups in Kenya.

While colonialism brought displacement and slavery for many indigenous ethnic groups, their reprisals eventually led to independence and a means for regaining land and wealth (see p.3 of *History & Myth*). Having a history of strong ethnic identity and self-rule, Kenya emerged from colonialism attempting to construct a democracy from a diverse ethnic landscape that had no national government prior to colonialism.

## Tribalism

Since 1990, Kenya has been governed primarily through a form of autocracy known in academic circles as tribalism, referring to an intense allegiance to one's ethnic identity to the extent that political parties are often divided along ethnic lines with people expecting their politicians to favor their ethnic membership. This

partisanship has fueled violence, and following the 2007 presidential election, a power-sharing agreement was established between President Mwai Kibaki (an ethnic Kikuyu)



and Prime Minister Raila Odinga (an ethnic Luo) as an attempt to abolish tribalism – this effort has seen little success.

### **Humanitarian Crisis**

A humanitarian crisis in Somalia has spilled over into northeastern Kenya, creating an unsustainable overflow of displaced Somalis in Kenya's Dadaab Refugee Complex. Originally built 2 decades ago to hold 90 thousand refugees, the camp currently houses roughly 250,000-300,000. Kenya is therefore reluctant to take in more refugees for security reasons and due to increased pressure on land & resources. Likewise, Kenya's strict encampment policy provides no opportunities for refugees to integrate into the local community, causing increased tensions with the host community (mainly Kenyan Somalis).

## **Social Ritual**

### **Male and Female Initiation**

The rite-of-passage from childhood to adulthood is a hallmark social event in Kenyan society involving initiation ceremonies that vary from tribe-to-tribe. Typically experiencing separate rituals, boys and girls once initiated are considered eligible for marriage, with the age of adulthood varying widely among tribes.



For example, the Gussi mark the passage at 8-years-old with other tribes acknowledging it between 15 and 18 years of age. Kikuyu boys typically at age 18 are initiated by having their ears pierced, their heads shaved, and their faces painted with white earth. Likewise, Pokot girls are initiated at age 12 in a ceremony that includes singing, dancing, and adorning their bodies with red ochre. Also, the Luo have

been known to remove the lower front incisors of boys during coming-of-age ceremonies. Likewise, preparation for marriage is important in Kenya and can involve celebrations that include several days of music, tribal dancing, and special ethnic foods (see p.3 of *Sex & Gender*).

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Fundamental to daily living throughout Kenya, religion is a revered institution with freedom to worship protected by law. Kenyans generally worship openly, with biblical studies taught in both public and private schools. A predominantly



Christian nation (86%), Kenya is composed of approximately 33% Protestant, 21% Catholic, 12% other Christian, with 11% Muslim, and 4% indigenous and Anglican faiths.

## Christianity

Christianity in Kenya can be traced to colonial rule, with Christian missionaries arriving in the late 19th century (see p.2 of *History & Myth*). The establishment of railway allowed easier access to Kenya's interior, and during the early 20th century, mission churches began to take root primarily among the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luhya ethnic groups. While Christianity entered Kenya through the efforts of foreign missionaries, today a majority of clergy and church leaders are native Kenyans. These spiritual leaders are widely respected and influential in Kenyan society,

where they are known for their progressive church politics.



### Protestantism

Widespread throughout the country, the Protestant faith consists of more than 30 denominations,

most notably the African Inland Church (AIC), Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), along with a number of other evangelical, missionary, and independent African Christian churches. The AIC is the

largest and one of its most significant religious institutions. Protestant worship practices vary significantly across the numerous denominations, with some relatively emotional and others restrained.

### **Catholicism**

Established in 1860, the Catholic Church of Kenya (CCK) represents the Vatican's policies on abortion, divorce, and homosexuality and exerts substantial influence on governmental administration of a variety of social programs. Generally conservative, the CCK also has aligned with Protestants to rally for governmental reform, particularly replacing autocratic rule with democracy.



With the Pope as spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church, even in Kenya he serves through his assigned archbishops as spiritual guardian for the local Catholic congregations.

### **Independent Churches**

As mentioned, there are also a number of independent Christian churches that have severed connections with established Christian denominations, most notably the Nomiya Luo Church – the country's first independent church not tied to a denomination outside Kenya. Likewise, there are a plethora of mission churches – some Pentecostal and others a blending of Christian and traditional beliefs – still having a viable presence in Kenyan schools, orphanages, and hospitals.

### **Worship Practices**

Generally enthusiastic when expressing their Christian beliefs, Kenyans customarily use music and rhythm to accentuate their worship experiences, which are generally a variation to typical Western services as you may know them. Gospel and religious music are popular in Kenya and can be heard in a variety of social settings, and it is not uncommon for ministers of the gospel, sometimes referred to as “street preachers,” to publicly confess their beliefs at liberty.



## National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCK)

The NCCK generally represents the Protestant churches. A strong advocate for democracy during the Moi administration (1978-2002), the NCCK continues to play an important role in social and government reform. It has also been on the leading edge for opposing constitutional legislation that would reinstitute Islamic courts and ease restrictions on abortion.

## Social Impact of Christianity

Nearly a third of Kenyan Christians believe the holy Savior, Jesus Christ, will return to earth during their lifetime, a conviction that has served to attract and retain converts to the Christian faith. Their steadfast brand of Christianity has also produced strong opposition to abortion and homosexuality, and other social practices considered less controversial in Western cultures.

## Islamic Faith

A minority of Kenyans concentrated along the coast and the eastern and northern parts of the country near Somalia practice Islam. Likewise, the national capital of Nairobi is home to a large number of Muslims and features several artistic mosques – Islamic houses of worship. As with Christianity, Islam began to

spread into parts of Kenya's interior in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Instrumental in Kenya's cultural development predating colonial times, Islam was brought to Kenya's coastal region in the 8<sup>th</sup> century by Arab traders. Kenya's Islamic

population is comprised of two primary groups: Sunni Arabs (the majority group) and South Asian Shi'a. The two sects are distinguished by their differing views about who should be the rightful leader (*Caliph*) of the Muslim community (*Ummah*). Sunni believe he should be elected, while Shi'a deem he should be a direct descendant of God's final Prophet Muhammad. Muslims customarily pray five times per day.

With more than half its Muslim minority of Somali descent, Kenya has firm social ties to neighboring Somalia. The remainder of Kenya's Muslim population are Oromo speakers (a Cushitic language form spoken by Oromo, Somali, and Afar people from Somalia and Ethiopia) occupying northern Kenya and the Swahili-speaking groups on the coast.

### Origins of Islam

It dates to the 6th century when the Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca, in the country currently known as Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or the "Holy Book," to guide their everyday life. The Qur'an represents a core belief that helps shape Muslims' lifelong values.

### Meaning of Islam

Islam is more than a religion to its adherents – it is a way of life. The term Islam literally means submission, and a Muslim is "a person who submits to God." Islamic doctrine can be summed up in its simple confession of faith, "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."

### Five Pillars of Islam

There are five basic principles of the Islamic faith that all Muslims accept and follow; these are commonly known as "The Five Pillars of Islam."

- **Shahada (Faith):** "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger."
- **Salat (Prayer):** Pray five times a day.
- **Zakat (Charity):** Donate alms to the poor.
- **Sawm (Fasting):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during holy month of Ramadan (*Discussed below*)
- **Hajj (Pilgrimage):** Pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia if possible at least once.

## Islamic Customs

Honoring Muslim traditions, the Kenyan constitution upholds customary Islamic marriage and divorce laws. Despite minor unrest between the Christian and Muslim community regarding the constitutionality of Islamic law, the Muslim community is allowed to practice classical law of Talaq, which prescribes the rules for divorce and varies between Sunni and Shi'a (For more information about the Islamic faith, please visit the AFCLC website).

