

LIST OF KENYA TRIBES A- Z

Aweer

This Kenya tribe is also frequently called the "Boni", though the correct name for these people is Aweer. The Aweer is a small and very isolated tribe found by the coast of Kenya, near the border with Somalia. There are only around 4,000 Aweer people left. This Kenya tribe is best known for its unusual practice of using semi-domesticated birds to find honey, with whistling signals. The Aweer are mostly Muslim, like other coastal tribes. Their remote territory is heavily wooded and the tribe are traditionally hunter-gathers, rather than the typical Kenyan cattle herders.

Bajuni

The Bajuni territory is mainly along the coast in Somalia, but with some villages in northern Kenya. The islands in the Indian Ocean near Kismayo are mainly populated with Bajuni people. Naturally, their traditional way of life is as fishermen and sailors. Their language is called Kibajuni, and it is very similar to the popular Swahili of the region. These people are very isolated, and there are between 4,000 and 10,000 of them left.

Bukusu

The Bukusu are actually a sub-group of the larger Luhya tribe, living near Mount Elgon in the Western Province of Kenya. They are an agricultural people who live in extended family groups, with husbands traditionally having more than one wife. This Kenya tribe keeps large herds of cattle for food and as measures of wealth. Unlike many other pastoral tribes, the Bukusu are not nomadic and live in permanent villages. Compared to the rest of the Luhya tribe, the Bukusu people live the most traditionally and have not accepted many modern changes to their way of life. Former Kenyan vice-president, Michael Wamalwa Kijana is from the Bukusu tribe. The tribe is often politically active, particular with the FORD-Kenya party.

Dahalo

The Dahalo tribe has diminished almost to extinction, with its people living among the Swahili and other coastal tribes, but with no real communities or territory of their own. The language of the Dahalo is very unusual, and has clicking sounds seldom seen in spoken languages. Only around 400 people are still able to speak it, and it is unlikely that children are still being taught the Dahalo language of this Kenya tribe.

Embu

The Embu tribe numbers around a half million people, and their territory is located on the south-east side of Mount Kenya. In the past, they grew crops for their own use, but today they use their fertile mountain lands for growing cash crops instead. Circumcision is an important coming-of-age rituals, that is done for both girls and boys. The Embu don't have a warrior generation like some other tribes do. Though most Embu are Christians now, their

traditional beliefs held that god, Ngai, lived on the top of their mountain. The closely related tribe of the Mbeere believed the same thing.

Isukhu

The Isukha are considered a smaller sub-group of the Luhya tribe, which is the 2nd largest ethnic group in Kenya. The language they speak is called the Wanga dialect, of the main Luhya language. The traditional territory of the Isukha is in western Kenya, near the forests of Kakamega. These people are usually farmers, and they live in large extended families, sometimes with more than one wife involved. Though most of this Kenya tribe are now considered Christians, the god of the Isukha is called Were.

Kalenjin

There are about 3 million people in the Kalenjin tribe, whose territory is in the Great Rift Valley. This group wasn't always a single Kenya tribe. Many smaller but related groups decided to come together under one name in order to create a more powerful tribal identity. The traditional Kalenjin religion centers on a single god, who is called Asis. Many people have adopted Christianity, while still holding some old beliefs about sacrifice and ancestor spirits. The Kalenjin people are renowned for their running abilities, and have won a number of gold medals in marathons and long-distance running competitions, including several at the Olympics. The 2nd president of Kenya after independence was Daniel arap Moi, who was a member of the Kalenjin tribe.

Kamba

Also called the Akamba, this Kenya tribe live in the east-central areas of Kenya. The practice many trades, including cattle herding, farming and trade with other nearby tribes. Today, there are large populations of the Kamba living in the coastal cities, but many still live in the countryside. Artistic crafts made by the Kamba can be seen all through Kenya galleries and gift shops. They are particularly well-known for their wood carving and pottery. A bride price in cattle is paid before a marriage, and families live together in tight-knit extended groups.

