



History of Kenya

General Background

East Africa is a very important geographical area in the study of human evolution. It is believed that people migrated to Asia and parts of Europe about 500,000 years ago from eastern Africa.

Hunter-gatherers were living in East Africa when, about 12, 000 years ago, Caucasoid people came and settled in the Rift Valley area of Kenya and the central plains of Tanzania. Their skeletons have been found at Gamble's Cave, Kenya. From these two groups of people all present- day people of Africa are descended.

Kenya itself was first populated by a number of small-dispersed tribal groups. The country's interior was settled by agriculturists and nomadic pastoralists, consisting of as many as 40 distinct ethnic groups. The main groups were the Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo, and Maasai. The Bantu-speaking Kikuyu dominated the fertile heartland of Kenya. Each group had different origins, but shared the same area of land.

The coastal region came under Islamic influence as early as the tenth century. Arab and Persian merchants founded towns along the coast due to the proximity to the commercial hubs in the Middle East. Traders were also in contact with Greeks and Egyptians. The most important exported item during that time was ivory.

Over time, the intimate contact between Arabic people and indigenous Bantu cultures produced the Swahili culture, assimilating the characteristics of both groups.

The People of the Interior

In present-day Kenya, people of three distinct language groups are found: Bantu, Cushitic, and Nilotic. The interior of the country, extending from the '*nykia*' (Swahili word for the climatically hostile area forming a barrier behind the coast) to Lake Victoria, is populated by Bantu-speaking and Nilotic people. Their ancestors migrated to Kenya after the beginning of the second millennium A.D. The early Cushitic people who inhabited western Kenya, and parts of the highlands area, were absorbed or driven out during these movements. Present day Cushitic-speaking people, who occupy the northern and northeastern parts of the country, arrived sometime before the sixteenth century.

The Kikuyu, the nation's largest ethnic group, claim that their ancestors came originally from northeast of Mount Kenya during the fifteenth century and moved inland. Archaeological discoveries indicate that Bantu-speaking people preceded the Kikuyu in this region. The Kikuyu migrated slowly southwestward, absorbing other groups inhabiting these areas, such as the Gumba or the Athi, both hunter- gatherers.

The Kikuyu seemed to have lived in a symbiotic relationship with the Gumba, hunters skilled at iron working and pottery making. The two ethnic groups exchanged meat and skins for agricultural products. However, as the Kikuyu expanded, warfare started between the two people. The fate of the Gumba after these hostilities in the mid-nineteenth century is not known.

The Athi, a group that had a relationship with the Kikuyu similar to that of the Gumba, were forest dwellers. As they were only partly assimilated by the Kikuyu, groups of them still exist in the Rift Valley Province.

The Kamba, another main ethnic group in Kenya, was formed by merging Bantu communities. They were initially hunter-gatherers, but turned to agriculture because of the fertility of their new territory in Kenya. Due to immense population growth, and thus expansion to less fertile areas, they returned to hunting in these areas. It was the Kamba who discovered the value of ivory as a trade item and began the systematic exploitation of elephants. At its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, the prosperity of the coastal port of Mombassa was based on ivory trade. By the late nineteenth century, the elephants were depleted and a state of unrest made caravan traffic unsafe in remote areas. The Uganda railroad finally brought an end to the commercial Kamba activities, which had lasted for over a century.

Nilotic Luo came during the sixteenth century into the area north of Winam Bay from present-day Uganda. The details of the arrival of other Nilotic people in modern Kenya is uncertain.

Maasai pastoralists pushing southward through the Rift Valley became the dominant force in southwestern Kenya in the eighteenth century. They were so feared by their neighbors that only few dared to challenge their control of the southern valley, plains areas, and surrounding plateaus.

The Kenyan Coast

The coast of East Africa was mentioned in the first and second centuries A.D. Greek writings as a trading place for items like ivory, tortoiseshell, and spices.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Arab and Persian merchants founded settlements along the coast. These towns, stretching from the coasts of Somalia to the coasts of Mozambique, became links in an extensive commercial network between East Africa, Southwest Asia, and the Indies. Settlements in Mombassa, Malindi, Lamu, and Pate in present-day Kenya exported slaves and ivory that had been exchanged by Africans from the interior of the country for salt, cloth, beads, and metal goods.