### Ramadan

The object of Ramadan is to subdue life's passions and draw oneself nearer to God by purifying the body. It is a time for inner reflection, self-control, and reading the Qur'an. Because the Islamic calendar is based on the moon's appearance, Ramadan occurs at a different date each year on the Western calendar. When it occurs during the summer, keeping Ramadan requires great focus and endurance because people will not hydrate for up to 18 hours, despite extreme climatic conditions. It is common for Muslims to break their fast at sunset with a light meal followed by sunset prayer and then dinner.

## Indigenous Religions

As is common among most African countries, Kenya is influenced by local African beliefs and practices, with nearly 40% of Christians belonging to indigenous churches. As with its Christian counterpart, Islam also is influenced by the indigenous African belief system, although most Islamic worship rituals remain unchanged. Likewise, Muslims generally dress according to Islamic rules and adhere to tenets of the Islamic faith.



## Ancestor Spirits

Most indigenous religions share similarities, particularly the belief in ancestor spirits. While Kenyans do not typically worship deceased family members, some do believe that at death the deceased enters a spirit world, whereby they are empowered to influence the affairs of the living. Many of these religions believe that spiritual forces work together in all areas of life, and that pleasing the spirits will earn them success, while displeasing them will bring evil or illness. Others profess the power of the soul's reincarnation, declaring that children are the personification of deceased ancestors.

## Eternal Creator

A common misrepresentation often associated with traditional indigenous religions is the notion their belief system includes a multiplicity of gods. On the contrary, just as in Christianity and Muslim systems, many traditional religions practice Monotheism or the belief in only one God, who is the eternal all-powerful creator.

For example, the Kikuyu tribe who live in the vicinity of Mount Kenya borrowed their god, *Ngai* (also known as *Enkai*), from the Maasai ethnic group. *Ngai*, is believed to live on

top of Mount Kenya, although its recent glacial melting is causing a spiritual crisis among some Kenyans who fear that God is melting.



Among northern Cushitic-speakers, God is known as *Waq* or *Waqqa*. A defining difference between their indigenous views of God as compared to the Christian or Muslim perspective is the indigenous God is not considered omnipresent. Likewise, they commonly summon *Ngai* or *Waq* to a particular location through a sacrificial ceremony, where an animal is sacrificed and communal prayers for prosperity are sung to God the Creator of heaven and all things on earth.

## Nature Spirits

Commonly referred to as animists who worship the natural environment, there are those who believe trees and animals house spirits with supernatural powers over human beings. Their reverence towards nature drives their methods for adapting to their surroundings. For example, some animists suggest that nature spirits use their divine sense of the cosmos to guide their agricultural lifestyle. They look to the sun to predict the seasons and the stars to indicate rainfall.

## Ghosts and Witchcraft

Likewise, belief in ghosts, sorcery, and witchcraft is widespread among indigenous religions, with many Kenyans seeking psychics to intercede on their behalf with the spirit world and use their divine powers to relieve people of hardship. Likewise, these spiritual powers are expected to combat the evil work of witches and sorcerers, who unlike psychics, are believed to use their supernatural powers to cause harm rather than benefit.

On occasion, Christianity is used in conjunction with psychics to counter the effects of evil powers. For example, it is acceptable practice to blame misfortune on the acts of alleged witches, while depending on one's Christian faith to negate the associated adversity. More commonly, Kenya's Catholic Church is losing some of its membership exclusively to psychic worship or witchcraft.



## Indigenous Celebrations

As with Christianity, indigenous worshipers celebrate memorable occasions. For example, the Maasai traditionally welcome the beginning of the rainy season with a celebration lasting several

days, where besides sharing festivities, they also pray for the wellbeing of their livestock. They hold ritual dances and adorn themselves with body art. Likewise, the Kikuyu commemorate the start of the planting season with warrior dances, whereby men paint their bodies blue with white patterns, dress in leopard or zebra skin robes, and carry spears.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Importance of Family

“Familia ya kwanza” means family first in Swahili, and most Kenyans share this attitude. To them, family is at the center of most business and social relationships, and they typically make decisions with the family in mind. Kenya, like many East African countries, is struggling to preserve the traditional extended family structure, which is the cornerstone of most African institutions and used to connect multiple families by both blood and marriage. This tradition is gradually eroding as evolving social and economic conditions cause many African people to organize in ways that are compatible with modern practices.

### Extended Family Unit

An informal welfare system that ensures all its members are sustained, the Kenyan extended family unit generally is comprised of two or more nuclear families and tends to be rather large. However, as you travel throughout Kenya you can expect to see a variety of family configurations. In fact, in some regions, particularly in urban area, the extended family may be underrepresented, as smaller single-parent and nuclear families are on the increase.

There are a number of social conditions that have influenced these changes in the traditional family component. Inspired by Western influences, a growing trend towards more monetary-based subsistence patterns, along with an increased literacy rate, has altered both traditional family size and gender roles (see p.1 of *Sex & Gender*). For example, it is more commonplace for male heads-of-household to seek employment outside the home, and in some cases, to remotely-separated locations – a pattern that is altering the traditional role of not only the husband, but also the wife, who is faced with more decision-making responsibility



in her spouse's absence. Moreover, family size has plummeted from an average of 10 children in traditional polygynous families, whereby the husband may have multiple wives, to 3 children in urban homes.

Likewise, HIV/AIDS has had a profound impact on the modern urban family. In cities, such as Nairobi, HIV has claimed the lives of many parents, resulting in more single-parent families, and even families led by older children and other living relatives, as well as an increasing number of orphaned street children. Likewise, widows of HIV patients rarely remarry, while single mothers will likely not marry if HIV positive.

### Housing

Large, extended families often live together in homes or small compounds having several buildings. For example, the Maasai and other rural tribes often live in a *kraal*, consisting of a dozen or more huts built in a circle surrounded by a



fence. Historically, this practice stems from the need to protect families from wild animals and intruders. Housing in Kenya can vary from mud and grass huts and simple block and corrugated



tin homes in rural areas to modern urban apartment buildings. Most family interaction occurs in an outer "courtyard," where family members generally perform household tasks and gather to visit and tell stories (see *Technology & Material*).

### Family Lineage

Kenya is generally a patrilineal and patrilocal society, which means the extended family resides with or near the elder male head-of-household, with family descent and inheritance following the male line. With this arrangement, it is common for all adults to function as parents while adolescents can treat cousins as their own siblings. Rural tribes such as the Maasai

and other more traditional ethnic groups have managed to preserve this customary extended-family system to include polygynous marriages and more traditional gender roles.



However, as noted earlier, the shift towards urban living patterns has disrupted some of the traditional close-knit family bonds and even prohibited many urban couples from residing with or even near the extended family unit.

## Marriage

As in most African cultures, marriage remains both a rite-of-passage and a method to sustain the extended family, although in urban areas, literacy and modernization have altered marriage customs. For example, while polygyny remains common in many rural villages and among mobile pastoralists, such as the Maasai, it has become less common in modern urban areas due



to the expense of providing for more than one wife and because the practice is becoming unacceptable to contemporary Kenyan women.

Traditionally, polygyny promoted a larger family-support network and provided a means to increase wealth. It

also served as a means to continue propagation in cases where the first wife is infertile or too old to bear children. It was also customary for brothers to marry their siblings' widows, primarily because family values prohibited a widowed family unit to remain void of a male head-of-household.

Generally, both rural and urban Kenyans rely on tribal customs regarding marriage practices. For example, Muslims are prohibited from having more than four wives, although some tribal groups, such as the Luo, have been known to have as many as five. Today, Christian marriage laws permit only one



legal wife even if their customary tribal law allows for multiple wives.

Likewise, the husband is expected to provide a separate dwelling within the compound for each wife, or adjacent houses in urban areas – which as mentioned earlier, can become a rather expensive arrangement.

### **Arranged Marriages**

The marriage-partner selection process is a notable variation to Western customs, as courtship or dating is rare in Kenyan society, same as most collective family-oriented cultures. Typically, the groom or his family approaches the bride's relatives and requests the marriage, which if accepted, the bride can refuse, although rarely does she disagree with her family's decision. Once families seal the marriage agreement, they then negotiate bridewealth, a payment from the groom's family to the bride's to compensate for loss of her labor. Serving as a covenant between the two families that oftentimes lasts for generations, the bridewealth traditionally was paid with livestock or farm products, although increasingly with cash.