Kikuyu

They are the biggest of the tribes in Kenya. They total about 5 million (22% of the population). They live in the fertile central highlands. They dominate the country politically and economically. Current president Kibaki's government consists almost entirely of Kikuyu, and this is one reason of the election riots of December-January 2008. The Kikuyu are closely related to the Embu, Mbeere and Meru peoples who live in the same area around Mount Kenya. Most Kikuyu are now Christians. Some still have their traditional beliefs, according to which their god Ngai ('the provider') lives on top of Mount Kenya.

Kisii

The Kisii live in a very heavily populated area in the western corner of Kenya, near the shores of Lake Victoria. Due to the fertile nature of their highland territory, the Kisii are often very

wealthy from their large cash crop plantations. You'll find most Kisii live in the cities, having embraced a modern lifestyle. Even so, female circumcision is still widely practiced among this tribe. Christianity is the common religion of the tribe now, though some still hold to their old beliefs. Their god is Engoro, and people communicated with him through their ancestors spirits. Even the Christian Kisii still fear witchcraft.

Kore

The Kenya tribe of the Kore is nearly extinct, with only a few hundred members left. They were defeated by some of the Masai more than a hundred years ago, and the remaining population were taken into slavery by the Somali tribe. After they were freed by the British, they returned to Kenya and now live on the island of Lamu. They live much like Somali people, having adopted many of their customs.

Kuria

About 2/3 of the Kuria tribe live in Tanzania, and the rest are found in the southern areas of Kenya. They are a mix of farmers, fishermen (those living near Lake Victoria) and pastoral herders. They are closely related to the Luhya, but are not considered a sub-group of that tribe. The Kuria have an unusual marriage custom where 2 women can be married, so that a woman who cannot have her own children can still have a family.

Luhya

The Luhya is a very large Kenya tribe, with more than 5 million people. It make up 14% of Kenya's population and is the second largest tribe (after the Kikuyu). There are up to 18 sub-groups within the tribe, making the tribe very diverse and wide-spread. They all speak their own dialects of the Luhya language. Their traditional territory is in the west of the country. This Kenyan tribe live in extended families, sometimes polygamous ones where the marriages are arranged. There are rituals for coming-of-age, but the biggest celebrations are for deaths. It was once the typical practice to mourn and celebrate for forty days when someone died. Today, the festivities are reduced to a week.

Luo

The second largest tribe in Kenya (over 3 million people or 12% of the population). They are now settled farmers and also keep cattle. Their language is called Dholuo. They are famous for their egalitarian culture. In the 1920s their ruoth (leader) Odera Akang'o initiated the quick adoption of the Luo to the British life style.

Contrary to many other tribes, the Luo don't practice ritual circumcision of males (which causes resistance among Kikuyu against a Luo President, because a 'real man' is of course circumcised!). Raila Odinga, the big challenger of President Kibaki, is a Luo and he succeeded in rallying many tribes against the dominating Kikuyu, which led to the election fraud and riots in December-January 2008. US Presidential candidate [Barack Obama](#) is partially of Luo descent too.

Maragoli

The Maragoli people are part of the larger Luhya tribe, and their 200 sq km territory is in western Kenya, just touching the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. The size of this Kenya tribe is around 200,000. Their lush and hilly territory is suited to the farming lifestyle of the Maragoli. Agriculture consists of both subsistence and cash crops. Ritual circumcision is still a common practice for this Kenya tribe, taking place throughout a village every 10 years. Like the rest of the Luhya, the Maragoli hold cattle in high regard as wealth.

Marama

Part of the Luhya tribe, the Marama speak the Wanga dialect of the language, just like the Isukha do. Their territory is in western Kenya near the border with Uganda. They are unlike the Luhya tribe though, in that they do not practice male circumcision as an initiation ritual. Families are traditionally polygamous, and many of the Marama are Christians.

