

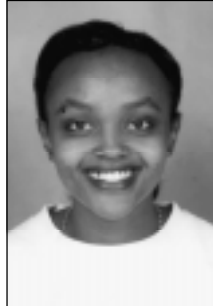
West Virginia Community Educational Outreach Service

An Introduction to Kenya



By: Ruth Mutahi
2001-02 International Student Scholarship Recipient

My names are Ruth Njeri Mutahi, a social work student at West Virginia University. When I learned about the West Virginia Community Educational Outreach Service scholarship, I promised myself that I would not rest until I got it. I want to sincerely give my heartfelt gratitude to all the WVCEOS members for their support, kindness, and concern. I also wish to sincerely express my gratitude to all of those responsible for selecting me to receive this scholarship.



Ruth Mutahi

Having a college degree has always been my dream, and again I thank you all for allowing me this golden opportunity to pursue my college education.

In the course of my rejoicing, one question ran through my mind: “Would a Kenyan girl rest if she learned about a scholarship that would change the rest of her life?” As you have allowed me this golden chance, I will not rest in the future until I allow it for other impoverished girls in my country. Together, we can improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged girls in Kenya and perhaps West Virginia as well.

Autobiography

Being the third of five children granted me the privilege of being named after my mother. I was born on June 6, 1978. I was born and raised in Nakuru District in Rift Valley Province. We are a family of seven; I have two sisters and two brothers. I have a 2-year-old son, Stephen Nderitu.

I went to nursery school and later to primary school (elementary) in my town. Both were a 20-minute walk from home. I graduated at the age of 14 and proceeded to high school, which was a boarding school. We would begin the first day of school, have only one parents’ visiting day,

and we would continue until the last day of school, returning home only for holidays. All students wore uniforms.

During the holidays, we would help our parents with harvesting crops and selling the produce so as to have some money to pay for tuition. Although it was not easy, we all loved it. We were privileged to have a small piece of land. We grew spinach, kales, potatoes, and tomatoes.

We appreciate the fact that we were a blessed generation as we wore shoes to school. Our late loving mother would tell us how they were not allowed to wear shoes to school. I graduated from high school at the age of 18 and started college at 21 years old. I had lived with my dream of achieving a college degree since I was 12 years old. I worked hard. After two years at home, I informed people of my community of my intentions to pursue higher learning. Although education is highly valued, it can be too expensive. Elders of the community met and discussed the issue, and money was raised. I applied at West Virginia University and was accepted as an undergraduate in the Division of Social Work.

I learned about the WVCEOS group and its scholarship program. I remember my interview with the WVCEOS selection committee was a day after I had been informed about my mom’s death.

I am grateful to West Virginia CEOS and its members for this wonderful scholarship. I wish to thank my family, my community, my relatives, and friends for their concern. I wish to thank my father, Mr. Stephen Ndreritu Mutahi, for all he is doing for me and my son, Stephen Nderitu. I am thankful for this golden opportunity.

“There is nothing we cannot live down, rise above, and overcome.”

–Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Introduction to Kenya

Kenya lies along the equator in eastern Africa. It covers an area of 582,646 square kilometers (225,000 square miles) and has a population of 28.8 million people. Neighboring countries are Ethiopia to the north, Somalia to the east, Tanzania to the south, Uganda to the west, and Sudan to the northwest.

Kenya enjoys a tropical climate. There is plenty of sunshine year-round, and summer clothes are worn through-

out the year. However, it is usually cold at night and early in the morning. The long rains occur from April to June and short rains from October to December. The rainfall is sometimes heavy; and when it does come, it often falls in the afternoons and evenings. The hottest period is from February to March, and the coldest is in July and August.



The People

Population: Kenya's population of 28.8 million is growing at 1.6 percent annually. The population is divided among 47 distinct ethnic groups. The largest of these groups are Kikuyu (22 percent), Luhya (14 percent) Luo (13 percent), Kalenjin (12 percent), Kamba (11 percent), Kisii (6 percent), and Meru (6 percent). Smaller groups include Maasai, Embu, Samburu, Somali, Taita, Teso, Turkana, and others. About 1 percent of the population consists of Europeans, Asians, and Arabs.

Language: Swahili (also known as Kiswahili) is the national language. Swahili, which is widely spoken by most Kenyans, was chosen over other native tongues because of its commonality with Kenyans' other Bantu languages. Speaking

Kiswahili is promoted to encourage national unity.

