

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280308435>

Keiyo

Chapter · January 2009

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.3455.7283

CITATIONS

0

READS

535

1 author:



[Bruce Roberts](#)

Minnesota State University Moorhead

13 PUBLICATIONS 21 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

KEIYO

PRONUNCIATION: KAY-oh

ALTERNATE NAMES: Kalenjin

LOCATION: Kenya

POPULATION: 110,000

LANGUAGE: Dialect of Kalenjin; Swahili; English

RELIGION: Christianity (Africa Inland Church [AIC], the Church of the Province of Kenya [CPK], Roman Catholic Church); Islam

RELATED ARTICLES: Vol. 1: Kalenjin; Kenyans

1 INTRODUCTION

The Keiyo live in the Republic of Kenya, East Africa. One of Kenya's lesser-known groups, they were known earlier as Elgeyo ("El-gay-o"), a Maasai term. The Keiyo are part of a larger ethnic grouping of eight culturally and linguistically related tribes known as the Kalenjin. The length of time the Keiyo and other Kalenjin groups have been living in the Western Highlands and the Rift Valley, their homeland, is open for debate. Some scholars claim that these peoples have only been living in western Kenya for about 400 years, while others argue that such groups have occupied these parts for 2,000 years or more.

2 LOCATION AND HOMELAND

Figures released in January 2007 estimated the population of Kenya to be 36,913,721. Of that 12% are thought to be Kalenjin, approximately 4.4 million people. Collectively the Kalenjin comprise Kenya's fourth-largest ethnic group, with the Keiyo numbering about 144,000 people.

The Keiyo live in the western section of Africa's Great Rift Valley in an administrative district bearing the same name—Keiyo District. Until recently, most Keiyo lived along the slopes of the Elgeyo Escarpment, a spectacular geological feature that drops in elevation from 2,590 m (8,500 ft) in the highlands to 1,070 m (3,500 ft) in the Kerio River Valley. Shortly before, and continuing after, the end of British colonial rule in 1963, many Keiyo moved up into the highlands of the fertile Uasin Gishu plateau to take up farming of cash crops.

3 LANGUAGE

As their first language, or mother tongue, the Keiyo speak a dialect of Kalenjin, a language of the southern section of the Nilotic branch, which is part of the Chari-Nile language group of Africa. There are three Kalenjin dialect clusters: one consists of the Sabaot, along with the Sebei and Kony; another is made up of Pokot, northern Marakwet, and northern Tugen; and the third includes the Nandi, Kipsigis, Keiyo, Terik, and southern Tugen and Marakwet. Although these dialects are all supposedly mutually intelligible, speakers of one dialect often have difficulty understanding speakers of another. In addition to Kalenjin, most people speak Swahili and English, since both are official national languages and are taught in school, beginning with primary school education. Today it is only very old persons who do not speak at least some English.

Most young people today have a Western or Biblical name (for example, Mary, Rose, David, or Paul) as well as a traditional Kalenjin name (for example, Kipkemoi, Kipchoge, Che-

mutai, or Jebet). Traditionally, names for males begin with the prefix "Ki," while those for females begin with "Che" or "Je." In addition, traditional names often refer to some circumstance when the child was born. For example: Kipchoge (a boy born near the granary), Kibet (a boy born during the day), Cherutich (a girl born as the cows were coming back home), and Jepkemoi (a girl born at night).

4 FOLKLORE

Oral tradition was, and still is to some degree, very important among the Keiyo. Prior to the introduction of writing, folk tales served to convey a sense of cultural history. Keiyo oral tradition has four main genres: narratives (stories), songs, proverbs, and riddles. Stories usually contain both people and animals, and certain animals have acquired attributes that are concrete representations of character traits, e.g., hare is a trickster figure whose cleverness can be self-defeating; lion is courageous and wise; and hyena is greedy and destructive. Songs accompany both work and play, as well as ceremonial occasions such as births, initiations, and weddings. Proverbs convey important messages in very concise ways and are often used when elders settle disputes or advise younger persons. Riddles involve word play and are especially popular with children.

