



# Understanding Kenya

| *A brief history of this beautiful land and people and some of their challenges*

## The Land and Its Peoples

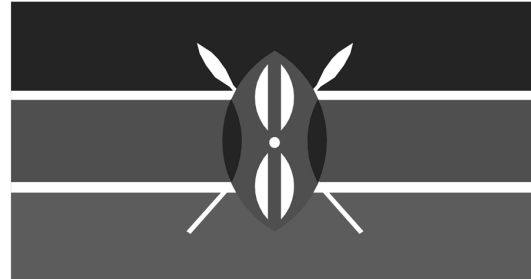
The land of Kenya is set in the heart of East Africa. To its north are Sudan and Ethiopia; to the west, Uganda; to the south, Tanzania; and to the east, Somalia and the Indian Ocean. In the middle of the country is Mt. Kenya, one of Africa's few snowcapped peaks. Surrounding Mt. Kenya are highlands, primarily settled by Gikuyu.<sup>1</sup>

The highlands in the west are divided by the Rift Valley. Beyond the western highlands is Lake Victoria, Africa's largest inland lake and a main source of fish. The Luo and Abaluhya, Kenya's second- and third-largest ethnic groups after the Gikuyu, reside in this region. The southern part of Kenya is the savanna, rich in wildlife. It contains the tourist safari destination of Maasai Mara National Reserve. The Maasai, whom the reserve is named after, are traditionally pastoral herders.

An arid region in the north and southeast has little rainfall but is still the home to other pastoral groups such as the Samburu, Somali, and Turkana. The coastal regions in the east provide some agriculture, but they traditionally have been centers for trade with cultures from all around the Indian Ocean.

This trade on the coast gave the region a mix of cultures with various Arab, African, and Indian roots. In this context the Swahili language developed and spread inland. Before the English settled in East Africa, the written form of Swahili used Arabic script. However, Swahili is a distinctly African language similar to other languages found as far west as Nigeria and all the way into South Africa.

These language similarities, along with archaeological discoveries and other cultural similarities, provide hints about migration and trade throughout the continent.



Kenya's flag was adopted in 1963. The color black symbolizes the black majority, red symbolizes the blood shed during the struggle for freedom, and green (bottom stripe) symbolizes natural wealth. It has a traditional Maasai shield and two spears.

Many of the Rift Valley peoples speak a language more closely linked to the Khoisan of South Africa. They are believed to have arrived in Kenya more than ten thousand years ago, while the Bantu speakers from which most Kenyan groups originate did not arrive until the last couple millennia.

## European Arrival

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to sail up the East African coast. Vasco da Gama led three boats around the Cape of Good Hope in December 1497 on their way to India. When they arrived in East Africa, they found a thriving trade, including an elaborate system of taxation.

However, the Portuguese wanted to control the trade routes to India. Almost immediately they set upon the East African ports, looting and burning whatever they found. Each sailor was given a portion of the total take from looting such towns as Mombasa.

The Portuguese were successful at disrupting the Indian Ocean trade, but they were not as successful at inserting themselves as the new trading partners. They did

not have enough boats or crew to maintain the trade at the same level that preceded their arrival. Other Europeans, led by the Dutch, started to move in and take over the ports. By 1650, Mombasa and Mozambique were two of the few places the Portuguese held.

Other Europeans were not the only threats to Portuguese influence in East Africa. Northern city-states such as Lamu sought assistance from Muscat in Oman. By 1728, the Omani had even forced the Portuguese to leave Fort Jesus in Mombasa. In the next century, the Muscat leader Sayyid Said moved his capital to Zanzibar in what is now Tanzania. While the East African-Indian trade continued, it never regained the strength it had before the Portuguese arrived.

Slave trading did exist before European arrival, though it was a minor part of commerce. The Portuguese expanded on the trade, raiding the coast for slaves. Said increased the trade further; and this trade encouraged Europeans to delve farther inland, occasionally meeting slaving parties crossing from the opposite coast.

The slave trade also encouraged local wars. Those captured in battles could then be sold to the traders. People could not trust their own neighbors. The local gold, ivory, and agricultural segments of the economy went downhill as the slave trade became the fastest way to get rich.

With the end of slaving came the beginning of European inland occupation. The various European powers were rushing to establish their claims to parts of the continent. What were once slaving wars turned to wars of occupation.

British colonial settlements in Kenya began in 1902. A new train line built in the early 1900s from Mombasa, on the eastern coast, to Lake Victoria, in the west, enabled trade and economic growth all along its route. White settlers filled up the highlands in the central part of the country, where the richest soil was found.

The settler life is idealized most popularly through the life of Karen Blixen and the novel and movie *Out of Africa*. However, life was not always as pretty as that in Blixen's home in the Ngong Hills.

These settlements mostly displaced Gikuyu. However some Gikuyu did benefit from trade. Along with the settlers came missionaries, who provided the primary educational opportunities for the African community.

## WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT, AND THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

In 2004 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement. Maathai founded the movement in 1977 under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya, for which Maathai served two terms as president. Green Belt volunteers plant trees and provide environmental education in primary schools. The movement quickly grew into an international organization with offices throughout Africa and in the United States.

Maathai's concern for the environment grew out of her childhood living in the Gikuyu highlands during the colonial period. During this time she observed the interaction of all the native plants and animals and learned the importance of a balanced ecosystem.

As she got older she witnessed the destruction of native forests in order to plant nonnative trees as sources for lumber. She also witnessed the change from using handmade baskets to carry items from the market to using plastic bags that now litter the cities.

In founding the Green Belt Movement and speaking out on concerns for women and the environment, Maathai has run into conflict with the male-dominated political system. She was thrown in prison numerous times during Daniel T. arap Moi's presidency.

Nevertheless, she persevered. In 2002 she joined the united opposition and was elected to Parliament with 98 percent of the vote. The new president, Mwai Kibaki, then named her as assistant minister in the Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources.

Two years later on the way back to her home constituency, she received a call from Norway with news that she had just won the Nobel Peace Prize. That day she celebrated by planting a tree. She proclaimed her belief that the environment, peace, and the rights of all people including women and children are essential for society to develop and thrive.

## Kenyan Complaints Grow

The Christian missions were not a focus of complaints except when they were connected with government regulation. Until the 1930s the missions were the only sources of education. By the time of World War I, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, and the African Inland Mission were all well established in Kenya. Just as European governments divided the continent among themselves during the Berlin Conference of 1884, so too did the missionaries divide the land within Kenya. The Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland Mission were the primary forces in Gikuyu territories.

In the 1920s debate grew over the traditional Gikuyu practice of clitoridectomy (often called female circumcision or female genital mutilation). The churches sought to have the practice outlawed. However, many Gikuyu felt that their procedure for initiating girls into womanhood was not inconsistent with Christianity and that it should be maintained as a cultural practice. As the debate grew, the Gikuyu pulled out of the mission schools and churches and created their own. Eventually the government provided support for the independent schools.

Writing about the impact of colonialism on the Gikuyu community, historian David Anderson identifies four key issues that led to conflict.<sup>2</sup> Until the 1930s the primary concerns were increasing wages paid to Africans and eliminating the identity card and passbook created after World War I. Since this passbook was required to gain employment, some employers would either destroy the card or notate it with the salary paid. Workers would then have difficulty finding employment for a higher salary.

In the 1930s the desire for elected representation in government grew. However, even six years after World War II, Kenya's Legislative Council had eleven elected white settlers, eleven nonwhite persons (four of whom were unelected African appointees), and fifteen other government officials. This division shows the racial hierarchy in Kenya, where the Europeans were on top, followed by Asians. The majority African population was relegated to the bottom of society. By this point, there were about twenty-nine thousand European settlers, ninety-seven thousand Asian immigrants, and five million Africans in Kenya.



The last key issue that became a focus for complaints was the European seizure of land. It had not initially been clear to locals that they were losing their rights to the land as they became tenant laborers. Only later did they realize their lack of land when the white settlers no longer needed the labor and tried to

get rid of the tenants. Africans were then relegated to reservations or shipped out to other areas where settlers needed labor.

Africans had moved into the European-controlled labor force in order to pay taxes imposed by the colonial government. All taxes had to be paid in cash and not through animals or produce. Further, the marketplaces were restricted to the European settlers; thus tenants could only sell what they produced to their own landlord.

Some Gikuyu were sent or otherwise traveled to the Rift Valley. Many times the Gikuyu accepted the moves, believing they would be given traditional rights to the land. However, after years of living on other people's land, the Gikuyu no longer would accept new tenant service. Instead they began to organize and gradually became more militant. Some of these organizations would later form the backbone to the Mau Mau resistance.

## Moving toward Independence

The violence generated by the Mau Mau began in 1951 as arson and cattle killing. It was directed toward European settlers and African loyalists. However, a year later an African official was killed. In response the government instituted a state of emergency and arrested Jomo Kenyatta, president of the Kenya African Union (KAU), even though many historians believe he was not linked with the violent groups. Kenyatta had been very critical of how the Europeans were disrupting the traditional culture and taking the wealth of the land away from its peoples. His outspokenness led to his arrest and to his becoming a focal point for a government under African control.

Thirty-two European settlers died during the rebellion along with fewer than two hundred British soldiers and police. In contrast, the Mau Mau killed more than

eighteen hundred African civilians, with hundreds more disappearing. It is also likely that more than twenty thousand rebels were killed, and at least one hundred fifty thousand Gikuyu were imprisoned at some point.

The resistance did prompt land reform and progress toward government representation. At the same time, it encouraged many white settlers to leave the country, many of whom moved to South Africa. As white settlers moved out, the land was redistributed to Africans. By 1960 Africans held a majority on Kenya's Legislative Council and a majority of the cabinet. The British government also announced its intention of moving Kenya quickly to independence.

