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# Kalenjin

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# KALENJIN

**PRONUNCIATION:** KAH-len-jeen

**LOCATION:** Kenya

**POPULATION:** About 4.4 million

**LANGUAGE:** 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: Keiyo; Kenyans

## <sup>1</sup> INTRODUCTION

The Kalenjin live primarily in Kenya, East Africa. A living illustration of the complex nature of ethnic identity in Sub-Saharan Africa, they are not a tribe. Rather, the Kalenjin are an ethnic grouping of eight culturally and linguistically related groups or “tribes”: the Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Keiyo, Marakwet, Pokot (sometimes called the Suk), Sabaot (who live in the Mount Elgon region, overlapping the Kenya/Uganda border), and the Terik.

Earlier, the Kalenjin were known collectively as the “Nandi-Speaking Peoples” or, alternatively, the “Southern Nilo-Hamites.” The name “*Kalenjin*” translates roughly as “I tell you.” It has played a crucial role in the construction of this relatively new ethnic identity among these formerly autonomous, but culturally and linguistically similar, tribes. The origin of the name “*Kalenjin*” and the Kalenjin ethnic identity can be traced to the 1940s. It represents a clear desire to draw political strength from the greater numbers of such an association.

Beginning in the 1940s, individuals from these groups who were going off to fight in World War II used the term *kale* or *kole* (the process of scarring the breast or arm of a warrior who had killed an enemy in battle) to refer to themselves. During wartime radio broadcasts, an announcer, John Chemallan, used the phrase *kalenjok* (“I tell you,” plural). Later, individuals from these groups who were attending Alliance High School formed a “Kalenjin” club. Fourteen in number, they constituted a distinct minority in this prestigious school in a Kikuyu area. This affected their desire for some sort of outward manifestation of identity and solidarity, as the Kikuyu are not only much more numerous but also culturally and linguistically very different from the Kalenjin. These young high school students would form the future Kalenjin elite. The next step in the consolidation of Kalenjin identity was the founding of a Kalenjin Union in Eldoret in 1948, and the publication of a monthly magazine called *Kalenjin* in the 1950s.

However, throughout this process the growing sense of pan-Kalenjin identity was not forming in a vacuum; instead, it should be seen in relation to colonialism and to anti-Kikuyu feelings. The British colonial government sponsored the *Kalenjin* monthly magazine out of a desire to foster anti-Kikuyu sentiments during the Mau Mau Emergency. The latter was a mostly Kikuyu-led, anti-colonial insurgency that provoked an official state of emergency lasting from October 1952 to January 1960. Clouded in emotional arguments coming from both sides, the causes of this movement have been reanalyzed. One of the most striking elements is the tension that existed between the numerically dominant Bantu Kikuyu and the less numerous Nilotic and Nilo-Hamitic Maasai and Kalenjin.

Considering this, and the desire of the colonial government to suppress the Mau Mau movement, a policy of encouraging pan-Kalenjin identity, which was still local in character rather than a truly nationalistic movement, made sense. Benjamin Kipkorir, a prominent Kenyan scholar, stated that “the term *Kalenjin* and the concept of ethnic solidarity that later came to be associated with it . . . had its roots in the Mau Mau emergency. It may thus be said to have been a by-product of Mau Mau” (Kipkorir 1973, 74).

Kalenjin language and culture probably began forming 1,000 years ago as a result of the intermingling of Highland Nilotic migrants with ancestral Southern Cushitic speakers. The length of time the Kalenjin have been living in Kenya’s Western Highlands and the Rift Valley, their homeland, is open for debate. While an earlier view claimed that these peoples have only been living in western Kenya for about 400 years, more recently a number of others have argued that the Kalenjin have occupied these parts of Kenya for 2,000 years or more.

One of the most famous aspects of Kalenjin history involves the *Sirikwa* holes. These are hollows that measure from 4.5 m to 9 m (15–30 ft) in diameter made in hillsides. Kalenjin legend has it that the Sirikwa people used these as cattle pens to guard their animals at night. Archaeological excavation at several Sirikwa holes reinforces this image: houses were built on the outside fence with the door facing inward toward the stock enclosure. There would have been only one way to enter the entire complex, and that would have been closely watched and heavily guarded.