The larger Arab towns developed into autonomous sultanates, competing with each other. Arab families continued to migrate to East Africa, and due to intermarriages between indigenous Bantu-speaking Africans and Arab settlers, a distinctive Islamic culture emerged. This also led to the development of the Swahili (Arabic for "coastal") language, serving as the main language on the East African coast, and as the native tongue of the mixed population.

By the end of the fifteenth century, Malindi was the most prosperous trading center on the Kenyan coast, surpassing Mombassa.

The Portuguese

Vasco da Gama came to Mombassa and Malindi on his voyage to India in 1498, initiating 200 years of Portuguese influence along the East African coast. While the sultanate of Malindi established friendly relations with the Portuguese, the leaders of Mombasa reacted with hostility. After several attacks on the town, they were forced to recognize the rule of the Europeans and pay an annual tribute.

In order to strengthen their power on this stretch of the East African coast, the Portuguese constructed a massive defense fort, Fort Jesus, at the entrance to Mombassa harbor in 1593. Their dominance went unchallenged for the next few decades, until the imam of Oman gained power. Fort Jesus fell in 1699 after a three-year siege.

During their 200 years on the Kenyan coast, the Portuguese showed no interest in colonialization, but only in trade. Their presence left no permanent marks other than a few words in the Swahili language and the monument of Fort Jesus. In addition, they introduced food crops from the New World, such as maize, cassava, and potatoes, which contributed to the growth of the population.

The Omani Hegemony and the Arrival of Europeans

After the Portuguese were expelled, the imam of Oman claimed authority over the entire coast of East Africa. However, the British wanted to curb the slave trade and combat piracy in the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century. A treaty was signed, trying to prevent the expansion of the slave trade to new markets, and, more importantly, to recognize the Omani rule from the Benadir Coast southward to Portuguese Mozambique.

In 1840, the now-called Sultan moved to Zanzibar. Although the British wanted to restrict and limit the slave trade, it flourished. Reports of the horrors of this trade reached Britain, leading to a permanent stationing of an anti-slave trade patrol in the western Indian Ocean. Although British pressure increased and agreements were signed, the discontent over slaving restrictions continued on the Kenyan coast until the end of the nineteenth century.

While Zanzibar became a center of trade, trade declined in Mombassa, leading to an exodus of merchants and artisans. It did not recover from the decline until the early 1900s, when construction of the railroad to Uganda began.

In the late nineteenth century, the Sultan's powers started to become overshadowed, as both British and Germans obtained trading concessions along the coast.

In 1846, the first Christian mission was established near Mombassa by Johann Krapf and Johann Rebmann, two Swiss men serving the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS). Local hostilities prevented the extension of mission activities to the interior, plus the indigenous Muslim population strongly opposed the teaching of Christianity.

By 1885, most of the estimated 300 Europeans in the region were involved in missionary work.

19th Century Onwards

In the late nineteenth century, the British included Kenya in their sphere of influence. Britain was also allotted what is now Uganda, and Germany was allotted the mainland of present Tanzania.

In 1893, Uganda became a British protectorate, closely followed by Kenya in 1895. Kenya was named after the 5,200 meter high mountain in the central highlands of the country, Mount Kenya. The Kikuyu called this mountain *nyaga*, “the mountain of whiteness”.

The British were mainly interested in controlling the rich resources of Uganda. In order to facilitate this, they built a railroad between Mombassa and Kampala, using Indian laborers. Many of them remained in the country and became today’s merchant class.

The climate and fertility of the Kenya Highlands made this region ideal for European settlement and for plantations producing export crops. Vast stretches of the country’s best land were reserved for the white minority, with restrictions of African and Asian land use. Many Africans lost their land during this process and were forced onto inferior land or into the labor market as a result of the hut taxes imposed by the colonial administration.

