

# THE KALENJIN ETHNIC COMMUNITY

**Introduction:** The Kalenjin is a tribe made up of 10 sub-ethnic groups namely: **The Nandi, Terik, Tugen, Keiyo, Sengwer, Ogiek (Ndorobo), Marakwet, Pokot, Sabaot and the Kipsigis.** The Kalenjin people are found in the Rift Valley escarpment of Kenya. There are related people in north central Tanzania. The Sabaot live around the slopes of Mt. Elgon and extend across to the border to Uganda, where they are called Sebei.

**History:** The Kalenjin are descendants of migrants from the Nile River area of the Sudan or the western Ethiopian highlands. One of their myths says they came originally from *Misri*, a name for Egypt. This name is common in origin traditions of many peoples, including some Bantu peoples in East Africa. Much has also been learned from comparison of languages of the various peoples. It is thought the ancestors of these Highland Nilotes were moving from their Nile River areas about 3000 years ago. The ancestors of the Kalenjin were established in approximately their current areas by about A.D. 500. One group moved on south to become the Datooga in Tanzania.

**Identity:** The Kalenjin are called Highland Nilotes because they live in the Highlands of the Rift Valley and are related to the people in the Nile area of Sudan and Uganda. The Kalenjin arrived in Kenya from the Nile River, possibly the Blue Nile, as it appears they came into Kenya from the Ethiopian highlands. Most of these clans acted as warriors during independence. The Kalenjin are related to the Datooga in north central Tanzania, the southernmost group of the Highland Nilote migration.

**Language:** The Kalenjin people speak several languages that are not mutually intelligible but are linguistically closely related. Nandi and Kipsigis are the two major dialects of what is called the Kalenjin language. The Talai and Endo speak separate languages, as do the Pokoot, Sabaot and Tugen. The Kalenjin as a group are related to the Samburu and Maasai somewhat. There are linguistic as well as cultural similarities. "Subai" (Good morning) is a word common to Kalenjin and Maasai. The Kalenjin are people of the Highland Nilote branch, while the Maasai and Samburu are Plains Nilotes.

**Weapons:** The arms of the fighting men usually consisted of a spear, shield, sword and club. By the late 19th century, up to four kinds of spears, representing various eras and areas were in use. In Nandi, the **eren-gatiat**, of the Sirkwa era was still in use though only by old men. It had a short and small leaf-shaped blade with a long socketed shank and a long butt. Two types of the Maasai era spear, known as **ngotit**, were also in use. Those of the eastern, northern and southern counties had long narrow blades with long iron butt, short socket and short shaft. Those of the central county (emgwen) had short broad blades with short iron butts. In the western counties, a spear that had a particularly small head, a long shaft and no butt was in use, it was known as **ndirit**. The pastoral Pokot carried two Maasai era spears, known as **ngotwa** while the agricultural sections armed themselves with a sword, known as **chok**.

**Age set (*Ipinda*):** All boys who were circumcised together are said to belong to the same *ipinda*. These age sets played a significant role in traditional Kalenjin society since they were

used to record time. Once the young men of a particular *ipinda* came of age, they were tasked with protecting the tribal lands and the society, the period when they were in charge of protection of the society was known as the age of that *ipinda*. There were eight ages in general (**Maina, Chumo, Sawe, Korongoro, Kipkwomet, Kaplelach, Kipnyigeu, & Nyongi**) though this varied between sections as an age-set would temporarily be dropped from use if a disastrous occurrence occurred during the age of the *ipinda*. As late as the early-1900s, the central Kalenjin groups initiated the same age-set concurrently while the outlying groups were one or at most two steps out of phase. It has been suggested that such synchronization suggests that most or all Kalenjin groups constituted not merely an ethno-linguistic category but a single information sharing system.