The basic unit of indigenous political organization among the Kalenjin was the *koret* (“chor-ette”) or parish. This was not a nucleated village in any sense but rather a collection of anywhere from 20 to 100 scattered homesteads. It was administered by a council of adult males known collectively as the *kokwet* (“coke-wet”) and was led by a spokesman called *poi-yot ap kokwet* (“poy-ought ab coke-wet”). This spokesman was not a hereditary or elected leader in the sense of a chief. He was, rather, someone who was recognized for his knowledge of tribal laws, oratorical abilities, forceful personality, wealth, and social position. At public proceedings, although the *poi-yot ap kokwet* was the first to speak, all of the elders were given the opportunity to state their opinions. Rather than making decisions himself, the *poi-yot ap kokwet* expressed the consensus of opinion, always phrased in terms of a group decision.

A number of *koret* formed the next level of political organization, the *pororiet* (“poor-or-e-et”). Each was led by a council, the *kiruokwet ap pororiet* (“kee-roo-oh-kwet ab poor-or-e-et”). This council consisted of the spokesmen of the individual *koret*, over whom presided two reasonably active old men called *kiruokik* (“kee-roo-oh-keek”), the “councillors.” In addition, among the Nandi, there were two representatives of the *orkoiyot* (“or-coe-ee-yot”); a Nandi prophet, called *maotik* (“mah-oh-teek”); and two senior military commanders of the *pororiet*’s warriors, *kiptaienik ap murenik* (“kip-ta-eneek ab mur-eh-neek”).

Today, traditional Kalenjin political/territorial organization has been largely replaced with one based upon the units imposed by the British colonial structure—villages are included in sublocations, which are included in locations, which are included in divisions, districts, and provinces. Each village has a village elder, who may be seen as the equivalent of a modern *poi-yot ap kokwet* and who tries to settle minor disputes and

handle routine affairs. Assistant chiefs are in charge of sub-locations, while chiefs administer locations. District officers oversee divisions, and district commissioners are the highest authority in each district. Finally, provincial commissioners are the highest authorities in each of Kenya's eight provinces and are directly under the president's authority.

## 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. Together, the Kalenjin peoples comprise Kenya's fourth-largest ethnic group. Most Kalenjin are concentrated in the Western Rift Valley and the Western Highlands.

## 3 LANGUAGE

The first language of the Kalenjin peoples is Kalenjin, a language of the southern section of the Nilotic branch, and part of the Chari-Nile language group of Africa. Three Kalenjin dialect clusters have been identified: one consists of the Sabaot, along with the Sebei and Kony; another is made up of Pokot, northern Marakwet, and northern Tugen; while the third dialect 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.

## 4 FOLKLORE

Oral tradition was, and still is to some degree, very important among the Kalenjin. Prior to the introduction of writing, folk tales served to convey a sense of cultural history. Kalenjin 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 Kalenjin religion is based upon a concept of a supreme god, *Asis* ("Ah-sees") or *Cheptalel* ("Chep-ta-lell"), 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-eeek") have magical powers and help in appeals for rain or to end floods.

Currently, nearly everyone professes to being a member of 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 Kalenjin. Generally speaking, only older people can recall details of traditional religious beliefs.

## 6 MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The major holidays observed by the Kalenjin are mostly those associated with Christianity (i.e., Christmas and Easter), and national holidays such as Jamhuri (Republic) Day, Madaraka (Responsibility) Day, Moi (the second 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").

Three one-month-long school holidays occur 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 all Kalenjin societies, as it across much of Africa. The status a person occupies and the roles he or she performs are still to a large degree ordained by age. For both males and females, becoming an adult in Kalenjin society is a matter of undergoing an ini-

tiation ceremony. Traditionally, these were held about every seven years. Everyone undergoing initiation, or *tumdo* (“toom-doe”), thereby becomes a member of a named age-set, or *ip-inda* (“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 an important basis for traditional social structure. Among the Kalenjin, indigenous political organization was based upon the combination of cross-cutting principles of age-sets and small territorial units called *korotinwek* (singular *koret*) and larger ones called *pororisiek* (singular *pororiet*). No Kalenjin societies possessed any kind of centralized leaders such as chiefs; instead, councils of elders made all decisions.