5 RELIGION

Traditional Keiyo religion is based upon a concept of a supreme god, *Asis* ("Ah-sees"), who is represented in the form of the sun, although this is not God himself. Beneath *Asis* is *Elat* ("Ay-lot"), who controls thunder and lightning. Spirits of the dead, *oyik* ("oh-yeek"), can also intervene in the affairs of humans, and sacrifices of meat and/or beer, *koros* ("chorus"), can be made to placate them. Diviners, *orkoik* ("or-coe-eek"), have magical powers and help in appeals for rain or to end floods.

Currently, nearly everyone professes membership in some organized religion—either Christianity or Islam. Major Christian sects include the Africa Inland Church (AIC), the Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK), and the Roman Catholic Church. Muslims are relatively few in number among the Keiyo. Generally speaking, today only older people can recall details of traditional religious beliefs.

6 MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The major holidays observed by the Keiyo are mostly those associated with Christianity (i.e., Christmas and Easter), and national holidays such as Jamhuri (Republic) Day, Madaraka (Responsibility) Day, Moi (the current president) Day, and Kenyatta (the first president) Day. At Christmas it is common for people who still live in traditional mud-walled houses with thatched roofs to give the outer walls a new coat of clay white-wash and paint them with holiday greetings (such as "Merry Christmas" and "Happy New Year").

There are three month-long school holidays in April, August, and December. The first two coincide with peak periods in the agricultural cycle and allow children of various ages to assist their families during these busy times. The December holiday corresponds with both Christmas and the traditional initiation ceremonies, *tumdo* ("toom-doe").

7 RITES OF PASSAGE

Age is a fundamental organizing principle in Keiyo society, as it is across much of Africa. Thus, the status occupied and the roles performed by a Keiyo individual are still to a large degree ordained by age. Shortly after a child is born, it is given a name. Friends and family are invited for a ceremony called *chai ya mtoto* (“cha-eye ya m toto”), meaning literally, “the child’s tea.” This designation derives from the slang use of the KiSwahili word for tea, *chai* (“cha-eye”), to mean payment, often in the form of bribes paid to government officials. Guests give presents and contribute money to the parents to help defer the costs of the party. In the past, the two lower incisor teeth of both boys and girls would be removed at a later age both for cosmetic reasons and to toughen the children for later initiation rites.

For both males and females, becoming an adult involves undergoing an initiation ceremony. Traditionally, these were held about every seven years. Everyone undergoing initiation, or *tumdo* (“toom-doe”), becomes a member of a named age-set, or *ipinda* (“e-pin-da”). Age-sets were traditionally “open” for about 15 years. There are eight male age-sets and they are cyclical, repeating approximately every 100 years. The *sakobei* (“sah-coe-bay”) ceremony marked the closing of an age-set about every 15 years, and the elevation of a new age-set to the warrior age-grade. These age-sets and the age-grades (e.g., warrior, junior elder, senior elder) through which individuals passed provided part of the basis for traditional social structure.

After circumcision, male youths were secluded for lengthy periods of time during which they were instructed in the skills necessary for adulthood. Afterwards, they began a phase of warriorhood during which they acted as the military force of the tribe. Elders provided guidance and wisdom. Today age-sets have lost their military function, but this principle still creates bonds between men who are members of the same set, and feelings of respect for those who are older. Female age-sets have long since lost much of their importance. Among the Keiyo today, females are known by the age-set of their husband, and very few women can even recall the names of the female age-sets.

In the past, only people who had borne children would be buried after death; the others would be taken out to the bush and left to be eaten by hyenas. Today at every person’s death, he or she is buried, but not in a cemetery as in the United States. People are returned to their farm, or *shamba* (“sha-mbaa”), for burial. There is usually no grave marker, but invariably family members, friends, and neighbors know where people are laid to rest.