Masai

The most famous of the tribes in Kenya. They total about 1.3 million, half of who live in Kenya (1.5% of the population) and the other half in northern Tanzania. They are semi-nomadic and have largely kept their traditional life styles. Masai always wear red, with a simple blue cloth underneath. Both women and men wear wooden bracelets, the women also jewellery. Their language is called Maa. Their society is patriarchal: the male elders keep communication with the Masai god (Enkai or Engai) and make the important decisions.

Meru

The north-eastern side of Mount Kenya is the home of the Meru tribe. Their population is about 1.5 million strong, with 7 sub-groups that all speak their own dialects of the Meru language. Meru folklore has confused scholars for years, as many of their myths are identical to the stories of the Old Testament. Society is patriarchal, with men in charge of leadership and the women in charge of the housework. Even so, the Meru have always been governed by elders elected fairly by vote. They are one of the only Kenya tribes to have a democratic system or rule in place before the country's colonial period.

Mijikenda

Nine different Kenya tribes came together to create the Mijikenda, who migrated to Kenya 300 years ago. Their territory is along a heavily forested ridge inland from the coast, and they hold their forests to be sacred. Conservationists are often interested in these lands because they have been untouched for centuries and contain many rare species. They are called "kaya forests", after the word for a Mijikenda village, a kaya. Trade with the nearby Swahili is common, and the Mijikenda language is much like Swahili because of it. Their society is structured around age-sets, marked by initiation and other rituals of age.

Ogiek

The Ogiek tribe is also sometimes called the Okiek or Akiiek. The population of the Kenya tribe is around 35,000 though only a few hundred speak their traditional language (called Akiiek). Most of these people now speak either Masai or Kikuyu. Their territory is near the land of the Masai, in southern Kenya near Mount Elgon. Culturally, the Ogiek is a hunter-gatherer tribe, though most have adapted the ways of other tribes around them due to their declining numbers.

Orma

The lands of the Orma are in the north-eastern part of Kenya, along the Tana River. They are a nomadic people, travelling with their herds of cattle across the desert regions. There are around 70,000 Orma remaining today, with many of them living in Ethiopia.

Oromo

Most of the Oromo people live in Ethiopia, but there are significant populations in northern Kenya as well. The total tribe consists of around 25 million people. With such large numbers, the tribe is broken up into 16 smaller subgroups, each having their own area of territory. The religious makeup of the Oromo is roughly half Christian and half Muslim, with few still holding traditional beliefs. The tribe represents about a third of Ethiopia's overall population, and so the Oromo are often well-represented among leaders and politicians. Haile Selassie I, past emperor of Ethiopia was a member of the Oromo tribe.

Pokomo

The Kenya tribe of the Pokomo are found in the flood plains of the Tana river, near the territory of the Orma tribe. They usually farm along the banks of the river, and also fish for food. They have traditionally hunted the hippo and crocodile as well. Pokomo society is very communal and all the members of a village will come together for labour and other needs.

Rendille

The Rendille people are semi-nomadic camel herders who live primarily in the dry regions of the Kaisut Desert. The Kenya tribe came originally from Somalia, but are today aligned with the Samburu tribe. Rendille villages are very large, with hundreds of people living together. Drought has forced many to leave their traditional ways and move closer to aid depots and towns. Marriages are arranged by parents, and a heavy bride price of livestock is involved. Rendille marriages are frequently between an older man and young girl. Missionary work has not had much effect on the Rendille, who still follow their traditional beliefs in a god called Ngai.

Samburu

They are closely related to the Maasai (the Maasai and Samburu language are 95% the same). They live in northern Kenya and form only 0.5% of the population. The name they use for themselves is Loikop or Lokop. They are semi-nomadic and their lives revolve around their goats, sheep, cows and camels. They usually stay somewhere for about 5 weeks, in

groups of 5 or 10 families, and then move on to new pastures. Most Samburu dress traditionally, with bright red clothes, multi-beaded necklaces, earrings and bracelets.