By 1915, the majority of the fertile highlands were being used by the British and racial segregation of land effectively excluded Africans and Asians from owning properties. This pressure over land ownership and the controls over cultivation and marketing of cash crops by Africans prevented them from competing with the white settlers and led to unrest and the formation of political action groups in the 1920s. In 1923, ‘The Devonshire White Paper’ was issued, declaring that Kenya was primarily African territory, with African interests being the most important, and that the British government had to protect and ensure the welfare of the African people. Unfortunately, when gold was found in an African reserve, the law was amended to enable the government to access the land where the minerals were found.

During World War 2, as a result of Africans being conscripted, political consciousness expanded. One political movement among the Kikuyu was led by Jomo Kenyatta, who later became the founding president of Kenya. A formation of guerrilla groups, Mau Mau, was crushed in 1956, and Kenyatta and leaders of the Kenya African Union (KAU) were imprisoned. This rebellion shook the colonial administration. A state of emergency was declared and the restrictions on African cultivation lifted.

In 1961, the British government granted Kenya the majority rule, and at the end of 1963, the country was declared fully independent within the Commonwealth of Nations. The next year Kenya became a republic with Jomo Kenyatta, released from prison, as the nation’s first president. The principal political parties merged voluntarily under his leadership into the Kenyan African National Union (KANU). Radical dissidents and ethnic interest groups feared a Kikuyu dominance and formed an opposition party under Oginga Odinga. However, this party was banned in 1969, reverting Kenya back to a one-party state.

Kenyatta provided the country with a substantial degree of stability during its first fifteen years of independence. The Mzee – the “Old Man”, as Kenyatta was familiarly known – held the power but still maintained basically democratic institutions. The press was relatively free in its reporting and commenting, and the Kenyan economy developed along capitalist lines,

emphasizing rapid growth and modern production methods.

In 1978, Kenyatta died and was succeeded by his vice president, Daniel arap Moi. Increasingly autocratic in style, Moi was successful in settling a dispute with Somalia over its borders and normalized relations with Tanzania.

As Kenya was a de facto one-party state, Moi conceded to internal and external pressure for political liberalization in 1991. The opposition, however, failed to dislodge KANU from power in elections in 1992 and 1997. These elections were characterized by violence and fraud, but seem to have reflected the will of the Kenyan people.

President Moi stepped down in December 2002, following fair and peaceful elections, leaving the presidency to Mwai Kibaki. Kibaki was the candidate of the multiethnic, united opposition group, the National Rainbow Coalition.

During colonial times, Kenya was considered a hub for economic and strategic activities in East Africa. The country's importance has continued in the post-independence era, and has at times been described by Western leaders and development institutions as one of Africa's most progressive, politically stable, and prosperous nations.

Today, Kenya remains a focal point for development and Western intervention. Many development institutions, organizations, and agencies have established a presence in Kenya, including a large UN complex in Nairobi. Until recently, Kenya was regarded as a model country open to the ways of 'modernization'. Its recent loss of model status is based on what is considered its failure to embrace and comply fully with reforms supported by the IMF and World Bank, and further, its 'propensity' toward over-population, corruption, ethnic rift, and environmental degradation.

Land Politics

Land, an incredibly important resource for sustaining livelihoods in Kenya, is the focus of intense strife. Struggles over land are experienced differently by women and men, depending upon gender, class, age, marital status, and life-cycle positioning. Women and men negotiate, access, and maintain control over land as a productive and material resource differently and inequitably within local relations of power.

Land has been considered a patriarchal construction. Along with women, children, and livestock, land is considered men's "property" in many parts of Kenya. This patriarchal ideology is sustained and perpetuated through the language of custom, based on men's roles as "commanders". This situation was reinforced during colonialism by the adoption of western concepts of men as outright owners of land and property. Although women recognize these inequities, many believe that it is "a matter of persevering". Women often assume a posture of deference to patriarchal ideology, making room to maneuver by making "back door" decisions and engaging in covert acts of resistance, rather than contesting the patriarchal system outright. Nonetheless, the fact that men own most property significantly affects the way struggles over resources play out and the types of options and opportunities that are available to women.