After male youths were circumcised, they were secluded for lengthy periods of time during which they were instructed in the skills necessary for adulthood. Afterwards, they would begin 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 politico-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, and most people are hard-pressed even to remember the names of the 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* (“chaam-moo-gay”) is the standard greeting among Kalenjin. 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 *missing* (“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 Kalenjin 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 Kalenjin 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 usually 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

Considerable variation exists in the way that members of various Kalenjin groups make a living. For most groups, subsistence is agropastoral in orientation, based upon a combination of cultivation of grains such as sorghum and millet (and more recently maize), and livestock husbandry of cattle, goats, and sheep. Typical of East African groups, there tends to be little integration between the two activities since grazing land is usually located some distance from the fields and homesteads. Livestock are not used for traction, nor are they fed on the stubble of grain or other crop products. Often, such groups live on the face of a hillside or escarpment and cultivate nearby, as do the Keiyo and Marakwet. Among the Pokot there are two different subsistence patterns: one consists of pastoralism, involving the keeping of, and primary dependence upon, cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, and a few camels; the other consists of agricultural production, mostly of corn today, but in the past, indigenous grains such as sorghum and millet. The pastoralists comprise approximately 75% of the Pokot.

Previously, when game populations were at higher levels and before the government ban, hunting sometimes supplemented the diet, but only among the so-called “Dorobo” or “Okiek” did it provide a major staple. The latter were forest hunter-gatherers who often resided near the Kalenjin groups.

Traditionally Kalenjin 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 Kalenjin are rural dwellers and do not have electricity or indoor plumbing in their houses. Radio/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 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 Kalenjin. But by family what

was meant was the extended family, not the nuclear family in the Western sense. Kalenjin residence patterns were, and still are, mostly 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 Kalenjin 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 that tended to make the earlobe stretch downward almost to the shoulder. This is generally not practiced today, when the Western-style dress of most Kalenjin, 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 T-shirts with logos, especially those of American sports teams or bearing the likeness of famous entertainers.

### 12 FOOD

The staple Kalenjin food 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 weekly") in KiSwahili, 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-seek"). 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 remains 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, education among the Kalenjin was provided during the seclusion of initiates following circumcision. This transitional phase of the rite of passage provided an opportunity to instill in young men and women all the requisite knowledge necessary to be a functioning and productive adult member of society. It was, in essence, a "crash" course in the intricacies of their culture. Nowadays, after initiation young men and women are still secluded but for shorter 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 Kalenjin societies, 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 Kalenjin, 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.



*A leader of the Kalenjin tribe speaks to a group of warriors near the western Kenyan town of Chebilat. (Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images)*

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 Kalenjin, especially the youth, as it is with many other Kenyans. Nonetheless, running (especially middle and longer distances) is the sport that made the 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 without electricity, 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 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 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 Kalenjin 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**

Politically, Kalenjin fared extremely well under the presidency of Daniel arap Moi, from 1978 to 2002. Moi, a Tugen, was very generous with resource distribution in Kalenjin areas during his rule. In 2002 Moi was constitutionally obligated to step down. However he did select a successor, Uhuru Kenyatta, in hopes of continuing his influence in the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Unfortunately for Moi the various opposition parties united behind Mwai Kibaki, who won the presidency with approximately 65% of the vote.

Since that time KANU's influence has waned but Moi has remained an active, albeit backstage, political force. The return of the presidency to a member of the Kikuyu ethnic group resurrected a great deal of animosity among Kalenjin.

In the election of December 2007, Kalenjin overwhelmingly sided with the opposition candidate, Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Sadly, the disputed results of that election saw a great deal of violence, considerable loss of life and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Although most of the international attention was on Nairobi, regrettably many of these actions took place in the Rift Valley Province, Kalenjin heartland, especially in and around the highlands town of Eldoret and to some extent in the Rift Valley town of Nakuru. Unsavory elements of society used the occasion to once again resurrect the idea that this part of Kenya is only for Kalenjin and that others, particularly Kikuyu, must leave. Approximately 1,500 people died in the post election violence and at least 350,000 internally displaced people are living in camps around the country.