Each ethnic group speaks its own mother tongue and communicates with other groups in Swahili. English (official) is widely used in businesses, education, and government.

Religion: The majority of Kenyans are Christian Protestants (40 percent), Roman Catholics (30 percent), Muslims (6 percent), and other indigenous nontraditional Christian beliefs (10 percent). Muslims live along the coast and in the northeast.

General Attitudes: Kenyans are proud of their cultural heritage and their nation's accomplishments. They respect their national flag. When and wherever it is raised or lowered, people stop to observe the short ceremony before moving on. Kenyans are warm and friendly. The family is the most important group, followed by the tribe. Individuals traditionally share their wealth with poorer family members. For



Kenya's flag

example, a man with adequate finances may be expected to pay school fees for his less-fortunate brother's children. Wealthier individuals are expected to help their community.

Land ownership is a valued indicator of wealth. Kenyans take pride in their efforts to preserve African wildlife. Many tourists visit Kenya for its safaris. The 23 national parks and 29 game reserves cover more than 7 percent of Kenya's land area.

Leading attractions are the population of zebras, lions, elephant, monkeys, and other animals.

Personal Appearance: Kenyans dress conservatively and modestly. Light fabrics and short

sleeves are common because of the warm climate. Sleeveless dresses and blouses are considered immodest. Only children, tourists, and the elderly wear shorts. Women wear dresses, but many young urban women wear slacks.

Mothers use a Kanga (long, colorful cotton cloth), to carry children on their back. The Maasai, Samburu, and Turkana groups retain traditional dress.



Baby carried in a Kanga.

Customs and Courtesies

Greetings: A handshake is common and important throughout the country. Standing and supporting the right forearm with the left hand when shaking hands shows special respect for a leader or elder. Kenyans are friendly and greet others with warmth and politeness. Maasai children greet elders with a slight bow; the elderly respond by placing an open palm on the child's head.

Gestures: People pass and accept items with the right hand or both hands. Using the left hand alone is improper. It is improper to touch an elder, and it is often considered improper to photograph another person without permission. Eye contact is important. Public displays of affection (including holding hands) are not acceptable.

Visiting: Due to strong family ties, visiting is a common activity among Kenyans. Sunday is a popular day for making visits. Most visits are unannounced; people just drop by for conversation and a cup of tea. No rule exists about how long a visit should last, but it is impolite for a host to ask a guest to leave. Enjoying afternoon tea is a daily custom throughout the country. It is impolite to say good-bye at the door. Hosts commonly walk with departing

visitors for some distance before returning home.

Food and Eating: In some traditional families, children do not eat with adults. Men are often served first. Among the Samburu, warriors avoid eating in the presence of women.

The most common meats in Kenya are goat, beef, lamb, chicken, and fish. Ugali, chapati, githeri, Nyama Choma, stews, samosas, and sukuma wiki are staple foods. Ugali is a corn meal, which is simply cooked in boiling water until it has the same consistency and texture as bread dough.

At the heart of every Kenyan meal is sukuma wiki (kale), often cooked in beef-flavored gravy. In Swahili, sukuma wiki literally means "to push the week."

Abundant fruits include pineapples, mangoes, oranges, bananas, and papaya (paw paw).

Dating and Marriage: Dating starts at about ages 18 and 19 in the cities, but it is still rather uncommon in the villages. Young people choose their partners, but some marriages are still arranged. Men and women usually marry in their mid-20s. The families largely handle wedding details.

The groom's family pays the bride's family a dowry (traditionally livestock but now often cash) to thank them for raising the bride and to compensate them for losing her.

Recreation: Soccer is the most popular team sport. Leagues exist throughout the nation. Highly organized, although poorly equipped, leagues even operate in the poorest areas. Track and field activities join soccer as the national sports. Kenya has produced some world-famous runners and other athletes. Kenya National Theater offers drama, concerts, and dance programs. Homemade drums and guitars accompany traditional dances.

Culture of the Agikuyu (Kikuyu)

Kikuyus are farmers. A man's wealth is measured by his ability to own a piece of land. Kikuyu people will not let a man leave without serving him chai. Chai is tea made with water, milk, tea leaves, and sugar. Chai is hot and sweet, usually taken in the morning to fight off cold air.