### **Divorce**

As with other modern societies, marital separations and divorce are becoming increasingly common practices in Kenya, although generally discouraged by society at large. Both family and community compel couples to settle their differences without resorting to divorce, with family interest primarily based on avoiding the return of bridewealth. Women rarely initiate divorce, and when they do, it is usually for cruel treatment. When a marriage does result in divorce, the estranged woman is viewed as a failure while the man is not.

### **Authority/Respect for Elders**

As in most African cultures, elders are highly revered in the extended family unit and considered the formal authority figures whose guidance is usually endorsed without question. The father still retains the mantle of authority, although dwindling resources and



outside influences have equalized, at least informally, the role of the wife. As mentioned earlier, the economy has forced many Kenyan males to seek urban employment, with the wives becoming the household authority figures.

### **Child-Rearing**

Traditionally, the extended family promoted a very collaborative child-rearing environment that still exists in most rural areas. Girls begin caring for younger siblings at an early age, and it is not unusual to see girls as young as 5- or 6-years-old taking care of an infant. Traditionally, girls were taught to do household chores and care for children, while boys learned how to herd livestock and tend fields. In urban settings, there is an obvious erosion of this family collaboration, whereby child-rearing presents challenges as extended families decrease in size and structure. As in Western cultures, urban schools and social networks may share a nurturing role that once belonged exclusively to extended family members.



Likewise, childcare becomes even more of an issue when both parents work outside the home, which is becoming a more common occurrence. Mothers will often take young children to work with them or rely on older siblings to care for smaller children, as daycare is rare in Kenya. More affluent families are able to hire house girls to care for children.

### **Family Rapport**

- Kenyans proudly enjoy talking about family.
- It is appropriate for Airmen to show interest in and inquire about Kenyan family members.
- Also proper to share family stories and photos.
- Be prepared for Kenyans to ask personal questions about your marital status and family relations.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Gender Relations

A popular Kenyan proverb says “Man is the head of the family, woman the neck that turns the head.” This principle generally describes a traditional Kenya of the past, whereby traditionally, gender roles in predominantly rural areas were distinct and well-defined: men controlled the livestock in herding tribes, with women responsible for household chores and food-gathering to include farming. However, contemporary influences such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, and rising literacy rates, particularly among women, have altered Kenyan social institutions and popular views about gender and sexual relations. Despite Kenya’s narrowing gender gap in many urban areas, where up to 72% of women work outside the home, traditional gender roles still remain in many rural parts of the country.



### Women’s Roles

With an increase in family migration to urban centers, traditional marriage relations gradually are changing (see *Family & Kinship*). While the wife generally accompanies her husband to the city, in some cases she remains in the rural household, with the husband commuting. Many of his responsibilities as head-of-household are delegated to the wife, who also retains her traditional household duties, and despite the

increased workload, women remain subservient, with men commonly controlling the family finances.

In urban areas women have greater opportunities to earn an

education and seek a profession outside the home, and in some cases, her traditional role as mother and wife takes second place to her profession. Likewise, it is common for professional women to experience difficulty reconciling their professional and traditional family roles, sometimes resulting in separation or divorce. There is also a growing trend toward single women choosing not to marry at all.

### **Professional Women**

It is more common to see Kenyan women participating in previously male-dominated aspects of society, with an increasing number of educated women disregarding traditional motherhood for a marriage arrangement whereby both spouses agree to remain childless to focus exclusively on career building. In some cases, women elect not to marry at all, as they view it distracting to their professional ambitions.



Women increasingly are seeking employment in the service industry, where they occupy one-third of the labor force, although their status and financial compensation generally is lower than their male counterparts'. Conversely, men view female independence a threat to traditional male dominance, remaining unsupportive of women achieving professional success despite their qualifications. However, urban women are beginning to acquire higher-ranking positions in a variety of vocations to include occupying 81 National Assembly seats and 21 Senate seats in 2024.

### **Educational Opportunities**

While primary and secondary education is free and accessible to all school-aged children (see *Learning & Knowledge*), girls normally do not perform at the level of their male counterparts, especially in rural areas where traditional female gender roles require them to stay home rather than attend school, nor do many graduate. Likewise, differences are apparent in colleges and universities, where men represent a majority (57%) of the student population. However, 51% of all graduate students are female.

## Sexual Relations

Largely as a result of Western influence, sexual perspectives are changing in Kenyan society. In this traditionally male-dominated society, sexual relations served exclusively to produce offspring, although gradually as gender roles have altered, so has the perspective regarding romance and its integral role in a marital relationship.



Sexual awareness has also served to promote a promiscuous urban sex profession targeted at tourists predominantly traveling in coastal areas.

Young women determined to achieve independence view this occupation as a lucrative source of income. In a country with a severe HIV/AIDS problem, this promiscuity only serves to enhance the disease crisis, as well as increase the rate of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried women, many of whom are unable to adequately support themselves.

**Homosexuality in Kenya:** Homosexual acts are prohibited by Kenyan law, with a maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment, which may extend to 21 years in specific aggravating situations. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Kenya. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## Rite-of-Passage

In most herding tribes, there are unique male rite-of-passage rituals marking transitions first to adulthood and then to elder status. Boys generally transition into manhood (referred to as warriorhood) during a prescribed 5-year timeframe, marked by a series of tribal rituals. Through years of experience herding livestock and heading their family households, seasoned males anticipate becoming tribal elders, whereby they will oversee the community's social institution. Like transition to manhood, this transition from warrior to elder is also celebrated through ritual.

Likewise, females also experience rite-of-passage initiations, with girls assuming the honorable roles of wife and eventually motherhood (see *Political & Social Relations*).

## Female Circumcision

A highly controversial practice throughout Africa and internationally, female genital mutilation (FGM) has been outlawed in Kenya. Affecting more than 15% of Kenyan females, this practice has been viewed as a form of religious practice to mark the passing of an adolescent female into puberty. It



involves physical cutting and altering parts or all of the female genitals with the scope of the practice varying by ethnic group.

Originally, the ritual was intended to preserve a woman's chastity and reduce her prospects for

infidelity, although when 19th-century colonial administrators and missionaries sought to abandon the ritual, FGM became a popular means to preserve ethnic identity.

Elderly women, nature healers, or community midwives have traditionally conducted the circumcisions, although more recently medical professionals are being hired to perform the procedures to avoid physical complications.

Both international and Kenyan human and women's rights groups are vocally opposed to FGM, particularly since medical research has determined FGM results in lasting physical and mental side effects. Similarly, there are organizations working to identify acceptable alternative practices, and there are some positive indicators the ritual is slowly losing its attractiveness.

However, there are still contemporary proponents of the practice, who believe FGM is a necessary cultural means to prevent infidelity and transmission of HIV/AIDS.

## Property Succession

Traditionally, inheritance passes from father to son in Kenya, with women facing legal and cultural obstacles to property inheritance. Women generally own less than 5% of land, and it is difficult for unmarried daughters to receive an inheritance. Although progress has been made, legal and cultural boundaries remain.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

## Official Languages

Most Kenyans commonly speak the two official national languages, Swahili and English, along with their respective ethnic language. Also referred to as Kiswahili, Swahili was chosen the indigenous national language from among 30 or more ethnic languages because of its resemblance to the various Bantu (largest ethnic group) dialects. While various groups typically speak their own native tongue within their respective communities, they normally use Swahili or English to communicate externally. For example, pre-school children are taught at home in their local language, while they receive formal school instruction in Swahili and English (see p.3 of *Learning & Knowledge*).

Originating along Kenya's coastline around the 13th century, Swahili was primarily influenced by Arabic – secondarily by English, Persian, and Hindi. While Swahili contains a variety of dialects, Zanzibar (originates from an island area on Tanzania coast) is the most common.



