

# Tribal/ethnic identity in Africa

# Talking about "Tribe"

## Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis

(Africa Action)

- Written in months after December 2007 election in Kenya in which over 1500 people died and as many as 500,000 were displaced by “inter-tribal” violence.
- Not only does using the term “tribe” in this instance promote a racist conception of African ethnicities as primitive and savage, it prevents observers from coming to an accurate understanding of the causes of this conflict.

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- Rethinking the use of “tribe” in the African context can support a discourse on Africa grounded in African realities that escapes the intellectual laziness of a term that has no coherent meaning.
- In this paper we argue that anyone concerned with truth and accuracy should avoid the term "tribe" in characterizing African ethnic groups or cultures.
- This is not a matter of political correctness; nor is it an attempt to deny that cultural identities throughout Africa are powerful, significant and sometimes linked to deadly conflicts.

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- Main points:
- Section 1: What's Wrong with "Tribe?"
  - Tribe has no coherent meaning.
  - Tribe promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness, obscuring history and change.
  - In the modern West, tribe often implies primitive savagery.
  - Images of timelessness and savagery hide the modern character of African ethnicity, including ethnic conflict.
  - Tribe substitutes a generalized illusion for detailed analysis of particular situations.

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- Section 2: If "Tribe" Is So Useless, Why Is it So Common?
- Tribe reflects once widespread but outdated 19th century social theory.
- Social theories of tribes resonated with classical and biblical education.
- Tribe became a cornerstone idea for European colonial rule in Africa.

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- Section 3: But Why Not Use "Tribe?"
  - Answers to Common Arguments
  - In the United States no one objects to referring to Indian tribes.
  - Africans themselves talk about tribes.
  - African leaders see tribalism as a major problem in their countries.
  - Avoiding the term tribe is just political correctness.
  - Rejecting tribe is just an attempt to deny the reality of ethnic divisions.

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- To say African groups are not tribes, and African identities are not tribal, in the common-sense meanings of those words, is not to deny that African ethnic divisions exist.
- It is to open up questions: what is their true nature?
- How do they work?
- How can they be prevented from taking destructive forms?
- It is, moreover, to link the search for those answers in Africa to the search for answers to the similar questions that press on humanity everywhere in the world today.