Rain is a blessing from God. Whenever it rains, people collect water from roofs using gutters. This water is stored in plastic tanks for later use. Rainwater is considered best for drinking, as it has not been altered by the use of chlorine and other water-purifying chemicals.

Lack of rain is translated as a sign of God's anger and wrath. Elders pray facing Mount Kenya. This is because it was believed to be God's dwelling place. Visitors are a blessing just as rain is. If it rains while a visitor is at your home, that is believed a blessed day. Children, too, are a blessing from God. Abortion is not only illegal but also immoral. Any misfortunes following abortion are seen as a result of disrespecting God.

Death is accepted because only God gives and only God can take. Not accepting the death of a family member or friend is questioning the will of God. Diseases and accidents are just forms of taking one home.

A boy child is important in the family especially in the continuation of the family name, while girls are seen as a form of wealth.

When a couple wishes to marry, they arrange a ceremony along with their parents. Much money and time are invested in the event. Traditional and modern elements mix together during the ceremony, providing a colorful and fun-filled day. The wedding begins with a Christian celebration, and a traditional reception follows. **Kiondo** is one of the presents a mother is expected to give to the bride. Kiondo is a woven basket made from sisal or leather (cow skin). This is a way of letting her realize her responsibilities have begun. Although

some shops will pack goods in a plastic bag, it is inappropriate to show off your goods.

The bride's parents also have to give a bed to the newlyweds. The bed indicates that the girl has to work hard on her marriage, as she would have nothing to sleep on if she came back to her parents. This proves that marriage is not trial and error but a serious commitment. If you lose it, you find somewhere else to go. The bride is still welcome at home, but only as a visitor.

The groom thanks the bride's parents for having and raising the bride for him and promises to take good care of her. All other gifts follow.

After the ceremony, a certificate of marriage is issued to the newlyweds. They both accept it and then the woman is asked to put it in the inside pocket of the husband's coat. She is told that she should always do the same thing whenever she needs money to buy food.

Several follow-ups are made by the bride's mom just to advise them and get them started. The girl's parents have the sole responsibility over children of unwed daughters. The father of the child has to get permission from the child's maternal grandparents to make contact.

Role of Women

Man is the head of the house. Excelling and well-behaved kids are the pride of the father, while women or wives are to blame for the misbehaved children. Beating is a popular means of disciplining children. "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

Although many educated women are striving to be financially independent, household duties are the responsibility of the wife. Mothers will teach their daughters about issues related to human development, moral values, and family values, and dads will work with the boys.

Piped water is rare and people in rural areas often have to travel as far as 30 kilometers (19 miles)

in search of this scarce commodity. Fetching firewood, fetching water, tending animals, and taking care of the family are part of a woman's daily chores.

Rites

During the period of circumcision, which normally occurs at age 14 immediately after elementary school graduation, boys are taken away to a rural area. They then disappear to the bush, as they do not want to be seen by anyone. Only men, older and circumcised, are allowed to feed them.

Parents, sisters, and brothers see them only after the wounds have healed. A ceremony of eating and dancing follows in the celebration of the brave young men. No ceremony is complete without music. Music and dance play a major role in the maintenance of traditional culture. Drums and other instruments like kayamba (shakers) are often played. The young man receives gifts from family and friends. He is proud and can tell his friends. The boy is expected to behave like a young man.

Health

Many illnesses in Kenya are transmitted by insects and animals, and by the use of contaminated water for washing and drinking. Malaria remains a major health risk despite long-standing programs to control its spread, including spraying mosquito-infested

areas and free distribution of anti-malaria medication. Other common illnesses are tuberculosis and dysentery. Many Kenyans also use traditional methods of diagnosis and treatment. There is widespread belief that illness and death are caused by spirits of angry ancestors. Traditional cures involve finding the cause of afflictions through divination as well as restoring the social equilibrium brought on by the affliction through magical acts and sacrifice.

Language

Most Kenyans speak at least two languages.

1. Mother language, which is determined by one's tribe.
2. National language, which is shared by all Kenyans (Swahili).

Although English is becoming a popular language (official), Swahili still remains as the national language.

<i>English</i>	<i>Swahili</i>
Hi	Jambo
How are you?	Habari Gani?
Good	Mzuri
Today	Leo
Welcome	Karibu
Thank you	Asante
No problem	Hakuna Matata