**Governance:** Among the Kalenjin, there were no chiefs of any form. Each village or Kok, usually had a headman, celebrated for his wisdom or his wealth or both. He was henceforth distinguished by the name Ki-ruwok-in. The *Kokwet* was the most significant political and judicial unit among the Kalenjin. The governing body of each kokwet was its *kokwet* council; the word *kokwet* was in fact variously used to mean the whole neighbourhood, its council and the place where the council met. The *kokwet* elders were the local authority for allocating land for cultivation; they were the body to whom the ordinary member of the tribe would look for a decision in a dispute or problem which defied solution by direct agreement between the parties. The Nandi adopted the Sengwer system of governance in the early-19th century, selecting an Orkoiyot who held precisely the same position as the Maasai Laibon, that is to say he was the supreme chief of the entire Nandi section. The Kipsigis would adopt this system of governance from the Nandi in the late-19th century

**Medicine:** Traditional Kalenjin medicine recognized both supernatural and technical skills, with male practitioners more associated with the former and female practitioners with the latter. When a person fell ill, it was attributed to an angry spirit, often of a relation, and a cleansing ceremony was performed following which treatment was carried out. Medicines were made out of bark, roots and leaves of various trees and plants. Surgery was practiced and limbs skillfully set and amputated. Cupping therapy was frequently made use of and wounds were at times cauterized using a fire-stick.

**Customs:** The Kalenjin at one time pierced their ears, men and women alike, and then put sticks in them to stretch the lobes. They did this so that they could wear beads in their ears. Many old Kalenjin can still be recognized by their stretched earlobes. They stopped doing this for hygiene reasons.

Kalenjin love their cows and land. They grow millet, maize and now tea and sorghum.

Traditionally Kalenjins built round homes of sticks and mud plaster, with pointed thatch roofs with a pole out the center. Nowadays homes are commonly wood and stone with modern facilities, though traditional homes are still common also.

The children of Kalenjin were taught to respect elders. Even now respect is very important in the Kalenjin culture. Manners are important and men are the head of the house. Girls were taught to kneel in front of men and weren't allowed to speak to men until they had been circumcised.

Girls were taught how to make gourds and pots for carrying water. They learned to carry firewood and look for wild vegetables. Boys were taught to care for the cattle and the boma. Boys were not allowed to sleep in the same house with their mother after the age of 5.

### **Traditional Religion:**

Traditionally, the Kalenjin worshipped the sun. The word for god and sun are one and the same: Asiiis. This is the name of an ancient Egyptian (Cushite) god. They would go to the mountain and worship at 5:00 a.m. and pray until the sun would rise. They worshipped the sun because it gave life. The Kalenjin traditionally did not build a structure for worship, "as it was felt that this would have reduced His power and would have limited it to a particular building". They did, however, have three main places of traditional worship.

- ***Kaapkoros***, which was a hilltop set aside for worship by the Kalenjin. When the Kalenjin or the various sections would settle at a place, one hilltop would be set aside for worship. As the tribe expanded and people moved further away from this point, other hilltops would be set aside as being sacred. Evidently, the first *kaapkoros* took place very soon after the Kalenjin settled in Kenya—or even long before that time. People gathered on average once a year at *kaapkoros*, where worship would be led by the priests, known as *Tisiik*.
- ***Mabwaita*** is a term used by the Kipsigis section for the family altar or prayer tree which was positioned to the east of the house as one exited from the door. The Nandi and Keiyo sections called it *korosyoot*. This was a duplicate of the one at *kaapkoros* and was the centre for worship and ceremonies connected with the home and family.
- ***Sach ooraan*** is a Kalenjin term used for the intersection of two or more paths or roads. *Sach ang'wan* is used for the place where four paths or roads branch off. Years ago when a crossroad was being used for a ceremony or practice, it was considered to be a shrine. It was remembered ever afterwards that the spot had been used for the removal of something bad. Children were not allowed to go near a shrine at an intersection. Casting a leaf at *sach ooraan* was a form of prayer to Asis to drive away disease.