# Ethnic Comparison

## Republic of Kenya

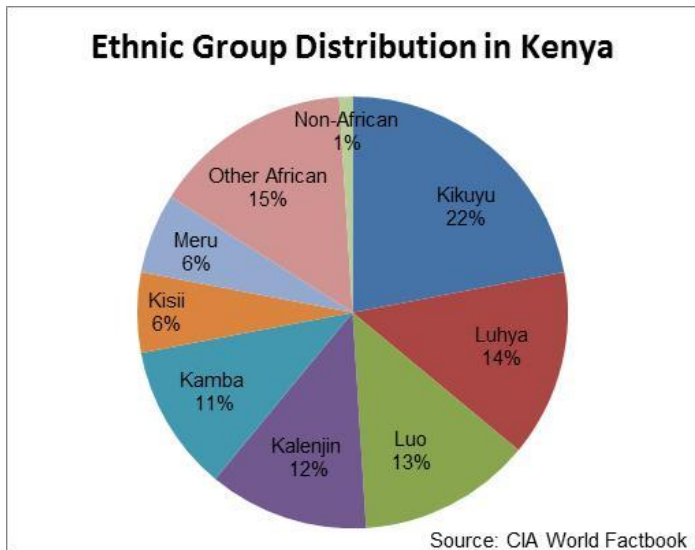
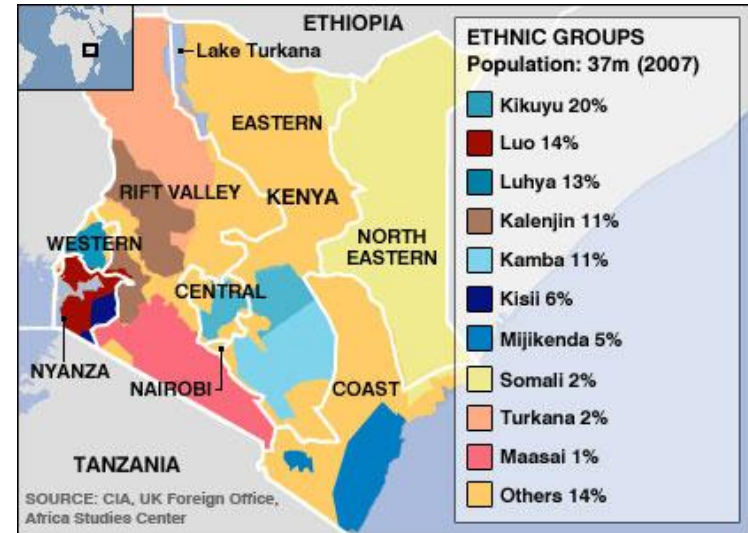
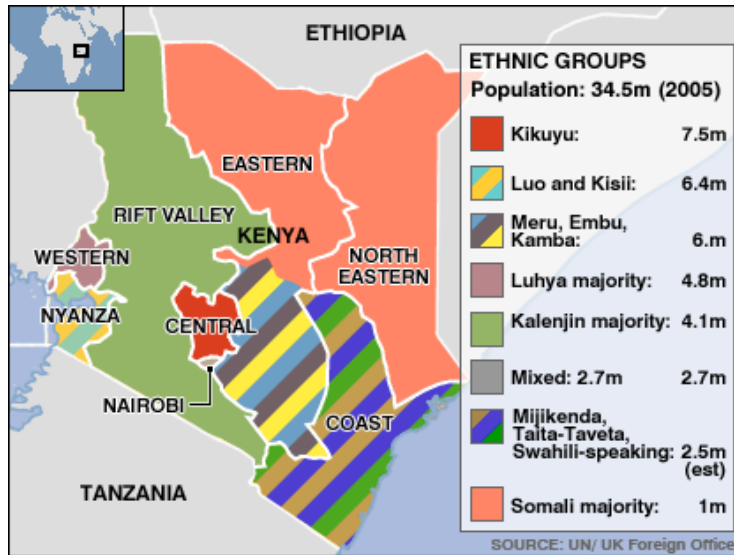
- Over 70 distinct ethnic groups.
- Range in size from ~ 7 million (Kikuyu) to about 500 (El Molo)
- Largest ethnic group, Kikuyu, makes up 20% of population.
- 5 largest groups - Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba and Kalenjin- account for 70% of population.
- 97.58% of Kenya's citizens are affiliated with its 32 major indigenous groups.

## United Republic of Tanzania

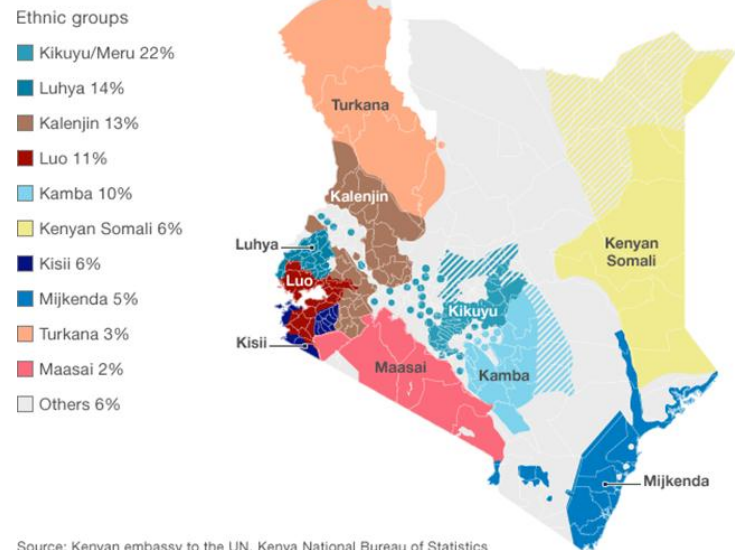
- More than 120 groups.
- Largest is Sukuma, represents 13% of population.
- The remaining large groups represent under 5% each.
- Ethnicity continues to reflect geographic area in spite of government attempt to downplay ethnicity.
- Ethnicity is not politicized as in Kenya.



