



Historical Context

Kenyan Insights

We have provided some background information on the vibrant communities of Kenya and the challenges they face amid climate change.



https://www.101lasttribes.com/countries/kenya_map.html

There are over 42 different ethnic communities or tribes in Kenya. Language is the main criteria for a tribe, and there are three main language groups into which the tribes of Kenya can be divided: Bantu tribes, Nilotic tribes, and Cushitic tribes.



In Kenya, the terms “Indigenous farmers” and “nomadic pastoralists” are often utilized primarily to refer to the groups in broad terms and avoid inciting violence through the specific naming of tribes. However, it is important to note that pastoralism is the economic activity of certain ethnic groups in Kenya. In pre-colonial times, pastoralism was practiced primarily by Nilotic-speaking tribes across Kenya and Africa but has been largely abandoned in favor of modernization/modern lifestyles. Indigenous farmers were primarily Bantu groups, while a fairly well-known and recognizable pastoralist group is the Maasai people, who are indigenous to Laikipia. Although there is tension between smallholder farmers and pastoralists, there are also inter- and intra-ethnic tensions between the individual tribes. These conflicts often stem from modern borders and lines imposed from the colonial system.

Land ownership and rights are complex issues in Kenya. The impact of colonialism set the foundation for tensions to rise from competing interests from conservationists, tourism developers, agriculturalists, and pastoralists. Wealth inequalities were then further continued by the biased and corrupt government that would come to replace the imperial regime. As in all nations of the world, land is considered a major asset for its quality of resources, ability to sustain livelihoods, and economic growth. Kenya’s economy is primarily fueled by agro-based and other land-based activities. As a result, land is often perceived not only as a source of economic power, but of political, and social status. The increasingly restricted use of traditional lands for agricultural needs and herding animals by pastoralists has in turn restricted these Indigenous communities from accumulating wealth and transferring it between generations. Two-thirds of Kenyans live in poverty, and there is a large gap between the rich and poor, with approximately 70 percent of Kenyan families experiencing poor nutrition, food insecurity, and preventable diseases. Many Kenyans suffer from economic inequality, while a minority elite continues to exploit their labor, resources, and opportunities.

In addition to tensions over land rights, climate change in Kenya is increasingly impacting the lives of Kenya’s citizens. It has led to more frequent extreme weather events like droughts that last longer than usual, along with increasing temperatures. Two of the most important sectors in Kenya’s economy are agriculture and tourism. On a local scale, reduced yields of staple crops, such as maize and beans, damage the local economy. When farmers cannot produce any surplus crops to sell, they cannot afford to buy other provisions, such as clothes, food, or fuel, and so other small businesses are suffering too. Additionally, as climate change endangers wildlife preservation, it damages Kenya’s tourist industry, as wildlife safaris are a major attraction for tourists visiting the country.

The Colonization of Kenya: A Timeline¹

- 1885** European colonial powers divide Africa between themselves at the Berlin Conference. The Berlin Conference established the rules for the colonization of Africa, resulting in the drawing up of arbitrary borders that ignored existing ethnic and political boundaries. Colonization aimed to exploit Kenyan resources to profit from the colonial powers, who imposed their culture, religion, and governance on Africans, thus ending African autonomy.
- 1888** A commercial association, the Imperial British East Africa Company, was founded to develop trade in the African territories controlled by the British Empire.
- 1895** The British government founded the East African Protectorate and soon after, opened the fertile highlands of present-day Kenya, parts of Uganda, and South Sudan to white settlers.
- 1901–1960** Great Britain colonized Kenya to gain access to its resources and agriculture-friendly climate. When the British arrived, they forced a lot of the Indigenous farmers and pastoralists onto camps where they were faced with working infertile land for survival. Pastoralism is a subsistence livelihood in which herders make their living by raising livestock and living semi-nomadically in areas where grasslands for grazing are available. As a result, land availability plays a crucial role for pastoralists in terms of maintaining food security, communal resources, and economic sustainability. Some Kenyans had to abandon their own agricultural or pastoralist way of life to become workers on European-owned farms and plantations. This contributed to ethnic conflict, as working for the Europeans sometimes led to the Kenyan natives' competing for the same goals: power, access to resources, and territory for survival.
- 1920** Kenya was officially named a British colony; however, Africans were banned from direct political participation.
- 1944** Jomo Kenyatta founded the Kenya Africa Union (KAU), the first countrywide nationalist party, to fight for independence.
- 1951–1963** A rebellion began to rise against British rule. A resistance group called the Mau Mau sought to forcibly drive the Europeans out of Kenya. At the core of the Mau Mau movement was access to basic rights: higher wages, increased educational opportunities, return of alienated lands, and African self-determination. The British responded by sending anyone accused or suspected of being associated with the Mau Mau to detention camps. Through this process, over one million Kenyans were removed from their homes and put into the camps.
- 1963** Kenya's independence was realized with Jomo Kenyatta named as prime minister. The Mau Mau movement was eventually suppressed by the British; however, it is believed that Kenya's eventual independence was undoubtedly a result of the political and economic pressures created by the Mau Mau.
- 1964–Present** The Republic of Kenya was formed and Kenyatta became the first president. After Kenya gained independence, a lot of the "white settler" land was sold to the Kenyan government and other wealthy individuals. Initially, the government had intended on restoring the land back to the Indigenous communities that had been stripped of their lands. Unfortunately, the government did not keep its promises and instead prioritized the desires of wealthy individuals over the needs of the Indigenous communities who were the original owners of the land. The land was unevenly distributed, favoring some Indigenous communities over others, leading to inter-ethnic/inter-tribal conflict. Some of the land was also sold to wealthy Europeans who would fence off the land to form large farms, ranches or nature conservancies.

¹ This information, and more, can be found in the Focus on Land "Kenya" brief, written by Peter Veit and available at <https://gatesopenresearch.org/documents/3-982/pdf>.