English is widely used in business, public education, and government – particularly for drafting legislation. Television broadcasts and print materials are normally in English and Swahili; while radio programs are broadcast in Swahili, English, and other African languages, depending on the location.

## Ethnic Languages

Spoken predominantly in rural communities, Kenya's ethnic languages correspond with the three largest groups – Bantu (69%), Nilotic (21%), and Cushitic (6%) – which include a variety of dialects and sub-dialects.

Bantu speakers are divided geographically into the western (Luhya, Kisii, and Kuria), central (Kikuyu, Kamba, Meru, Embu,

Tharaka, and Mbeere), and coastal (Mijikenda, Taveta, Bajun, Pokomo, Taita, and Swahili) groups.

Unlike the various Bantu groups, Luo is the only pure Nilotic language (also spoken in Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania), although a hybrid Nilotic/Cushitic blend, known as Paraniotic, is spoken by a small group of Kalenjin, Maasai, and others. Related to those spoken in northern Africa and the Middle East, Cushitic languages are primarily spoken among a small minority of herdsman in northern and coastal Kenya.

## Sheng

Spoken mainly in urban areas, an emerging “slang” language, known as Sheng, is developing primarily among rural youth groups migrating from throughout Kenya and settling predominantly in Nairobi’s slums. Using Swahili sentence structure and grammar, Sheng is primarily a blend of English and other languages, with various subgroups having their own distinct vocabulary.



Quickly emerging to represent a unified Kenyan national identity, Sheng has become popular at all levels throughout Kenyan society and is even spreading to rural areas, as well as internationally.

## Social Greetings

Generally polite and friendly, Kenyans usually greet others with a handshake and a simple “hello,” followed by inquiries and exchanges about family. When greeting multiple people in a group, it is proper to individually shake hands with each person. The typical Swahili “hello” is “Jambo,” which is generally followed with “Habari gani?” meaning “What is the news?” or just “Habari?” The normal response is “Mzuri,” meaning “Good,” or “Salama,” which translates to “Peaceful.” When departing, Kenyans may say “Tutaonana,” meaning “we will see each other,” or in the evening, they may reply “Lala salama,” or “sleep peacefully.” Common English greetings are also used in Kenya.



## Greetings

- Greetings are an inherent part of social interaction and typically include inquiries about family.
- A handshake with a close friend is more prolonged than with a casual acquaintance.
- Close friends and family generally hug and kiss once on each cheek.
- To show respect to an elder or someone of status, it is proper to grasp the right forearm with the left hand while shaking hands.
- The most common greeting is “Jambo” (“Hello”), which typically accompanies the handshake.
- Small talk during a greeting is a critical part of social interactions and should not be avoided.
- Kenyans recognize professional or honorary status by using appropriate title with the surname, for example, Dr. Smith or Professor Jones.
  - Once a close personal relationship is established, it is acceptable to address each other by title and first name, first name alone, or nickname – best for your Kenyan counterpart to initiate first-name basis.
- “Mama” is a term of endearment reserved for elderly women, while “Mzee” is for elderly men.
- Children will generally refer to adults as Aunt or Uncle, even if there is no family connection.

## Greeting Close Friends & People of Status

When male companions meet, they normally shake hands and embrace, keeping their hands clasped for a few moments while speaking. As a sign of respect, particularly towards elderly and

people of status, they typically grasp their right forearm with the left during the handshake. In the Maasai tribe, children commonly greet elders with a slight bow with the elder responding by placing an open palm on the child's head. Another gesture unique to some rural areas involves men spitting on either side of their hand just prior to shaking hands with someone they consider inferior.

Among female friends, a handshake is appropriate in most situations, with close friends and family exchanging a kiss on the cheek along with a hug.

Kenyans generally greet close friends with humorous enthusiasm. For example, elderly women may swing their arms from behind their body to smack and clasp their hands in mid-air, accompanied by verbal greetings and loud laughter.



### **Greetings Between Opposite Sexes**

For the most part, greetings between men and women are passive or subdued. While a handshake is the most common form of greeting, it is proper protocol of the man to shake her hand only when she initiates the handshake. In some instances, close friends also may kiss lightly on both cheeks. Likewise, the verbal greeting, “Jambo,” usually accompanies the handshake.

### **Communication Style**

Generally respectful and soft spoken, Kenyans tend to avoid direct and outspoken communication and are often reluctant to show emotion – a characteristic that is deeply ingrained in their culture. Kenyans typically express themselves indirectly using an eloquent speaking style which may include a combination of metaphor, allusion, and wit. They often use exaggerated phrases to emphasize a point.

Normally, Kenyans tend to be non-confrontational and offer what they believe to be the expected response rather than say something that might embarrass another person. Honor and

dignity are crucial attributes in their culture, and they will go out of their way to keep from doing anything that could bring shame to another person. Therefore, it is important to treat your Kenyan colleagues with utmost professionalism and never behave in a manner that could cause embarrassment or loss of dignity or respect.

While Kenyans are generally reserved and diplomatic in public settings, particularly among strangers, their communication style is more direct and informal with close friends and family. Once you establish relationships with your host-nation counterparts, you will be able to interact with less formality.

### **Gestures**

Kenyans commonly use gestures or body language to emphasize or reinforce their words. When agitated or excited some Kenyans generally express themselves closely and very



passionately, appearing to be on the verge of having a physical altercation. Keep in mind that most gesturing is harmless, even if it is more animated than you are comfortable with or accustomed to.

They appreciate modest demeanor and typically only raise their voices during disagreements, although you may encounter people speaking louder in rural areas. Expressing anger is sometimes considered a sign of mental

instability. Kenyans pride themselves on their ability to control their emotions and appreciate the same in others.

### **Constructive Criticism**

When interacting with your Kenyan counterparts, you may on occasion find it necessary to provide corrective guidance, and it is important for you to know the proper way to approach them. While constructive criticism is viewed as a normal part of American social relations, it is considered demoralizing to publicly correct a Kenyan and usually results in his loss of dignity and respect.

**Consult privately:** If possible address the person about the issue in private to avoid public humiliation, and if not possible, address the issue indirectly by not pinpointing a certain individual or group. First provide positive feedback before suggesting improvements. It is best to frame your comments as a friendly conversation, stressing that you aim to teach and mentor by offering constructive improvements rather than assign blame or dictate your own agenda.

**Promote confidence:** Make comments such as “as you know” to show confidence in your Kenyan counterpart, even if he may not know. It's effective to say “We find it useful to ...” rather than “you didn't respond correctly.” This approach places no blame on him yet stresses the most important points you expect him to learn.



### **Conducting Meetings**

Some Kenyans may follow a scheduled agenda, while others tend to meet on a more casual and informal basis. However, in general, business interactions are hierarchical and formal.

In their culture, it is imperative to develop a personal relationship prior to conducting business, and therefore, any attempt to bypass or rush what tends to be a time-consuming process could hamper success. Patience is necessary to building effective cross-cultural relations. Reaching consensus or agreement generally takes longer than Americans are accustomed to, and it may require several meetings to accomplish what you would generally handle via a routine phone call.

Likewise, meetings seldom have a scheduled ending time, as it is considered more important to focus on building relationships than timekeeping. The meeting will end when everyone has had their say and the most senior Kenyans decide to adjourn.

Kenyans value history and tradition. Therefore, you should offer a historical framework when trying to introduce new ideas or concepts. Do not get frustrated if they ask questions until they feel comfortable and agree to proceed.

## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

### Giving Appropriate Gifts

- Kenyans typically exchange gifts during significant events or when invited to dine.
- Practical inexpensive gifts are the norm.
  - Kenya is a poor country – a gift item the person could not generally afford will be appreciated, although it is best to avoid expensive gifts.
- Wealthier Kenyans traditionally give small gifts to servants or trades-people at Christmastime.
- If invited to dinner at a Kenyan's home, bring pastries, flowers, or sweets for the hostess. In rural areas, gifts of sugar or tea are common.
- It is considered thoughtful to wrap gifts nicely.
- Kenyans often give gifts in hand-woven bags called “*kiondo*.” The host or hostess typically returns it to the guest with a small gift inside.
- Do not give alcohol if your host does not consume it or if he is Muslim. When in doubt, do not give it.
- Gifts should be given using the right hand or both hands. Avoid using only the left hand, as it is considered unsanitary.