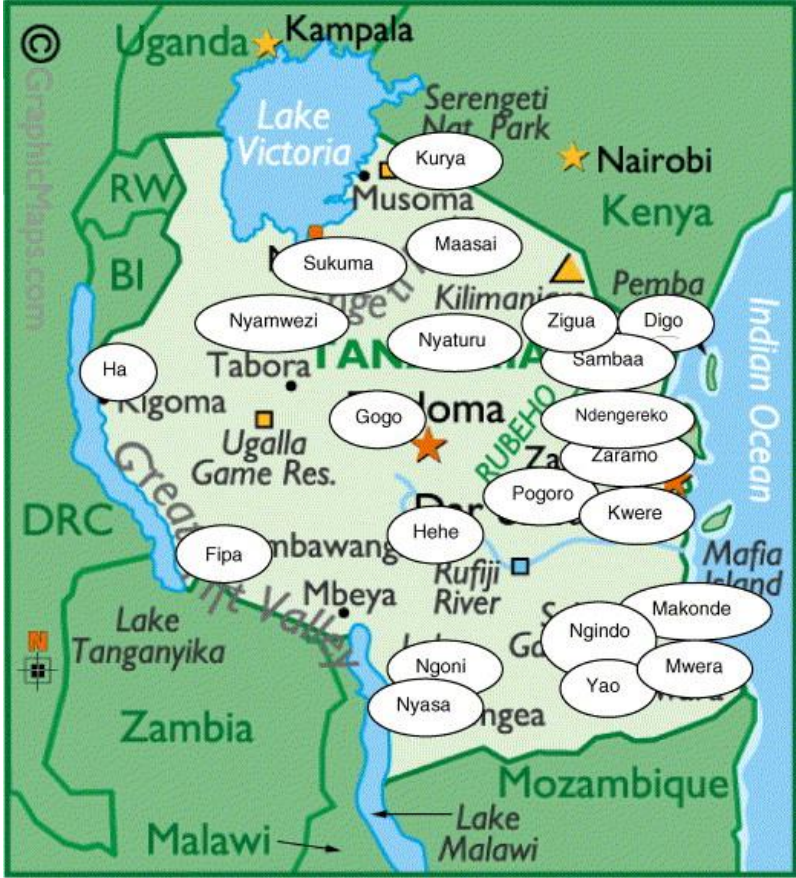
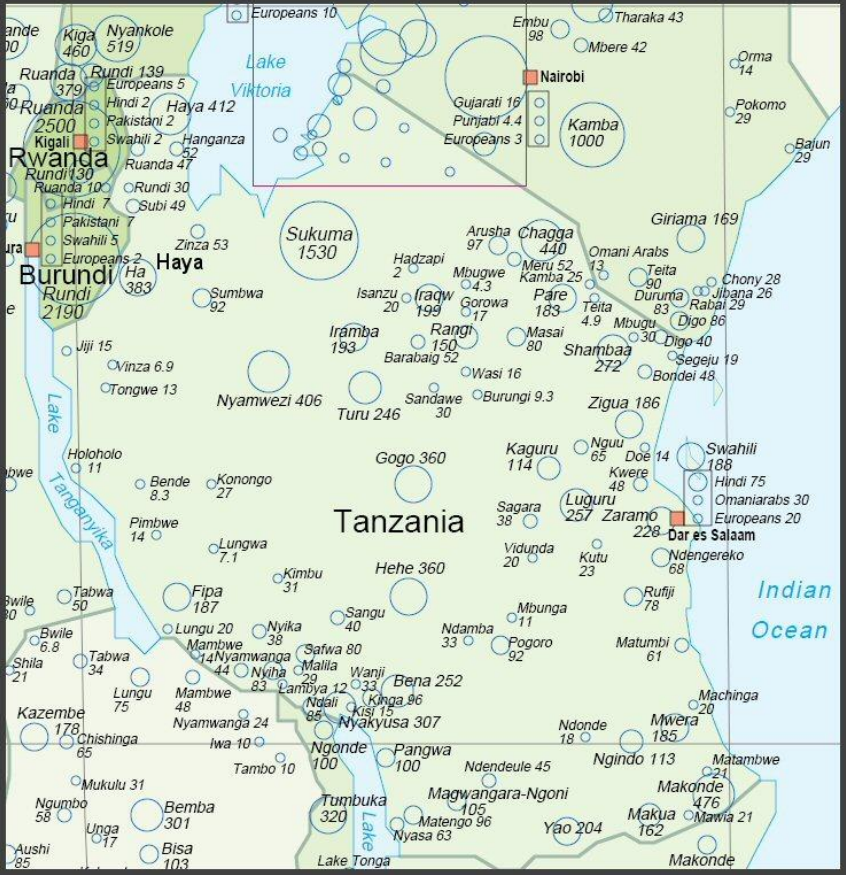
# Kenya's Ethnic Map(s)