In this new spirit of self-determination, two political parties formed. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) grew out of the former KAU. It was led by two Luos, Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga, though they claimed that the still-imprisoned Kenyatta was their leader. Reaching beyond KANU's Kikuyu-Luo coalition, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) organized under the leadership of Ronald Ngala, Daniel T. arap Moi, and others.

KANU won the 1961 elections, but it refused to form a government without Kenyatta. Thus KADU led the government even after Kenyatta was released later that year. However, by the time Kenya became formally independent in 1963, KANU had received full control of the government.

## Building Self-Rule

When Kenyatta became president, he stepped into the gap between the various peoples living in Kenya as well as into conversations with the former colonial governments. The nation quickly became an ally with western Europe and the United States, causing some Kenyans to charge Kenyatta with selling out his own people.<sup>3</sup>

Kenyatta quickly centralized power into his own hands, first by amending the constitution to create the role of presidency and give it more power, and then by reducing the power of Vice President Odinga.

The rift between Kenyatta and Odinga grew until Odinga finally left KANU and formed his own party, the Kenya People's Union (KPU). Allegations arose against Odinga and other KPU leaders, including suggested links to Communist nations. Other leaders were disqualified on

## BY THE NUMBERS<sup>4</sup>

Land size: 219,788 square miles (a little more than twice the size of Nevada)

Coastline: 333 miles

Highest point: Mt. Kenya, 17,057 feet

Population: 36,913,721

Infant mortality: 57.44 deaths per 1,000 live births

Life expectancy: 55.31 years

Fertility rate: 4.82 children per woman

Adult HIV/AIDS: 6.7% of population

HIV/AIDS deaths: 150,000

Literacy (age 15 and older): 85.1% (males: 90.6%; females: 79.7%)

Unemployment rate: 40%

Population below poverty line: 50%

Refugees: 150,459 from Somalia; 76,646 from Sudan; 14,862 from Ethiopia

allegations of technical errors. In the 1968 election, KPU received few seats, and KANU was able to continue its rule as if Kenya was a one-party state.

Some potential opposition leaders ended up dead. Tom Mboya was reaching out beyond his Luo community in 1969 before being assassinated. In 1975 Kikuyu member of Parliament Josiah Mwangi Kariuki was taken by senior police officers, and his body turned up later. After an investigation of the murder, those critical of the government were forced out of their positions.

After Kenyatta's death in 1978, Daniel T. arap Moi assumed the presidency, bringing along Gikuyu support by naming Mwai Kibaki as his vice president (he was later replaced in this role). In the 1980s, opposition to the KANU one-party rule rose, though a 1982 constitutional amendment put into law a one-party state. An attempted coup was defeated in 1982, and other opposition leaders were identified as "traitors" before the 1983 election. Other political organizations were also repressed and their leaders arrested.

International pressure eventually led the government to reinstate multiparty politics in December 1991. At least

five new parties quickly organized. Rhetoric swiftly flowed in an attempt to discredit the new parties and their leaders. The government also restricted the movements of various leaders and prevented the registration of the Islamic Party of Kenya.

At least 240 persons were killed in violence in three provinces during the first half of 1992. The National Christian Council of Kenya created its own task force to investigate the violence and any connection it may have had with Moi. Nevertheless, with the opposition divided, Moi was able to win reelection with 36 percent of the vote.

The opposition remained divided until the 2002 election. At that time Moi finally stepped down from the presidency under its constitutional term limit. Fighting within KANU prevented the party from finding a solid successor. On the other hand, the opposition organized around Kibaki, successfully removing KANU from its nearly forty-year rule of the country.

## Recent Turmoil

In late 2007 Kenyans went to the polls to vote in a presidential election predicted to be a close one. (For more detailed information see the Thoughtful Christian study “Will Kenya’s Democracy Survive?”) This would be the second election in Kenya’s transition to multiparty politics.

The hot issues of the election involved sensitive topics such as the power sharing between the president and the prime minister, charges of corruption of the government, and a growing economy that has not led to increased wealth of many citizens.

Elections results were mixed. Official results gave the election to the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, who was quickly sworn in for his second term. Almost all other polls showed the election went to the opposing party. Fighting erupted, with both Kibaki and Raila Odinga, son of the former vice president, claiming victory and neither willing to compromise. A month later more than a thousand Kenyans were dead and over three hundred thousand displaced because of the fighting that ensued. While the international community quickly showed its concern, a very promising sign has been the desire of a great number of Kenyans, including many Christians, to resolve the issues themselves peacefully and get on with creating a country that is prosperous, just, and peaceful.

## About the Writer

*Andrew Schleicher of Nashville, Tennessee, is a United Methodist clergyman and religious journalist who previously lived in Kenya.*

## Endnotes

1. Jomo Kenyatta in his anthropological study of his own people, *Facing Mt. Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage, 1962), explains that the common European spelling “Kikuyu” is incorrect (see footnote on page xv). This study uses Kenyatta’s spelling as it continues to be used today by other writers from this ethnic group.
2. David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 10.
3. Koigi wa Wamwere, *I Refuse to Die: My Journey for Freedom* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), 33.
4. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ke.html>.