8 INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Chamge (“chaam-gay”) or *chamuge* (“chaa-moo-gay”) is the standard greeting among the Keiyo. If the encounter is face-to-face, the spoken greeting is almost always accompanied by a hearty handshake, and people often clasp their own right elbow with their left hand. The response is the same—*chamge*, sometimes repeated several times. It may be emphasized with *mis-ing* (“me-sing”), which can mean either “very much” or “close friend,” depending upon the context. As a sign of respect, a younger person will greet someone of their grandparents’ generation by saying, *chamge kogo* (grandmother—“chaam-gay coe-go”) or *chamge kugo* (grandfather—“chaam-gay coo-go”).



Americans are likely to find several aspects of Keiyo body language to be unusual. First, holding hands after greeting is very common for people of the same sex. Even when walking, these people may hold hands or lock little fingers. But it is readily apparent that there is absolutely no sexual connotation to this behavior. Furthermore, people of opposite sexes are strongly discouraged from these and other public displays of affection. Second, in their conversations Keiyo do not point out objects or people with their fingers. Instead, they point by turning their head in the proper direction and then puckering their lips briefly.

Taking leave of someone is accompanied by the farewell, *sait sere* (“sah-eat sarey”—meaning literally, “blessing time”), and hearty handshakes. Often people will walk with their visitor(s) a distance in order to continue the conversation and to give their friend(s) “a push.” Once again, these people often hold hands, especially if they are members of the same sex.

In the past, dating and courtship were almost entirely matters of family concern. Clans were exogamous, i.e., one had to marry outside of one’s own (and father’s) clan. Today young men and women are more free to exercise their own free will, especially those who live away from home at boarding schools. They will meet and socialize at dances in town discos and in cafes called *hoteli* (“hotel-e”) in KiSwahili. Still, when a young man decides on a wife, he and his father’s family must gather together a suitable bride-price payment (often erroneously referred to as a “dowry”) to be given to the bride’s family. In the past this consisted almost entirely of livestock, but today it is

becoming more and more common to use money in place of, or in addition to, livestock.

9 LIVING CONDITIONS

Most Keiyo live on relatively small family farms averaging less than 2 hectares (5 acres). They grow many different staple food crops such as corn, beans, millet, sorghum, kale, and cowpeas, as well as a variety of cash crops like coffee (small amounts), pyrethrum (related to the chrysanthemum and used in manufacture of insecticides), potatoes, and tomatoes. Most people also keep livestock in the form of cattle, sheep, and goats, and a few donkeys that are used for transport.

Before the British arrived, the Keiyo lived on the face of the Elgeyo Escarpment, while grazing their cattle in the forests at the top of the escarpment and cultivating on the escarpment shelf around their homes. Disease-resistant goats would be sent to the valley during the day, and hunting would also be carried out there. Residence on the Elgeyo Escarpment enabled productive use of multiple ecological zones and protected the Keiyo from diseases like malaria in the valley and, in the past, raids by Maasai and Nandi warriors on the Uasin Gishu plateau. Furthermore, the climate on the escarpment shelf is very moderate. The highlands can become extremely wet and cool during the rainy season, while the valley becomes devastatingly hot in the dry season. However, the escarpment provides relief from both extremes for most of the year.

Traditionally, Keiyo houses were round, with walls constructed of bent saplings anchored to larger posts and covered with a mixture of mud and cow dung, while roofs were thatched with local grasses. While these kinds of houses are still common, there is a growing trend towards the construction of square or rectangular houses that are built with timber walls and roofs of corrugated sheet metal, *mabati* (“ma-baatee”).

Most Keiyo people still do not have electricity or indoor plumbing in their houses. Radios and/or cassette players; kerosene lamps and stoves; charcoal stoves; aluminum cooking pots; plastic dishes, plates, and cups; and bicycles are the most common consumer items. Those few people who do not have electricity but who do have televisions use car batteries for power.

10 FAMILY LIFE

Traditionally, like in most African societies, the family was central in the daily life of the Keiyo people. But by family what was meant was the extended family, not the nuclear family in the Western sense. Keiyo residence patterns were, and still are, largely patrilocal. That is, typically after marriage a man brings his wife to live with him in, or very near to, his father's homestead. Marriage of one man to multiple wives (polygyny) was and is permitted, although most men cannot afford the expense of such unions because of the burden of bride-price. Regardless of the type of marriage, children were traditionally seen as a blessing from God and, as a result of this, until very recently Kenya had the highest population growth rate in the world.