Distribution of ethnic groups

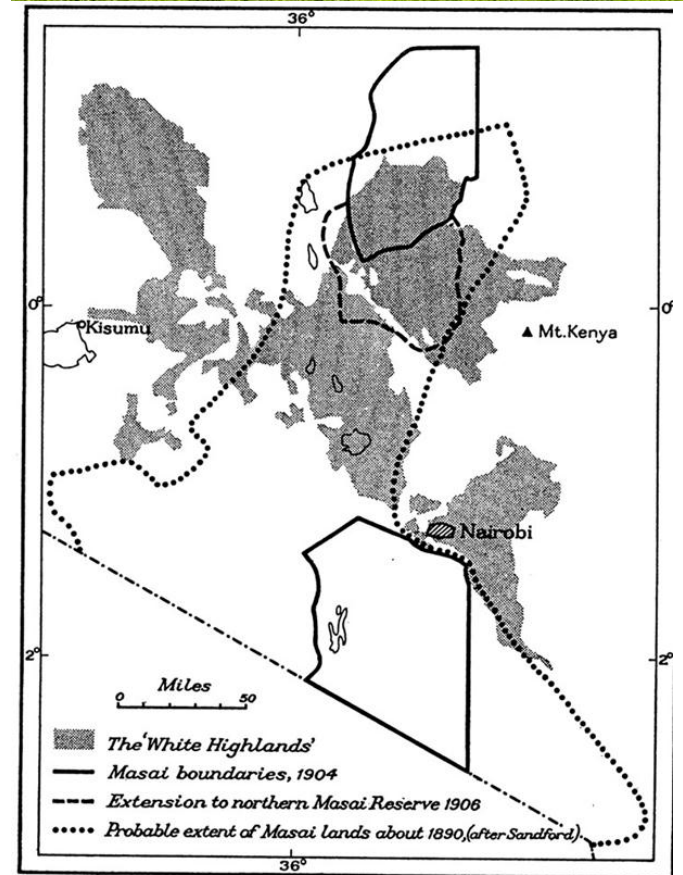


# Tanzania's Ethnic Map(s)



# Kenya

- British Protectorate 1895.
- Became settler colony 1920.
- Extensive land alienation – most fertile land taken mainly from Kikuyu people & given to white settler-farmers.
- Racial segregation and forced labor on European plantations.
- Alienation of land & displacement from ancestral lands is basis of post colonial conflicts experienced in Rift Valley and Coast provinces.



A POLITICAL HISTORY OF KENYA, Dr John Mwaruvie.  
Department of History, Political Science and Public  
Administration, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Fig. 3: Masai lands after the first Masai Treaty. The present Masai Land Unit is approximately the 1890 area south of the Highlands

# Mau Mau & State of Emergency

- From 1952 to 1959.
- *Land & Freedom Army* death toll was 11,500.
- 1,000 of were hanged.
- 80,000 Kikuyu imprisoned in concentration camps.
- 150,000 Africans, primarily Kikuyu, died – many from disease & starvation in "protected villages".
- LFA killed around 2,000 people, of whom only 32 were European civilians and 63 were members of the security forces.