## Useful Translations

ENGLISH	SWAHILI
Thank you	Asante sana
Hello	Jambo
Good morning	Habari ya asubuhi
Good afternoon	Habari ya mchana
Good evening	Habari ya jioni
Good night	Usiku mwema
Thank you	Asante
Excuse me	Samahani
Please	Tafadhali
You are welcome	Karibu
Sorry	Pole
My name is...	Ninaitwa / Jina langu ni...
What is your name?	Unaitwa nani?
Where are you from?	Unatoka wapi?
I come from...	Ninatoka...
How much money?	Shilingi ngapi?
Don't worry	Usijali
Safe journey	Safari njema
Water	Maji
Do you speak English?	Unajua kizungu?
Pardon	Samahani
Good / Fine	Sawa / Sawasawa
Listen	Sikiza
What?	Nini?
Why?	Kwa nini?
Where?	Wapi?
Who?	Nani

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 83%
- Male: 86%
- Female: 80% (2022 estimate)

### Traditional Learning Style

Much of Kenya's history and tradition are preserved in oral legends passed along through familial lineages, although many folktales, particularly older ones, have not been recorded and are subject to extinction.

Besides preserving history and legend, folktales also serve to help maintain group identity and strengthen ethnic ties. Stories vary from fables about a group's origins and traditions to great feats of bravery that normally relate to an important historical event or period.



### Education Origins

The roots of modern education in Kenya can be traced to the 19th-century colonial period, when Christian missionaries brought the concept of organized education to Kenya. Besides teaching basic reading and writing skills to facilitate their

ministry, they also include instruction on practical survival skills such as carpentry and crop cultivation. While this practice provided education to a core of people in and around mission schools, it was unable to reach many remote areas.



### Education System

Since independence, education in Kenya has been a work in progress. Its system resembles a Western model, consisting of

8 years of primary school, followed by 4 years each of secondary school and college. Students are administered comprehensive examinations to determine eligibility to advance to secondary and college levels.

However, Kenyan schools have been plagued with corruption (particularly with advancement examinations), unaffordable costs, and poorly paid teachers, with a resultantly high student-to-teacher ratio. The elimination of primary-grade school fees in 2003 has brought improvement, with enrollment rates increasing and primary school becoming more available to even the poorest children.



Likewise, the government began to offer free secondary education to most Kenyan children in January 2008, although this endeavor has not seen equal success with free primary education. Secondary enrollment has not increased significantly, particularly among the poorer rural children who work at home to help support the family.



Besides poor attendance rates, many children who do attend school have difficulty advancing. Statistics show that more than 1.13 million primary-aged children do not attend school and only 59% of those enrolled will complete upper secondary. Consequently, these statistics serve to highlight an educational system needing reform. The government has pledged to make improvements, particularly providing quality education in the rural and poverty-stricken areas in addition to the urban centers. On a positive note, current school enrollments are at an all-time high.

### **Mission Schools**

Mission schools continue to provide education and, in many cases, a place for underprivileged and orphaned children to live.



Located throughout Kenya, these schools typically are found in rural areas and slums, thereby providing education to thousands of children who have no physical or financial access to public schools. Likewise, American and European missionaries remain active in establishing schools for the growing number of street children in and around urban areas.

### Basic Curriculum

Rural children initially are taught in Swahili or sometimes their native language, with English introduced in the



first and second grades and is the primary language used for all subjects (except Swahili language classes) after the third grade (see p.1 of *Language & Communication*). Urban children are usually taught in English from the beginning.

### Curriculum

Primary grades, commonly called "standards," provide instruction in

- Language
- Mathematics
- History
- Geography
- Science
- Arts
- Religion

Secondary grades, called "forms," emphasize academic subjects, especially science and vocational subjects at the upper secondary level.

## Universities

Kenya provides remarkably comprehensive university and college opportunities, although these institutions are generally overcrowded. Public universities offer a wide range of programs covering social sciences, agriculture, business, education and technology. Private universities and colleges throughout the country offer instruction in political science, communication,



agriculture and vocational skills.

Public and private universities have a total enrollment of around 563,000 students, with about 80% in the public universities. Over 275,000 other students are enrolled in mid-level colleges

where they study courses that lead to certification or a diploma in various technical and vocational fields.

### Kenyan Advanced Learning Institutions

- The University of Nairobi
- Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
- Egerton University
- Moi University
- Maseno University
- Masinde Muliro University
- Several private universities including the United States International University

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Time

You may hear a Kenyan say, “Hurrying has no blessing,” which means they tend to have a more relaxed view of time than most Americans and typically do not rush. In contrast to most Western cultures, Kenyans consider time an endless commodity rather than a perishable asset.



In rural areas making advance appointments is not as common as in urban areas. Many rural Kenyans generally live-for-the-moment and are spontaneous in fulfilling engagements. Therefore, appointments are subject to last-minute postponement or cancellation (see p.6 of *Language & Communication*). It is preferable not to schedule them more than a day in advance – it is wise to call in advance to confirm availability. It is not uncommon for Kenyans to meet on short notice when convenient. Generally speaking, it is not unusual for them occasionally to be late for an appointment, as Kenyans do not value punctuality (this view varies in urban areas). As in American culture, the higher the person's status, the more likely you will have to wait on him.

Therefore, Kenyans generally consider delays or cancellations an inherent part of life, believing it is useless to get frustrated over events beyond their control. It is best not to appear impatient and demanding, which they consider rude behavior.



Kenyans value relationships, so expect to spend time engaging in small talk with your host to get to know them better (see p.2 of *Language & Communication*).

This should not be considered a waste of time but embraced as a chance to build a relationship. Be polite and allow your host to decide when it is time for

business. Kenyans rarely schedule a meeting's end because they believe it is more important to finish with social time rather than dwell on a schedule.

In most businesses, employees will commonly arrive early or on time because they often leave home early in anticipation of unexpected delays due to bad weather, poor roads or unreliable public transportation. Heavy rains frequently slow things to a standstill in many parts of the country.



### **Kenyan Concept of Personal Space**

Kenyans, as most collective societies, view personal space to be closer than people from individualistic cultures, such as America. Kenya is a tremendously open and friendly society, where touching a shoulder or arm in conversation is common – Kenyans naturally touch and stand close when conversing, with most conversations occurring at arm's length or as close as shaking hands. Keeping your distance during conversations can be misinterpreted as rudeness by Kenyans.

It is common to see men who know each other well walking and talking while holding hands. It is also not unusual for good friends to be seen holding hands, hugging, or touching each other affectionately while they talk. It is less common to see men and women holding hands or displaying affection in public, as this is considered inappropriate behaviour. Conversely, touching



is usually minimized when conducting business, as it is usually reserved for close friendships.

Many Kenyans, particularly those from rural areas, often grow up in crowded homes and have very few personal possessions. They share everything so there is little concern for another person's belongings or space. While waiting in lines Kenyans will stand very closely together without regard for personal space.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Introduction – Expressive Culture

Kenyan culture like all cultures offers a variety of “aesthetic” experiences, featuring such expressions as the visual arts, literature (written and oral), music and theater. These experiences are oftentimes intertwined with religious ritual and behavior, where in American culture we tend to disassociate art from religion. Expressive cultures tend to use aesthetics to define their ethnic identity, as seen in the way they adapt their attire to climate, engage in recreation and sport, and produce their music and art.



### Dress

Living in predominantly warm climate, Kenyans usually dress for comfort, with clothes made of light fabrics popular among both men and women. Most Kenyans dress in conservative Western-style clothing, with some people adding traditional African elements of color and appearance. Secondhand clothing imported from Europe and America is very popular and tends to be very affordable, making dry goods a profitable market in

Nairobi and other cities. Most school children are required to wear uniforms to school, particularly in urban areas.