Slowly these patterns are changing as monogamous marriages now prevail and nuclear families are becoming more frequent. Moreover, younger people are now expressing a desire to have fewer children when they get married. This is due to the increasing expense of having large numbers of children who not only must be fed but also educated to cope in today's

world. To some degree, young women are also changing their aspirations to go beyond motherhood alone and include a career as well.

11 CLOTHING

The Keiyo were not renowned for their traditional clothing, which essentially consisted of animal skins, either domesticated or wild. Earrings were common for both sexes in the past, including heavy brass coils which tended to make the earlobe stretch downward almost to the shoulder. This is generally not practiced today, when the Western-style dress of most Keiyo, even in rural areas, is scarcely different from that of people in nearby towns. The buying of secondhand clothes is quite common. Thus, men wear trousers and shirts, usually along with a suit jacket or sport coat, while women wear skirts and blouses, dresses, and/or *khangas* (“khan-gaaz”)—locally made commercial textiles that are used as wraps (one for the top and one for the bottom). Youths of both sexes covet tee-shirts with logos, especially those of American sports teams or bearing the likeness of popular American entertainers.

12 FOOD

The staple food of the Keiyo is *ugali* (“oo-golly”). This is a cake-like, starchy food that is made from white cornmeal mixed with boiling water and stirred vigorously while cooking. It is eaten with the hands and is often served with cooked green vegetables such as kale, called *sukuma wiki* (“sue-cooma weeky”) in KiSwahili, and meaning literally, “to push the week.” Less frequently it is served with roasted goat meat, beef, or chicken. Before the introduction and widespread diffusion of corn in recent times, millet and sorghum—indigenous African grains—were staple cereals. All of these grains were, and still are, used to make a very thick beer that has a relatively low alcohol content. Another popular Keiyo beverage is *mursik* (“more-see”). This consists of fermented whole milk that has been stored in a special gourd called a *sotet* (pronounced just as it appears, with the accent on the second syllable) that has been cleaned using a burning stick. The result is that the milk is infused with tiny bits of charcoal.

Lunch and dinner are the big meals of the day. Breakfast usually consists of tea (made with a lot of milk and sugar) and any leftovers from the previous night's meal, or perhaps some store-bought bread. Mealtimes, as well as the habit of tea-drinking, were adopted from the British colonial period. Lunch is eaten at 1:00 pm rather than at noon, and dinner is often eaten later in the evening at 8:00 or 9:00 pm. In addition to bread, people routinely buy foodstuffs such as sugar, tea leaves, cooking fat, sodas (most often Orange Fanta and Coca-Cola), and other items they do not produce themselves.

13 EDUCATION

Traditionally, Keiyo education was provided during the seclusion of initiates following circumcision. This transitional phase of the rite of passage provided an opportunity to instill in these young men and women all the requisite knowledge necessary to be a functioning and productive adult member of their society. It was, in essence, a “crash” course in the intricacies of their own culture. Nowadays, after initiation young men and women are still secluded but for briefer periods of time (one month as compared with three months in the past). The timing

of the December school holiday coincides with the practice of initiation and seclusion.

In 2003 free primary school education became universal in Kenya. "Free" must be qualified however, because parents must provide their children with uniforms, books, pens and pencils, and paper, as well as contribute to frequent fund raising activities for their children's school(s). This constitutes a tremendous financial burden for families in a country where the average per capita income is about \$360 per year. Post-primary school education is relatively expensive, even at the cheaper secondary schools, and entry is competitive. Tuition at the more prestigious high schools, where students must board, is very expensive. Typically, parents rely on contributions from a wide range of family, neighbors, and friends to meet the high tuition costs. Tuition at Kenya's universities is rather nominal, but the selection process is grueling and relatively few students who want to attend can do so.