Mau Mau detainees



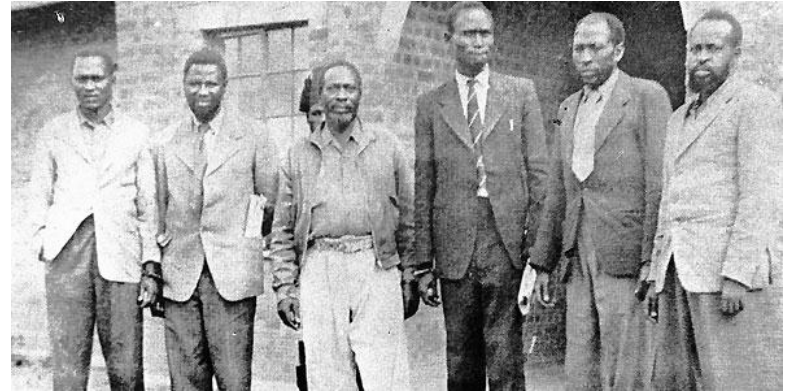
❖ Mau Mau Scare In Kenya: While one British soldier fingers the trigger of his machine gun, a second checks the papers of an African in Nairobi, Kenya. Because of Mau Mau action, all Africans without proper papers are arrested.

# Mau Mau & State of Emergency

- Use of “homeguards” – loyalists who collaborated with British – split the Kikuyu community and resulted in tremendous violence of African against African as members of other tribes were enlisted .
- Jomo Kenyatta & other presumed leaders became revered martyrs when sent to a desert prison-camp, Kapenguria.
- In reality they were much more moderate than true LFA leaders, such as Dedan Kimathi & General China.

[Mau Mau rebellion-Kenya](#)

[Dedan Kimathi Never Betrayed](#)



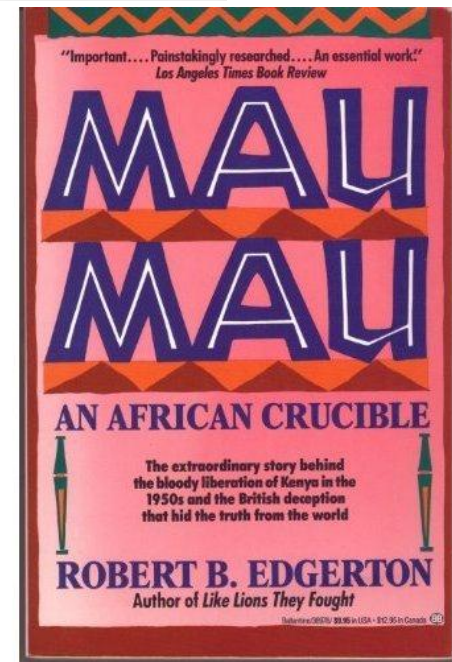
The Kapenguria Six: Jomo Kenyatta, Achieng' Oneko, Paul Ngei, Bildad Kaggia, Kung'u Karumba and Fred Kubai. None of these men were actively involved in LFA.



Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi

# Kenyan Independence

- On December 12, 1963 Kenya gained independence and Jomo Kenyatta became 1st Prime Minister & President.
- Moderates and homeguards (those who supported British) got spoils of victory.
- Members of *Land and Freedom Army* got nothing.
- No land redistribution and no reward for LFA freedom fighters.
- “In the end there was no revolution in Kenya...only the replacement of elite white rulers by another elite, this time black” (Robert Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*).