Sengwer

The territory of the Sengwer is in the central Rift Valley area, and their population is around 60,000. These people are hunter-gatherers, who lived in the forests of Marakwet. Most of the tribe have been displaced since their land was occupied during the colonisation of Kenya by the British. They are not a legally recognized tribe, and do not have any of the benefits of political representation.

Somali

As the name suggests, this Kenya tribe is from Somalia, and most of these people do reside there. About half a million Somalis live in Kenya, with the rest of the tribe numbering around 20 to 25 million. They gained their own independent nation in 1960. As a group, the Somali are almost exclusively Muslim and their way of life reflects modern Muslim practices. This Cushtic tribe originally came from Ethiopia, and the language they speak is Somali. The sub-groups of the Somali that live mainly in Kenya are the Ogaden and the Ajuran.

Suba

This tribe is one of the smaller ones, with less than 30,000 people. Originally from Uganda, their territory is limited to two islands in Lake Victoria, Rusinga and Mfangano. Today, many Suba also live on the shore of the lake. Traditionally, they have been known as hippo hunters but that practice is now outlawed. They speak Suba, but have adopted much the language of the nearby Luo tribe. Their culture is has been diluted with intermarriage with the Luo, and they don't have much of a unique identity in modern times.

Swahili

The Swahili are mainly a trading tribe, who live along the coast of the Indian Sea and have long had contact with the Arab and Persian traders who docked there. Because of the almost constant interaction with other Kenya tribes and races, the Swahili have no immediate traditions or culture of their own. They are Muslim, and follow Muslim practices. The language of the Swahili is Swahili (or Kiswahili), and has become a common tongue across much of eastern Africa. It is the national language of Kenya. Swahili people are found in Tanzania and Mozambique, as well as the coasts of Kenya.

Tachoni

The Tachoni people are a sub-group of the Luhya tribe, which is the 2nd largest tribe in Kenya. You can find people of the Tachoni tribe living both in modern cities as well as in their traditional countryside territory of western Kenya. The Tachoni speak the Wanga dialect of the Luhya language. Extended families live in large groups and the men sometimes have more than one wife, if he has enough cattle to pay the bride price. The Tachoni are more likely to perform female circumcision as a rite of passage, than others in the Luhya group.

Taita

The Taita tribe has become thoroughly modernized and none of the tribe live in their traditional or rural way anymore. Their customs and practices are not well-recorded, making their old way of life difficult to establish. Their territory is in the overpopulated Taita-Taveta district, in south-eastern Kenya. Also called the Kitaita or the Dawida, there are around a quarter million people in this tribe. They were originally successful farmers, but became more trade-oriented up until the British colonial period.

Taveta

Their territory is in the south-central parts of the country, between the Tsavo National park and Mount Kilimanjaro. The Taveta are often agriculturalists, though many have turned to cash crops in this modern age. The population of Taveta people is around 15,000. The religion of this Kenya tribe is mixed, with some having converted to either Christianity or Islam, and some have retained their traditional spiritual ways.

Watha

This is a traditionally tribe of hunters and gatherers, located in east Kenya. Today, many of the Watha people have turned to farming and cash crops for their livelihoods. Many of the Watha have converted to Christianity, which has led to fewer husbands taking more than one wife. Women are no longer getting married at 14 either. Sometimes the Watha are called the Sanye.

Yiaku

The Yiaku is a nearly extinct Kenya tribe, with a population of around 4,000 and less than 10 people still speaking their Yiaku language. Today, most speak the Maa language of the Masai. The tribe had 4 major clans within it. Their lands were near Mount Kenya, in the Mukogodo forest. Living deep in the forests, these people were hunters and gatherers. Many now have herds of cattle for their income and food supply instead. Unlike the typical practice of measuring wealth in cows, this Kenya tribe considered beehives to be the marker of status and prosperity.

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