14 CULTURAL HERITAGE

Traditional music and dance had many different functions. Songs would accompany many work-related activities, including, for men, herding livestock and digging the fields, and, for women, grinding corn, washing clothes, and putting babies to sleep (with lullabies). Music would also be an integral part of ceremonial occasions such as births, initiations, and weddings. Dances to punctuate these occasions would be performed while wearing ankle bells and would be accompanied by traditional instruments such as flutes, horns, and drums. Oral stories, proverbs, and riddles all convey important messages to be passed from generation to generation.

15 WORK

In Keiyo society, much of the work, at least traditionally speaking, is divided along gender lines. Men are expected to do the heavy work of initially clearing the fields that are to be used for planting, as well as turning over the soil. Women take over the bulk of the farming work from there on, including planting, several weeding, harvesting (although here men tend to pitch in), and processing crops. Among the Keiyo, tradition holds that men are supposedly more concerned with herding livestock than with other pursuits. Recent evidence suggests that women, children (especially boys), and even older people are equally as likely to be engaged in animal care as men, especially in those situations where men are likely to be away from home engaged in wage work.

In addition to all of their other tasks, women are expected to perform nearly all of the domestic work that is involved in keeping a household running. In doing so, they often enlist the help of young girls, who are expected to assist their mothers and other female relatives in chores such as fetching water from wells or streams, and collecting the firewood that most families use for cooking. Young boys will sometimes perform these same tasks but more often do things such as grazing and/or watering livestock.

16 SPORTS

Soccer is a major sports interest of the Keiyo as it is with other Kenyans. Nonetheless, running (especially middle and longer distances) is the sport that has made the Keiyo and other Kalenjin peoples famous in world athletic circles. St. Patrick's

High School in Iten has turned out a phenomenal number of world-class runners.

17 ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION

In rural areas, the radio is still the main form of entertainment. KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) programs are attentively monitored, as are shortwave radio transmissions by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and the VOA (Voice of America). A relatively small number of people have televisions, and the only programming available is from KBC. In towns and trading centers, video parlors are becoming common, and action films (e.g., those starring Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce and Brandon Lee) are especially popular.

18 FOLK ART, CRAFTS, AND HOBBIES

In other parts of Kenya, the famous sisal bags (called *kiondo* in Kiswahili and pronounced "key-on-doe") are manufactured and marketed worldwide. Although the Keiyo are not well known for their handicrafts, women do make and locally sell decorated calabashes (*sotet* in Kalenjin and pronounced just as it appears) from gourds. These are rubbed with oil and adorned with small colored beads and are essentially the same type of calabashes that are used for storing fermented milk.

19 SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Tobacco usage and alcohol consumption continue to be common among men but not women. For decades the Kenyan government has banned the brewing and distillation of traditional homemade alcoholic beverages, including *busaa* ("boosaah"), a beer made from fried, fermented corn and millet, and *chang'aa* ("chaan-gah"), a liquor distilled from *busaa*. Nevertheless, these beverages continue to be popular with people, especially men, and provide some individuals, mostly women, with supplementary income. *Chang'aa* especially can be lethal since there is no way to control the high alcohol content (unlike that of *busaa* which tends to have a very low alcohol content), and there are many opportunities for contamination. It is not uncommon to read stories of men dying after attending drinking parties in the Kenyan daily newspapers.

Considerable variation in levels of economic and social development exists in Keiyo District. The Kenyan government estimates the percentage of people living in absolute poverty is 47.82%, or about 75,000 persons. For various reasons, some of which are geographic in nature, there is much more poverty in the valley and much less on the escarpment and even less in the highlands. Considerable food insecurity exists especially in the lower areas of Keiyo, where people are being supported through famine relief. Cattle-raiding is also a major security concern in the valley area of the district. Paved (tarmac) roads are still in short supply and during the rainy season the earth roads become virtually impassable. This problem is true in all three regions of the district.

As is true all over Africa and Kenya, HIV/AIDS is arguably the major issue confronting Keiyo today. Fortunately, prevalence rates in the country as a whole have dropped dramatically from 14% in 2002 to 5.1% in 2008. Moreover the HIV prevalence rate in urban areas is much higher, at 9.6% whereas in rural areas it is 4.6%. Most Keiyo live in rural areas. Also, a link between male circumcision and susceptibility to HIV infection has been posited, whereby circumcision significantly

decreases the risk of HIV infection. One study among agricultural employees in Rift Valley Province found that Luo men, from a tribe that does not circumcise, had a significantly higher HIV prevalence (24.8%) than Kalenjin men (4.5%).