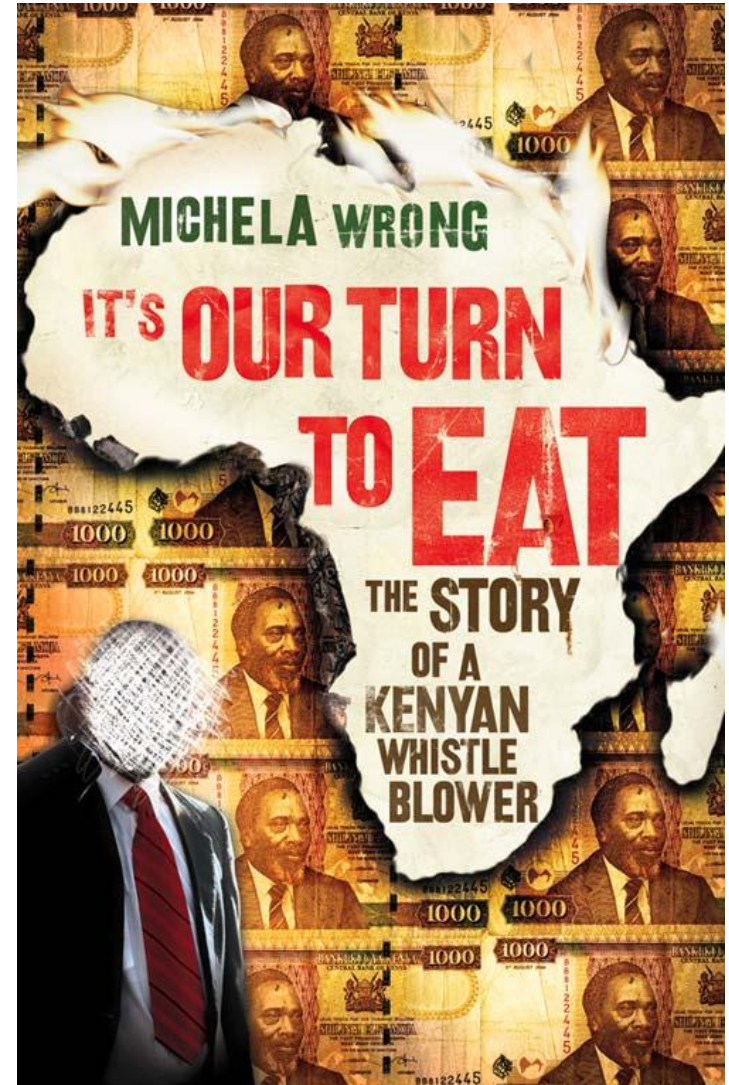


# Kenyan Politics = Ethnicity

even though it's not supposed to

- Single party state (KANU) until 1992.
- In post independence Kenya, politics has developed along tribal/ethnic lines.
- Ethnic group whose big man is in power gets to “eat” first while others get the scraps later.
- 1<sup>st</sup> President, Jomo Kenyatta, was **Kikuyu**. Ruled from 1963-1978.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> President, Daniel arap Moi, was a **Kalenjin** (Tugen). Ruled from 1978-2002.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> President\*, Emilio Mwai Kibaki, was a **Kikuyu**. Ruled from 2003 – 2013.
- 4<sup>th</sup> President, probably Uhuru Kenyatta, a **Kikuyu** & son of Jomo Kenyatta.

\*In second Kibaki administration (post 2007) power of Presidency somewhat offset by (re)creation of position of Prime Minister, filled by Raila Odinga, son of Kenya's 1st Vice President, Oginga Odinga. Compromise was brokered by former UN Sec. Gen. Kofi Annan in violent aftermath of December 2007 elections.



# Tanzania

- Colonized by Germany in late 1800s but given over to Britain by League of Nations after World War I.
- Some resistance to German colonial rule in form of the Maji Maji revolt 1905-1906; otherwise no parallel with Mau Mau in Kenya.
- Independence from Britain achieved peacefully on December 9, 1961.
- Unification with Zanzibar in 1964.



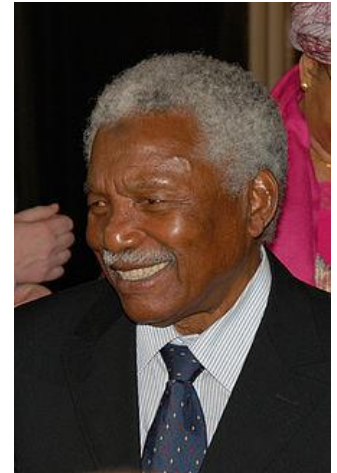
Mwalimu Nyerere





# Tanzania

- Like Kenya was a single party state (CCM) until 1990s.
- Four Presidents – Nyerere (64-85), Mwinyi (85-95), Mkapa (95-2005), Kikwete (2005-present) – all from different ethnic groups.
- Downplaying/suppression of ethnicity under Nyerere 's *ujamaa* policy.
- Deliberate use of Kiswahili language to unify Tanzanians.



# Readings

- Africa Action: [Talking about "Tribe"](#).
- [Is tribalism undermining democracy in Africa?](#)  
(BBC audio program)
- [Nation-Building and Public Goods in Kenya versus Tanzania](#)
- [Compare Kenya to Tanzania;](#)
- [Economy stats: Kenya vs. Tanzania;](#)
- [Tanzania vs. Kenya in CIA World Factbook.](#)