A snapshot of a Nairobi street or marketplace may remind you of America, where urban clothing styles



are remarkably similar to what we are used to, although a bit more conservative. Kenyan men commonly wear short-sleeve shirts and long trousers, along with a light blazer or sweater. Young men often wear western sports jerseys, baseball caps, and logo t-shirts.

Women choose long pants or skirts, typically extending below the knee, although sleeveless clothing is generally considered inappropriate and immodest (younger urban women are more liberal). Women typically wear headscarves known as *khangas* around their waist as a skirt, although urban dwellers dress more like Americans. Popular in East Africa, specifically in Kenya and Tanzania, *khangas* symbolize emancipation from slavery and are made by sewing brightly colored handkerchiefs called *lessos* into larger pieces of fabric. They are also used as a protective shawl for infants and small children. *Khangas* with beautiful patterns and Kenyan proverbs printed on them and *kikois*, a type of sarong for men in many different colors and fabrics, are popular Kenyan products.

### Traditional Attire

Some rural people still wear traditional tribal clothing – particularly the Turkana, Samburu, and Maasai – to include sheets and animal skins. Others have also adopted West African garments as their traditional dress, including the *kitenge*, a type of kilt that may be worn during special celebrations.



The Samburu tribe uses adornment and body art to enhance physical beauty, particularly unique hair styling and body painting to represent delicacy. The Turkana people use ostrich eggshells to decorate their bodies and personal items, such as knives and clubs. The Maasai are legendary for using red and decorative beadwork to highlight their social status and recognize different rites-of-passage. They may carry shields made from buffalo hide sewn onto wooden frames painted with red, white, and black crescents. The shield, used during rites-of-passage and for identification, is both



a valuable tool and symbol for the Maasai. Different Maasai

groups can also be identified by the unique markings and designs on their spears.

### Appropriate Attire for Airmen

- It is appropriate to wear typical Western-style clothing in Kenya – long pants and shirts made of light fabric are popular.
- Shorts are permissible for Westerners, although not encouraged.
  - Kenyans consider them immodest and are typically too polite to say anything.
- Women should wear clothing covering their arms and legs at or below the elbow and knee.

### Sports and Games

Kenya's moderate climate allows for year-round sports, with football (soccer) its most popular sport. Football leagues exist throughout the country, even in the poorest areas. Kenyans are best known internationally for their successful long-distance runners; such as Olympic champion Kip Keino, Paul Tergat, and Catherine Ndereba (world-record holder for the women's 2001 marathon). These world-famous athletes belong to the Kalenjin ethnic group inhabiting

Kenya's Great Rift Valley region that, therefore, afforded them the advantage of rigorous training. In fact, East Africa's Kenya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea collectively dominate international and Olympic long-

distance running events. Likewise, their success has been a source of national pride throughout the region, with many of them revered as idols comparable to America's pro athletes.



Huge advocates for wildlife conservation, Kenyans use sporting events, such as the International Camel Derby and annual Rhino Run, to garner awareness for this cause. The Camel Derby hosts camel races to promote awareness for camel husbandry and Kenya's desertification (soil erosion) problem. Likewise, the



Rhino Run is competition among world famous track athletes to showcase East Africa's declining rhinoceros population.

Many Kenyans enjoy a traditional strategy game similar to chess, known as *bao* or *ajua*. Kenyans can be seen playing the game in parks and villages,

where they hold annual tournaments.

## Arts

Kenyan craftsmen produce a variety of jewelry, carvings, and tapestries and are renowned for their colorful paintings, sculptures, and a naturally-dyed cloth, known as *batik*, originating in Indonesia.

One of the most unique items produced along Kenya's coastal region is the eight-foot wooden grave marker, called *kikangu*, designed to honor the power and presence of the *koma*, or ancestor spirits, and is believed to be able to mediate between them and the living. The *kikangu* also serves as a family tree that includes inscriptions of the deceased's wives and/or enemies.



Likewise, some Bantu tribes are famous for their soapstone carvings, ranging in color from white to deep red – popular tourist items include soap dishes, coasters, and ash trays.

## Music and Dance

Popular music in Kenya includes a variety of genres ranging from traditional to contemporary, with the traditional generally a



creation of complex harmonies formed from a combination of homemade percussion, stringed, and wind instruments.

For example, Kikuyu music is very basic and played primarily on the *gicandi*, a rattle made from a gourd, while other tribes use a wide variety of instruments, with some as simple as plastic jugs and wooden boxes.



Among the Kamba, *mwethya* (work group) songs are popular, with each melody illustrating a particular occupation. It is common for groups of workers to sing these tunes as they accomplish their tasks.

*Benga*, a musical combination of Western and Kenyan styles, was developed by the Luo in the 1950s using two traditional instruments, a small stringed instrument called a *nyatiti* and a one-string fiddle called an *orutu*, accompanied by an electric guitar.

Having Arabic and Indian influence, *Taarab* music is popular in coastal areas where it is commonly played at weddings using a variety of instruments and traditionally sang by women. Widespread throughout Kenya, gospel music is featured at schools and special public event, and while it has recognizable Western roots, it is typically an African version.

Dancing is an integral cultural element, although men and women commonly dance separately. Kenyans enjoy dancing to harmonious beats and rhythms accompanied by drums and stringed instruments. Among some Kenyan tribes, men perform line dances, competing to see who can jump the highest. Maasai jumpers are popular among tourists, as they try to outdo each other to demonstrate their strength and agility.



Dancing is also an important part of religious ceremonies to include marriage, child naming, and initiations; with the rituals differing across ethnic groups.

### **Celebrations**

National holidays include New Year's Day, Easter, Labor Day, Madaraka Day which marks the birth of the republic, Jamhuri Day or Independence Day, Christmas, and Boxing Day. Kenyatta Day, also called Harambee Day, commemorates Jomo Kenyatta's arrest in 1952 for opposing British authorities and usually includes a large capital city parade, with similar celebrations held throughout the country. Boxing Day originated as British tradition of presenting small boxed gifts to service workers, tradesmen, and servants, although today it is recognized as a family day.

A popular holiday destination is an ethnic theme park, Bomas of Kenya, designed to preserve tradition and maintain ties between urban dwellers and their rural heritage.

The Islamic community observes the holy month of Ramadan, with its most notable 3-day Eid-al-Fitr celebration held the last 3 days. During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset, after which they eat meals and visit.

#### **Kenyan Celebrations**

- |                  |                      |
|------------------|----------------------|
| • New Year's Day | January 1            |
| • Easter         | Good Friday – Monday |
| • Labor Day      | May 1                |
| • Madaraka Day   | June 1               |
| • Kenyatta Day   | October 20           |
| • Jamhuri Day    | December 12          |
| • Christmas      | December 26          |
| • Boxing Day     | December 26          |
| • Ramadan        | Dates vary           |

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Diet

Like its people, Kenya is known for food diversity, consisting of traditional dishes heavily influenced by British and Indian cultures.

### Common Dishes

A primary Kenyan dish is **sukuma wiki**, a leafy vegetable from the kale or cabbage family, similar to collard greens, and oftentimes prepared with beef gravy. A popular dish made from corn and similar to grits is **Ugali** which after boiling has a texture similar to bread dough and is commonly eaten with other dishes or sauces.



A favorite meat dish is **nyama choma**, which is beef or goat roasted over an open pit. Kenya also grows a variety of tropical fruits such as mangoes, papaya, passion fruit, bananas, and cassava (starchy plant used to make bread and tapioca). The



most popular drink in Kenya is **chai**, or tea prepared with sugar, ginger, and milk and typically served hot.

Likewise, many ethnic groups have their own unique dishes.

For example, the Luhya prepare a tribal chicken dish known as **ingoho**, which they generally serve to important guests.

