



## KENYA

**Area:** 224,961 square miles

**Population:** 54,685,051 **Capital:** Nairobi

**Ethnic Groups:** Kikuyu 17.1%, Luhya 14.3%, Kalenjin 13.4%, Luo 10.7%, Kamba 9.8%, Somali 5.8%, Kisii 5.7%, Mijikenda 5.2%, Meru 4.2%, Maasai 2.5%, Turkana 2.1%, other ethnic groups 8.2%, non-Kenyan 1%.

**Languages:** English (official); Kiswahili (national); numerous indigenous languages, including Gikuyu, Oluluyia, Doluo, and Kalenjin.

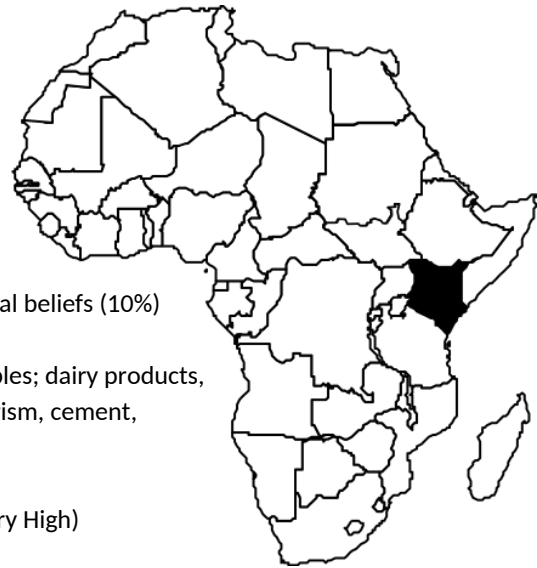
**Religion:** Christian (Protestant 45%, Catholic 33%), Islam (11%), traditional beliefs (10%)

**Life Expectancy:** 69 years **Literacy:** 81.5%

**Economy:** Agriculture (tea, coffee, corn, wheat, sugarcane, fruit, vegetables; dairy products, beef, pork, poultry); Industry (petroleum products, food processing, tourism, cement, textiles, fertilizers, mining).

**Gini (Income Inequality) Index:** 40.8 (comp.US=41.1)

**Gender Inequality Index:** 0.518 (Medium #143/189; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



### Africa's Earliest Histories: Diversity and Trade

Flanked by its long Indian Ocean coastline to the east and the shores of Lake Victoria to the west, Kenya has long been a crossroads of trade and therefore an incubator for historical change brought by diverse cultures and ethnic groups. The area was one of the cradles of humanity in Africa. On the shores of Lake Turkana, fossil evidence shows that some of the earliest hominids lived there around four million years ago and human ancestors such as *Homo habilis* (using tools) and *Homo erectus* (walking upright) lived there between one and two million years ago. The early Khoisan and Southern Cushitic hunter-gatherers were joined by Bantu speakers, who arrived from central Africa over 2000 years ago. The migrations of these farmers and herders continued over the first millennia CE. Coastal Africans also traded and intermarried with Arab merchants during the first millennia CE, producing the Swahili people and language and introducing Islam and literacy. Mixing of populations led to one of the defining characteristics of Kenya's history: the region's distinct ethnic diversity, a fact that later complicated British colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries and continues to create challenges.

### The Colonial Era and Resistance

The impact of European colonization on East Africa was prophesized by a woman of the Giriama (Mijikenda ethnic group). In the 13th century, a diviner named Mepoho foretold that a people with white hair would come and destroy Giriama culture and decimate their land. Her prophecy inspired a tradition of resistance to European encroachment for generations to come. The arrival of Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese in the early 1500s, ushered in the decline of the pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade. Through violent plunder, the Portuguese came to control trading until the 1700s, when two Arab dynasties as well as French traders took over the lucrative trade routes of ivory and slaves between the coast and Lake Victoria. At the 1885 Berlin Conference, Britain claimed the area and established a lucrative colony under the British East Africa Company built largely on the backs of Indian and African laborers. Around the turn of the 20th Century, English settlers migrated to the area in large numbers, settling on land taken from the Kikuyu, Maasai, and other ethnic groups. African and Indian laborers, many of whom had emigrated from British-controlled India, continued to toil for low wages on the land Europeans had appropriated.