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.

Raiding for livestock has always been part of Kalenjin culture and this continues to be true, especially among the Pokot. Now, instead of spears and bows and arrows, raiders use semiautomatic weapons like AK 47 rifles. The Marakwet in particular have continued to suffer at the hands of armed cattle rustlers, often from the Pokot. Because of their marginal status both geographically and politically Marakwet complaints to the government do very little. Poverty and a general lack of concern on the part of government continue to fuel the situation.

As is true all over Africa and Kenya, HIV/AIDS is arguably the major issue confronting Kalenjin 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 Kalenjin 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 Kalenjin culture is, like most others in Africa, 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, Kalenjin women have not participated in politics to the same degree.

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.

Homosexuality is not a subject of open discussion in Kalenjin society, nor in most other Kenyan societies. Reliable data on prevalence would be nearly impossible to elicit. An institution in which two women would marry was traditionally found among the Nandi. It was usually found in circumstances where an older woman had no male heirs and thus needed a son because women cannot inherit property. The older woman became the "husband" of the younger woman and was treated for all intents and purposes as a man. The younger "wife" may have already had children with other men who had left her or died or she may already be pregnant with the child of a man who did not want to marry her. Both parties benefited from the union, which was domestic and economic rather than sexual in nature. The female husband gains descendants and promotion to male status, after spending years in the unenviable status of a barren or sonless wife. The wife is likely to be a girl for whom getting married has been difficult. If she already has children, she gains inheritance and clan status for them (Oboler 1980).

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—by B. Roberts

## KARRETJIE PEOPLE

**PRONUNCIATION:** KAH-ri-ki

**LOCATION:** The Great Karoo in South Africa

**POPULATION:** Several thousand

**LANGUAGE:** Afrikaans

**RELIGION:** None

### <sup>1</sup> INTRODUCTION

Travelers who journey between the interior of South Africa and the coast cross the vast arid scrublands of the central plateau. This is the Great Karoo (derived from a Khoekhoen or "Hottentot"—a pejorative term—word for desert), and this is where the Karretjie People (*karretjie* means "donkey cart"), can usually be seen criss-crossing the plains in their donkey carts.

Most of the Karretjie People are descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the area, the hunting-gathering Xam San (also known as "Bushmen," a term that in some quarters is regarded as pejorative but is still sometimes used by such people themselves) and the nomadic-pastoral Khoekhoen ("Hottentots"). Archaeological evidence, DNA analyses, the historical record, local folklore, and oral tradition not only confirm the early presence of the Xam San and Khoekhoen in the area, but also the changing nature of their interaction with the more recently arrived pioneer white farming community from the south. The first sporadic contacts in the 1770s were followed by extended periods of conflict, intermittent times of peace, increased competition for resources, and eventually the powerful impact of a burgeoning agricultural economy and commercialization in the rapidly developing towns. The competition for resources, at least initially, centered around two issues. First, the farmers hunted the game in the hunting grounds that the Xam San regarded as their own. When they then began slaughtering the more easily accessible domesticated stock of the farmers, they themselves became the hunted. Second, the farmers and the Khoekhoen were in competition for the same grazing lands for their stock.

Eventually though, the lifestyle of both the Xam San and the Khoekhoen were transformed. In the case of the Xam San, for example, they changed from nomadic hunters to become so-called "tame Bushmen" farm laborers. They retained, at least initially, their nomadic ways, first on foot, later with the help of pack animals, and eventually with donkey carts. A few of those who were not hunted or who had not died of some foreign disease, like the smallpox epidemic early in the 18th century, still sought refuge in remote areas or rock shelters. Finally, though, most of the Xam San squatted near towns or were drawn into the agricultural economy by becoming laborers on the white farms. Like their parents and grandparents, most of the adult Karretjie People were born on a farm and, in spite of their present truly nomadic existence, many of them have a history of having lived at least semipermanently on a farm. It was on the farms that their ancestors first learned the skill of shearing. When wool-farming as an enterprise expanded, the Karretjie People, with the help of the mobility afforded by the donkey cart, developed an itinerant lifestyle in order to exploit shearing opportunities on farms spread over a wide area.