20 GENDER ISSUES

Traditionally Keiyo culture, like most others in Africa, is heavily divided on gender lines. Along with age gender is a fundamental organizing principle in African societies. In the past leadership was always the prerogative of adult males but recently this has begun to change. With the growth of multiparty politics Kenyan women have increasingly entered the political sphere. However, unlike other ethnic groups, such as Kikuyu or Kamba, Keiyo women have not participated in politics to the same degree. One exception is Tabitha Seii, who, since 1992, has repeatedly and bravely challenged the strongman of Keiyo politics, Nicholas Biwott. Although Mrs. Seii, a former headmistress, has never succeeded, she was appointed Kenya's High Commissioner to South Africa in 2003. In 2007 she resigned in protest and joined the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Mrs. Seii was also a founding member of the Education Center for Women in Democracy (ECWD), a group whose mission is to increase the presence of women in leadership and decision-making positions

As part of traditional rites of passage, circumcision of both boys and girls was practiced. In the academic world the female variant has come to be known female genital mutilation (FGM) and is a very controversial subject. Although technically illegal in Kenya since 1990 it is still widely practiced by members of many ethnic groups. Among the Kalenjin its prevalence rate has recently been estimated at 47% compared with rates as high as 97% for the Somali. In several areas of Kenya, some especially progressive women have recently been promoting alternatives to traditional circumcision and instead advocating what has come to be known as "circumcision with words." An example from Keiyo District is the Tumndo Ne Leel Support Group which started in 2003 as a community based organization. One of the unique features of this approach is that it retains the very important ceremonial and symbolic role of a rite of passage while doing away with the act of "cutting." In the process this community based organization addresses the larger issue of female empowerment in this traditionally male dominated society.

21 BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chesaina, C. *Oral Literature of the Kalenjin*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1991
- Fedders, Andrew, and Cynthia Salvadori. *Peoples and Cultures of Kenya*. Nairobi: Transafrica, 1988.
- Government of Kenya. *Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Natural Resources*, <http://www.cbs.go.ke> (April 2008).
- Massam, J. A. *Cliff Dwellers of Kenya*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1927.
- Miller, Norman, and Rodger Yeager. *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.
- Republic of Kenya. "Keiyo District Strategic Plan 2005-2010 for Implementation of the National Population Policy for Sustainable Development." National Coordination Agency for Population and Development, Ministry of Planning and National Development. August 2005.

Roberts, Bruce D. *The Historical and Ecological Determinants of Economic Opportunity and Inequality in Elgeyo-Marakwet District, Kenya*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1993.

———. "Livestock Production, Age, and Gender Among the Keiyo of Kenya." *Human Ecology* 24, no. 2 (1996): 215–230.

———. "Always Cheaply Pleasant: Beer as a Commodity in a Rural Kenyan Society." In *Commodities and Globalization: Anthropological Perspectives*, Angelique Haugerud, M. Priscilla Stone, and Peter D. Little, eds. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000. Pages 179–196.

Rosenberg, Jared. "Circumcision Reduces HIV Risk among Men in Kenya." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 33.1 (March 2007): p. 4(1).

Sateren, W. B., P. O. Renzullo, C. Mason, M. Wasunna, M. Robb, L. Langat, L. Elson. "HIV Infection among Agricultural Employees in Rift Valley Province, Kenya: Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Suitability for Vaccine Efficacy Trials." *International Conference on AIDS*, 7–12, July 2002.

Sutton, J. E. G. "The Kalenjin." In *Kenya Before 1800: Eight Regional Studies*, edited by B. A. Ogot. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1976.

"Tumndo Ne Leel: Placing Value on Kalenjin Traditions while Working to Stop FGM." *Sexuality in Africa Magazine*, September 2006. Volume 31. Issue 3.

—by B. Roberts