## Popular Kenyan dishes

- **Sukuma Wiki:** a leafy green vegetable dish similar to collards or kale.
- **Ugali:** a semi-hard corn (or other grain) cake.
- **Nyama Choma:** roasted beef or goat meat prepared over an open fire.
- **Kachumbari:** a condiment of finely chopped tomatoes, onions, pepper, cilantro, lemon juice and occasionally, avocado usually accompanying meat dishes.
- **Chapati:** a round, flat unleavened bread cooked on a griddle.
- **Githeri:** boiled corn and beans usually fried with onion.
- **Mukimo:** mashed potatoes and green bananas mixed with spinach.
- **Pilau:** rice flavored with Indian spices, commonly served during Kenyan parties and celebrations.
- **Wali:** a popular Swahili rice dish boiled in coconut milk.
- **Karanga:** a meat and potato stew.
- **Kienyeji / Irio:** mashed potatoes combined with lentils or corn and pumpkin leaves sautéed with onions.
- **Maandazi:** deep fried dough, similar to doughnuts, served for breakfast with tea or coffee.
- **Samosa:** deep-fried, square-shaped, meat-filled dough served as a snack.
- **Uji:** porridge made from a mixture of fermented grains and powdered milk. Often fed to infants, nursing mothers, and the sick because of its high nutritional value.
- **Chai:** tea boiled with milk and sugar, served hot.



### Kenyan Dining Practices

- Extended families usually eat together and consider mealtime an important social event.
- Kenyans usually eat from a common plate (*sinia*) using their right hand, as the left hand is considered unsanitary – utensils are rarely used.
- When Kenyans invite guests to dine in their home, the men usually socialize with the guests while the hostesses prepare the meal. After the meal, they usually continue conversation and enjoy beverages.
- It is proper for guests to wash their hands before and after the meal. In some instances, a washing basin may be brought to the table.
- Honored guests are usually served first, followed by elders. It is considered rude to begin eating before the elders.
- Many Kenyans do not eat and drink at the same time; therefore, beverages usually are served before or after but not with the meal.
- Although not required, it is considered polite to eat all the food on your plate.

### Food Safety

Unlike many Western cultures, Kenya generally does not have wide access to modern appliances; therefore, food preparation and preservation capabilities may be limited (varies widely depending on location). Kenyans typically produce their own food in small quantities or shop daily for perishable items.

Likewise, food safety is a concern in Kenya, not only because of limited storage capabilities but also due to inadequate food-handling standards. It is best to be precautionous about eating uncooked foods or even those sold by street vendors. Also, it is

advisable to drink bottled water, which is widely available, as tap water is unsafe in many areas. Kenyan-brewed beer, branded as Tusker and White Cap, are generally considered safe and widely available, although it is wise to avoid locally-brewed beers known as *muratina*.

## Healthcare

### Life Expectancy

Total population: 70 years

Male: 69 years

Female: 72 years

(2024 estimate)

### Age Structure

0-14 years: 36%

15-64 years: 61%

65 years+: 3%

(2024 estimate)



Kenya's healthcare system is considered inadequate, particularly in most rural areas, with only about half of all Kenyans having access to basic medical services. Government hospitals are marginally staffed, and although a

number of reputable private facilities exist in most urban areas, only the wealthy can afford them. However, there are a few good hospitals in Nairobi.

### Traditional Practices

Despite having access to more modern healthcare practices, many Kenyans continue to rely on traditional methods, such as magic and sacrifice, for diagnosis and treatment (see p.6-7 of *Religion & Spirituality*). Likewise, many people believe evil spirits are the primary cause of sickness and death, while others think they result from personal misbehavior.

### Healthcare Issues

Along with inadequate medical care, there also is a lack of reliable information on the numerous health risks. The predominant ones include HIV/AIDS, widespread infectious diseases, poor sanitation, and malnutrition; with HIV/AIDS continuing to be Kenya's most significant health problem and the primary cause for low life expectancy.

Kenya had been among the Sub-Saharan African countries showing steadily increasing Human Development Index (HDI) scores because of the progress made in battling the HIV/AIDS epidemic prior to 2020. In 2022, Kenya ranked 146 out of 193 countries and territories on the HDI. As of 2022, nearly 4% Kenyans were HIV positive and roughly 28,000 Kenyans are diagnosed annually. While aggressive HIV education and awareness programs have been relatively successful, HIV/AIDS continues to be a serious problem in Kenya.

Other diseases are transmitted by insects and animals or by using contaminated water for washing and drinking, with infectious respiratory diseases and malaria responsible for significant sickness and death. Malaria poses a major health risk despite programs designed to control it, including spraying mosquito-infested areas and free distribution of anti-malaria treatment.

Filariasis, an infectious tropical disease common in coastal areas, is transmitted by black or mangrove flies and mosquitoes. Kala-azar, also known as black fever and carried by sand flies, is the second largest parasitic killer in the world next to malaria and is predominant in Kenya's northern areas. Sleeping sickness, transmitted by tsetse flies, is a problem in the Lambwe Valley, a popular safari resort in western Kenya.



Kenyan children are especially susceptible to infectious diseases such as measles and gastroenteritis, colitis, tetanus, and whooping cough, with infant mortality rates increasing despite decades of gradual improvement.

In addition to disease, there is a significant mortality rate associated with accidental death, specifically motor vehicles. Awareness of this issue is critical while traveling throughout the country.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Economic Overview

While Kenya is East Africa's regional center for trade and finance, its economy has suffered in recent years from political turmoil, global recession, rampant corruption, and natural resource shortages.

Kenya's raw agricultural materials constitute 40% of all exports, with 33% of the workforce employed in agriculture despite hardly 20% of its terrain being suitable for agricultural use. While it certainly is not an industrial powerhouse, Kenya also leads East Africa in industrial capacity even though it has to import raw materials.

The tourist industry, rated as the best developed pre-independence market in East Africa, is also a major source of income. Although security issues, particularly publicized terrorist attacks, have had a negative impact, the industry is improving.

### Agriculture

Agriculture remains the backbone of the Kenyan economy, contributing 21% of GDP. About 75% of Kenya's population of work at least part-time in the agricultural sector. Over 75% of agricultural output is from small-scale, rain-fed farming or livestock production. Primary imports include cut flowers and tea; with coffee, tobacco, and fish of secondary importance. Other food products grown mostly for domestic use include grain (most notably corn), sweet potatoes, sugarcane, and a variety of fruits. One of Kenya's lesser known agricultural exports, although receiving renewed global demand, is pyrethrum flowers whose organic extract is used in insecticides. Kenya supplies about 2% of the world's pyrethrum market.



### Pastoralism

A number of Kenyan tribes are active pastoralists who base their economic strength on the



number of livestock owned. It is not uncommon to see men and young boys throughout the countryside and even in urban areas tending small cattle herds.

### Informal Activities

Kenya also features an active informal economy whereby families grow food and livestock for personal use. In a country where most people earn less than a dollar a day, many people supplement primary earnings with farm items they produce and sell, and in some cases, this secondary income becomes their sole means of subsistence.



Likewise, various ethnic groups produce a number of unique products to include household items, clothing, farm equipment, and artwork (see p.4 of *Aesthetics & Recreation*). Many Kenyans also work as informal day laborers in the *jua kali* or “hot sun” sector, performing jobs as mechanics, small craftsmen, carpenters, and farmers.

### Industry

Concentrated primarily in major urban areas like Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu; Kenyan industrial capacity consists of small-scale consumer-good production and oil refinement, with a recent growth in tobacco, plastic, paper, meat and dairy products, and beverages. However, Kenya has limited natural resources, and therefore, relies on imported raw materials to support its industrial base. The country also lacks the telecommunications and transportation infrastructure to support industrial growth (see p.1-3 of *Technology & Material*).

### Tourism

In 2022, tourism generated 10% of Kenya's total GDP, an increase from the 2021 contribution of 5%. Tourist arrivals decreased in 2020 due to the pandemic, but increased substantially to 1.75 million in 2023. Kenya is famous for its safaris, where tourists can view a variety of exotic animal species in their natural habitat. Although lucrative for government and private companies, eco-tourism has displaced

ethnic groups like the Maasai in an effort to establish wildlife parks.

