

KIKUYU

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Kikuyu language is of the Bantu family. It is the first language to approximately 20% (seven million) of Kenya's population making them the country's largest ethnic group. Kikuyu has three main dialects which are mutually intelligible. These dialects are *Ndia* (kiambu district), *Gichugu* (Muranga District) and *Mathira* (Nyeri District). The Kikuyu are clustered by age-sets. Like many tribes, the Kikuyu base their organization on the family unit (*nyumba*). Several families are combined to form a homestead (*mucii*), which is part of a sub-group (*mbari*). These make up the nine clans (*muhiriga*). The muhiriga further belonged to an even larger unit called *Riika*. After initiation into adulthood, men became warriors while women tended the farms and looked after the homesteads.

The Kikuyu are traditionally agriculturalists and keep livestock—they are well-favored by the fertile soils and climate to the south and west of Mt Kenya, Africa's second highest mountain. Although agriculture remains of paramount importance, many Kikuyu are involved in business, and work in towns and cities throughout the country.

The Kikuyu are known for their key participation in Kenya's liberation struggle. Key players in the struggle included Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku, and Dedan Kimathi to mention just a few. They were instrumental in achieving independence from Britain and formed Kenya's first post colonial Government.



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STUDYING KIKUYU IN THE U.S.

Below are some universities in the United States that currently offer Kikuyu. For more information please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at <http://lang.nalrc.wisc.edu/nalrc>.

Boston University
Michigan State University



A KIKUYU DANCER

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
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WHY STUDY KIKUYU?

Kikuyu, sometimes also known as Gikuyu is spoken by 22% of Kenya's population, which is approximately 7 million people. It is the most dominant language in Kenya second only to Swahili, which is the National language. The rich history of the Kikuyu people and especially their dominance in the struggle for Kenya's independence has aroused the interests of many students who have heard names of statesmen like Jomo Kenyatta and movements that led in Kenya's liberation struggle from Britain like Mau Mau.

In the field of linguistics and literature, Kikuyu is one of the most written languages in Kenya. It has been promoted through music, newspapers such as *Inooro* and journals such as *Mutiiri*. Efforts to preserve the Kikuyu language have been done by great African writers like Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o who stated in his book "*Decolonizing the Mind*" that he would write all his creative works in Kikuyu. Another great fiction writer who has played a big role to preserve the Kikuyu language is Gakaara Wanjau.

One of the reasons for the study of the Kikuyu language is a personal interest in dominant East African cultures of which Kikuyu is one of them.

Another reason for the study of Kikuyu is that Kenya is a great tourist destination. Kenya is annually flooded with tourists from all over the world. Thus, if one plans to visit central Kenya, which is a popular tourist destination because of Mount Kenya and the Great Rift Valley, one would find it useful to know the Kikuyu language because it is the native language around that area. In addition, it would be an added advantage to have a grasp of the language because the Kikuyu people are spread all over the country because of their business orientation. This means one is bound to encounter the language almost anywhere that business is thriving in the country.

Knowledge in the Kikuyu language may also be very helpful to students in African Linguistics, Anthropology, and Sociology who plan to conduct research in Kenya because it will allow them to receive maximum collaboration with the locals. Moreover, international workers such as Peace Corps volunteers and missionaries will receive maximum cooperation from the local populations in central Kenya if they can communicate in Kikuyu.

WHO SPEAKS KIKUYU?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Kikuyu (sometimes Gikuyu) are the people who speak Kikuyu language and is Kenya's largest ethnic group numbering approximately 6 to 7 million people. The Kikuyu are Bantus and actually came into central Kenya during the Bantu Migration. Kikuyu is thus one of the 5 languages of the Thagicu subgroup of the Bantu that stretches from Kenya to Tanzania. The Kikuyu usually identify their land by the surrounding Mountain ranges in Central Kenya which they call '*Kirinyaga*' - The Shining Mountain.

Folklore suggests that the Kikuyu tribe was originally founded by a man named Gikuyu. Oral tradition explains that *Ngai* (the divine spirit) took Gikuyu to the top of *Kirinyaga* (present day Mt. Kenya) and commanded him to establish his home there. He was also given a wife Mumbi with whom he had nine daughters. It is from the nine daughters (and occasionally a tenth) that the nine principal clans originated. The nine clans are *Achera, Agachiku, Airimu, Ambui, Angare, Anjiru, Angui, Aithaga, and Aitherandu*. The Kikuyu also had a religious tree—the *Mugumo* tree—where they would pray and offer sacrifices to facing the sacred Mountain Kirinyaga. The Kikuyu basically inhabit the fertile land around the slopes of Mt. Kenya to the north of Nairobi. Today, however, because of their entrepreneurial abilities, the Kikuyu people can be found virtually in all parts of Kenya.

Although the Kikuyu tribe has undergone a lot of changes since the British arrived over a century ago, their sense of cultural identity has remained strong. The Kikuyu have also been the most successful in adapting to Kenya's new economic and social realities. Moreover, the Kikuyu are known throughout Kenya as hard workers and good money managers. Today, they are easily Kenya's wealthiest people, and own a majority of the nation's businesses.



Picking tea on the central Kenya highlands.



A Kikuyu warrior in front of Thompson Falls in Central Kenya.



Kikuyu girls.