**MARRIAGE:** The first marriage of a man and a girl was arranged by their parents or guardians accordingly to the prospective bridegroom; a man with a marriageable daughter was obliged to wait until approached with an offer of marriage. On the other hand, a young man could ask his father to procure a wife for him he could name the particular girl of his choice. Polygamy was of course practiced by the tribe. ***Bride-wealth:*** The bride's father stated the bride-price(*kanyiok*) which varied slightly in amount from clan to clan but not within a particular clan. It would be in the region of two herd of cattle (one heifer and one ox) and three sheep and or goats. Traditionally, it was officiated over by an elder and the bride and groom would be blessed by four people carrying bouquets of the *sinendet* (traditionally auspicious plant) who would form a procession and go round the couple four times and finally the bridegroom and bride would bind a sprig of *sekutiet* (traditionally auspicious plant) onto each other's wrists. This was followed by feasting and dancing.

**Annual Festival (Kipsundet):** *Kipsundet* was a harvest festival observed during the months of September and October which was during the time of the ripening of the *eleusine* grain (finger millet) and after it had been harvested. Even in contemporary times, this period usually marks

the start of the harvest of the long rains grain crop in the western Kenyan regions. This is the main harvest of the country. During *Kipsunde*, which occurred in September and after which the month was named, each owner of a plantation would go with her daughters into the cornfields and make a bonfire of the branches and leaves of the *lapotuet* and *pék'ap tarit* trees. Some eleusine was then plucked and one grain fixed in the necklace whilst another was rubbed on the forehead, throat and breast by each woman and girl. No joy was shown by the womenfolk on this occasion and they sorrowfully cut a basketful of the grain which they took home with them and placed in the loft to dry. A few days later, porridge made from the new grain was served with milk at the evening meal, and all the members of the family would take some of the food and dab it on the walls and roofs of the huts. The head of the household would then hold some eleusine grain in his hand and would offer up a prayer with everybody present repeating the words after him.

During the month of October, after the gathering of the harvest, the Kipsunde oeñg or Kipsude nepalet ceremony would be held. This festival was a community wide celebration that was observed locally, i.e each bororiet would hold its own feast on top of a hill or in a large open plain. The festival featured feasting with a particular feature being a roast that made use of four different types of wood as fuel, a large bonfire would first be made using *emdit* and *tekat* wood, on top of which *kemeliet* and *lapotuet* shrubs would be thrown. There was often also dancing of various styles such as *kambakta*, a warriors dance, and *sondoiyo*, an old peoples dance. The musical accompaniments usually included lyres, pipes and the sukutit drums.

After the ceremony, women would go down to the river and pick two stones from the river, one which they would keep in their water jar and one in their granaries till the next Kipsundet festival. The festival was described as 'obsolescent' in 1950.

**Children's games:** Small children were fond of building huts in the sand and would collect snails, pebbles and solanum berries to represent cows, sheep and goats. Small boys also played mock war games, arming themselves with wooden spears and shields and clubs made of bulrushes. Small girls made dolls out of the fruit of the sausage tree and dressed these up in skins and necklaces and bracelets made of seeds. Other games little children played included morochet (frog), and *kimmis* where ten to twenty children would sit in a circle and pass a piece of live charcoal behind them. One child stood outside the circle and tried to guess who had the charcoal.

**Youth & Adult past Times Activities:** Youth and adults also had favorite past times. Big boys and girls sometimes had mock circumcision festivals but since children weren't allowed to talk of circumcision, they called it branding. Other games included *talus* (shooting the bow, which was said to represent the bleeding of oxen), *chemosiraitet* (high jump) and *kangetet* (lifting the spear). *Kechuiek*, the almost universal game of *bao* was sometimes played by grown-up people though they did not make a board containing compartments as do many Bantu tribes but rather made holes in the earth in which they circulated seeds.

**Christianity:** Missionaries were allowed in to work with the Kipsigis where no Europeans had settled by 1933. Missionaries of the Africa Gospel Mission pioneered the work among the Kipsigis while missionaries of the Africa Inland Mission started the work among the Nandi and

Tugen. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church was introduced to Kalenjin community through local missionaries from the neighboring Luo and Kisii communities. The Catholic Church too has a slight presence in the Kalenjin community. Currently, sources estimate that about 80% of the Kalenjin people are Christians.

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