Popular beach and coastal resorts comprise the second component of Kenyan tourism, although collectively they generate more revenue than wildlife tourism. Mombasa is the base for much of the resort



tourism centered along the Kenyan coast, although disturbances such as ethnic fighting and terrorist activity have caused security concerns. Kenya's tourist industry was temporarily crippled due to concurrent 1998 Al Qaeda-linked attacks at the US Embassy in Nairobi – which resulted in 214 deaths and over 5,000 injuries – and in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, along with another 2002 al Qaeda attack on a Mombasa tourist hotel. Eventually, tourism rebounded, although the Kenyan government continues to be concerned about losing tourism revenue due to fear of future attacks.

### **View of wealth**

In major urban areas, like Nairobi, economic strength is viewed monetarily, with a small, but growing urban middle class increasingly imitating the modern-day Western lifestyle.

Among rural herding tribes like the Maasai and Samburu, wealth is commonly measured by the amount of property and livestock owned – these are most valued treasures in Kenyan society – as well as the number of children who help provide for the family. Likewise, bridewealth is an important economic factor for



families with daughters approaching marriageable age (see p.3 of *Family & Kinship*).

### **Land Distribution**

Since the 19th-century colonial era, land distribution has been a major economic and political concern. With the wealthy few

owning larger tracts of rural property, coupled with population growth, more and more of Kenya's poor are unable to survive in

the countryside. Therefore, many of them migrate to the slums and informal settlements of Nairobi and other major urban areas.

### Poverty

This urban migration to major cities like Nairobi promotes an unbalanced economy, as city slums are plagued by overcrowding and poverty, while fewer people remain in rural areas to work on family farms and sustain Kenya's economic backbone.

### Currency

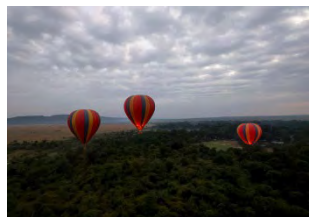
The Kenyan shilling (KES) is the national currency, with one US dollar equaling 139.10 shillings in 2023.

Currency can be exchanged at major banks or any *bureaux de change*.



### Geography

Kenya's geography is a diverse landscape of lowland and highland regions, with the Great Rift Valley the country's most prominent geographical feature. Kenya stretches from the fertile coastal plains in the east, to the cool central highlands culminating in western plateaus and lakes. Northern Kenya is



mostly dry, arid desert, with plains bordering Tanzania in the south. The country's namesake, Mount Kenya, is Africa's second highest mountain, featuring a glacier-cover mountaintop. While glacial run-off has promoted agriculture and hydroelectric power for years, about 90%

of the glacier has all but disappeared. Kenya's coastline features moderate tropical conditions, although it and the western region can receive significant rainfall commonly resulting in flooding.

### Climatic Issues

Both farmers and pastoralists suffer from recurring drought and flooding that seriously impact Kenya's agricultural capacity and natural resources such as wildlife and water.

## Conducting Business

- Expect to arrive on time, although it is not unusual for Kenyans to be late to meetings – as in American culture, the higher the status, the more likely they will be late.
- It is polite to greet the eldest and those of status first, and the others in turn.
- Relationship-building is an inherent part of conducting business meetings in Kenya and is key to establishing mutual trust.
  - Expect first to exchange small talk and get to know each other.
  - Allow your Kenyan hosts to determine when it is time to begin the business meeting.
  - It is also helpful to be polite and respectful – aggressive behavior will likely result in stalemate.
  - Do not expect immediate decisions, reaching an agreement requires follow-on discussions and negotiating for mutual benefits.
  - Disagreements should be handled in a calm, diplomatic manner and should never involve raised voices and anger.
  - It is helpful to find ways to compromise, even if it results in delays, and seek “win-win” outcomes.
  - It is good to remember Kenyans are extremely patient and tend to consider time on their side.
  - If the negotiation involves cost for an item, you may have to bargain, so it is advisable to initially offer a lower price.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Technology

Largely an agricultural society, Kenya has limited industry and natural resources. About one-fourth of the population is employed in industrial or service sectors, with most manufacturing related to agricultural products; along with some leather, textile, paper, refined petroleum, cement, and steel production (see p.1-3 of *Economics & Resources*).

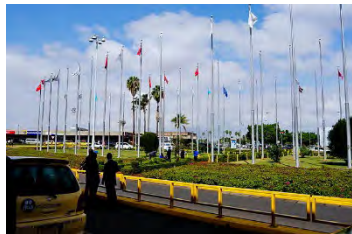


Historically, industrial development has been hampered by power shortages, manufacturer inefficiency, and corruption, although government has made significant efforts since 2002 to correct these issues.

While urban areas have adequate utilities for the most part, many rural areas are void of electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing; with only about 63% of Kenyans having access to improved water sources and only 37% to improved sewage systems.

### Transportation

Kenya has one of the best developed transportation systems in Africa, although the staggering economy has hampered



sustainment. Railroads stretching from Mombasa on the coast to Kisumu on Lake Victoria connect the country to neighboring Uganda and Tanzania, with highways linking all of Kenya's major cities, as well as its

neighboring countries. However, the railway system is in ill-repair, although upgrades are planned.

Nairobi and Mombasa have modern international airports, with Nairobi's Wilson Airport the hub for domestic travel. Kenya has over 200 other airfields, most of which are unpaved.

Conversely, roadways are mostly unreliable due to disrepair and neglect, resulting in rising transportation costs, travel delays, and vehicle damages. Over three quarters of Kenya's roads are unpaved, including major highways connecting Kenya to Ethiopia and Somalia. Likewise, traffic is highly congested in urban areas, particularly Nairobi.

Recently, Kenya has made some roadway improvements, with highway sections to Uganda and Kenya and Ethiopia either repaired or upgraded.

Large buses, along with small vans and pickup trucks called *matatus*, are the backbone of the country's public transportation system. Since most rural Kenyans do not own cars, they rely on *matatus* for distant travel, although most of them are usually overcrowded. Generally following regular, although unscheduled, routes; *matatus* are frequently involved in accidents as a result of reckless driving.



### Telecommunications

Like its transportation network, Kenya's telecommunications system is one of the best in Africa. Access to telephones is expanding, with Kenya one of the fastest growing cell phone markets in the world. Even homes without electricity commonly have a cell phone.

Likewise, radio broadcasts in English and Swahili are available throughout the country, with the privately-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation offering news and entertainment programming throughout the country. Also privately-owned are five television and three radio stations that offer a variety of

programming, along with three daily newspapers – all having national reach.

### Environmental Issues

Land degradation due to over cultivation/grazing is a critical issue for this semi-arid country, constantly susceptible to drought and famine. Deforestation leads to soil erosion and loss of wildlife habitat, with associated silt deposits hampering water storage capacity and hydroelectricity production. Likewise, recurring climatic changes have further intensified these issues, along with a dependence on wood to furnish utilities.



Kenya has taken positive steps to protect these and other vital natural resources. Efforts such as the Kenya Land Conservation Trust are taking measures to protect natural habitats and ensure land and resources are managed wisely, particularly since its tourism largely relies on abundant wildlife. However, increasing population and poverty have hampered Kenya's wildlife conservation efforts, particularly since it is difficult to justify homeless persons at the expense of wildlife resorts.

### Natural Hazards

Kenya's most significant natural hazards are flooding and drought. Highland and coastal areas are prone to flooding and landslides, with a recent overflow of Lake Victoria displacing thousands of people.

Drought is predominant in the Eastern Plateaus and Northern Basin region, with the Tana River Basin subject to both flooding and drought.

Recently, Kenya has experienced serious spring flooding and landslides, along with one of the worst droughts in over 25 years, resulting in widespread hunger and inability to produce crops.





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