**Source: [Gender, Land, and Livelihoods in East Africa](#), Ritu Verma*

Citizenship

In post-colonial Kenya, as in many other African countries, citizenship has developed in ways that reflect both the colonial heritage and the hasty transition to post-colonial state-society relations. Current forms of citizenship retain some structures of colonial society and continue to give privilege to the state rather than society. However, an evolving discourse between the state and civil society has recently challenged this status quo, asserting the importance of individual rights, including the right to restrain the state from trampling on them.

Unlike the centuries-long evolution of citizenship rights in the western world, citizenship in post-colonial African states is a product of rights bestowed by the state as opposed to those acquired or claimed by society through a historical process of struggle. Experts have noted that these rights are often precarious, because the government institutions that allow them may just as easily revoke them.

In the Kenyan case, the rights of liberty and democratic rule that were promised at independence were essentially negotiated among politicians drawn from colonial African society often referred to as "citizens", that is, the educated, urbanized political classes. These people were distinguished from "subjects", the largely uneducated rural dwellers. During the colonial era, the so-called citizens had acquired some status and limited rights from their participation in urban society or through education. Moreover, their anti-colonial struggles and ultimate independence emerged from battles to extend citizenship rights to themselves.

In Kenya, citizenship has been characterized by two trends. The first is the duality of citizenship that individuals hold in ethnic communities and in the nation-state and the conflictive relations this dual citizenship engenders, especially in the context of competitive electoral politics. The second trend is reflected in the duality between "citizen" and "subject," a distinction rooted in colonial society that has persisted and shaped political relations between individuals and the postcolonial states.

Political rights in Kenya evolved out of the transition to independence. Under the tutelage of departing British colonists, the African political elite, leading "mass-based" parties of mainly rural followers, negotiated a federalist constitution that emphasized individual rights and propagated institutions that took the centuries of British constitutional development as a given. For instance, Kenya embraced the common law heritage and patterned a bill of rights after the constitutional experience of Great Britain. Therefore, even as the two leading African parties negotiated a federalist compromise to their ethnic divisions, the citizenship package they received (in its entirety from British political tradition) lacked a historical bond with the people of Kenya. As bequeathed, these components of citizenship were soon withdrawn by governments eager to preserve their power in the face of growing divisions based on ethnicity, class, unfulfilled promises of social and economic development, and the external dynamics of political and economic dependency.

Even as the state enunciated a broad array of liberal rights, the typical Kenyan remained a subject, as best reflected in the relationship that Kenyans have had with their political leaders—a relationship that has remained unchallenged until very recently.

Perhaps the most significant attacks on the citizenship so generously given at independence were directed at the rights of assembly, association, and speech. The recent restoration of these rights and the continuing debate over reinforcing them reflect the necessary struggle to "acquire" them through a historical process of compromise between state and society. Some activists who claim these citizenship rights have resorted to sympathetic international institutions (e.g. in human rights) that diminish the sovereignty claims of nations if the sovereignty of individuals within them is not upheld. Some of the laws that undermined individual freedoms guaranteed in the constitution were enacted during the colonial era, particularly in an effort to suppress the Mau Mau independence movement. Ironically, these laws were left on the books as Kenya promulgated liberal constitutional tenets at independence. More tragically, they were eagerly invoked against an incipient opposition by Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, as well as his successor, Daniel arap Moi. For instance, laws against sedition and those permitting detention without trial were rigorously enforced in the 1980s.

Economy

Presently, a large majority of the land is still owned by expatriates or politicians. The country's employment problems are mainly caused by the fact that there is limited access to the land, and only seven percent of the total area receives enough rainfall to support agriculture.

A severe drought from 1999 to 2000 increased Kenya's problems, causing water and energy rationing and reducing agricultural output. Strong rains returned in 2001, but weak commodity prices, endemic corruption, and low investment limited economic growth to 1%. Substantial support, and rooting out corruption, are essential to making Kenya realize its economic potential.