Women were at the center of resistance to European colonialism in East Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries. As early as 1913, the Giriama woman named Mekatalili led a revolt against the British with the goal of strengthening Giriama control over local governance. She believed that Mepoho's prophecies were coming true: Giriama culture was eroding. Under Mekatalili's leadership, Giriama people refused to work for their colonial overlords. The colonial government acquiesced to Giriama demands in 1919. Mekatalili was released from jail and appointed to a leadership position. Other ethnic groups, most notably the Kikuyu, engaged in frequent and fierce fighting with the British settlers between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, but by the 1920s the British had solidified control over the colony and Africans increasingly turned to other methods of resistance.

Harry Thuku, a young Kikuyu activist, organized Kenyan workers to protest abusive labor policies imposed under British rule. His organization evolved to become the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA, 1925). In the KCA, the future first president Jomo Kenyatta first became involved in agitating against colonial rule. While studying anthropology at the University of

London, he met students from other parts of Africa and the diaspora and exchanged ideas about how to break from British colonial rule. Kenyatta's book *Facing Mt. Kenya* (1938) detailed Kikuyu culture with impassioned arguments for recognition of the human rights of Kenyans and all Africans. Despite African protestations, British settlers continued to take over land, especially in the fertile agricultural area of the central highlands. After World War II, Kenyatta founded the Kenya Africa Union and the group spearheaded efforts at political, economic, and land reform in the colony. When their petitions and other legal efforts failed to achieve meaningful reforms, however, frustrated militant young men, some of whom had served in the British Army, took up arms and formed the "Land and People's Party" to force their colonial overseers out. The British colonial government referred to them as the "Mau Mau." Militants killed white settlers and Africans they viewed as collaborating with the British. Colonial forces responded with vicious crackdowns, forcing the Mau Mau into a prolonged guerilla war. Kenyatta and other nationalists suspected of collaborating with the Mau Mau were arrested. Thousands of Africans were placed in British concentration camps, modelled after those employed in South Africa's Boer War. After years of bloody conflict that left thousands dead or displaced, the colonial government declared victory over the insurgency.

### **Independence and the Struggles of a New Nation**

Yet Kenyan writers also provide an alternative ending to the colonial story. In two early novels, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o details the horrors of the conflict and its aftermath. In her autobiography *Mau Mau's Daughter*, Wambui Otieno describes the integral roles that women played in the uprising. The Mau Mau achieved their goal when Britain's desire to continue using violent force to quell discontent faded, Kenyatta was released from imprisonment in 1961, and by 1963, Kenya gained independence. Kenyatta served as the first president for the next 15 years, while Ngugi warned of the difficulty of "decolonizing the mind" and wrote in his own language.

While one-party rule saw the successful redistribution of land from European to African ownership, Kenyatta's opponents criticized the inequalities brought by his policies, which saw Land ownership, businesses, and other avenues to wealth allies awarded, many of whom had been loyal to the white colonial government. Meanwhile the majority remained mired in poverty. Kenyatta's fiercest critics were harassed, jailed, and, in at least one case, even killed. Kenyatta's hand-picked successor, Daniel arap Moi, ascended to the presidency upon Kenyatta's death in 1978, continuing his policies while also becoming even more authoritarian. Moi's 24-year reign over Kenya was filled with corruption, electoral fraud, poverty, violent repression of any political opposition, civil rights abuses, and ethnic unrest. His regime faced constant resistance, including from the writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (jailed for criticizing Moi's leadership) and the environmental activist Wangari Maathai. In 2002, Moi finally stepped down from office, but his hand-picked successor Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo's son, was defeated by Mwai Kibaki, who promised reform but failed to deliver. The election between Kibaki and Raila Odinga proved so divisive that violence broke out in the country, killing more than 1,000 Kenyans and displacing over 300,000. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan brokered a power-sharing agreement and new constitution that helped stabilize Kenya's governance after the corruption of the decades after independence but even these efforts have not fully quelled election controversies.

### **Unbowed: Protecting Kenya's Environment**

Kenya remains a country blessed with not only ethnic diversity but also remarkable biodiversity. Its nature reserves and national parks draw tourists from all over the world, contributing significantly to the country's GDP. Kenyans have struggled to protect the flora and fauna (including forests and critically endangered herds of elephants and rhinos). In 2004, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her role in creating the Green Belt Movement that led to the planting of millions of trees and employment for tens of thousands of Kenyan women in environmental work. Maathai's grassroots organizing encouraged the unification of women from rural and urban parts of Kenya in the face of a dictatorial regime, a struggle detailed in her memoir *Unbowed*.

-- Daniel Kotin (January 2022)

### **Further Reading**

Maathai, Wangari. 2006. *Unbowed*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1964. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1967. *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann.

Otieno, Wambui Waiyaki. 1998. *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

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