



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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12 January 2005

KEN43248.E

Kenya: Information on the Kisii tribe, including customs, rituals and traditions; relationship between members of the Kisii and members of other tribes; relationship between persons who have left the Kisii tribe and members of the Kisii tribe; relationship between members of the Kisii and society in general (2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Alternate names for the Kisii tribe are Gusii or Guzii and Abagusii (*Ethnologue* May 2004; see also Kenyacolors n.d.; Kisii.com n.d.a). Members of the Kisii ethnic group, which represents 6 per cent of the Kenyan population (United States 30 Nov. 2004; Minorities at Risk Project 31 Dec. 2000), live in the very fertile Kisii (or Gusii) Highlands (Kisii.com n.d.a; Kenyacolors n.d.).

Customs, Rituals and Traditions

According to the Kisii.com Website, "[g]iven their history of almost constant migration, Gusii culture is inevitably a mixture of various influences" (n.d.b). This situation has resulted from "contacts" with the Bantu, Luo "and to a lesser extent the Maasai and Kipsigis" ethnic groups (Kisii.com n.d.b).

While traditionally the Kisii had strong clan affiliations, "clan divisions began to break down" in the mid-1800s (ibid.). Today, chiefs represent clans in the "local Kenyan administration" (ibid.). Women have historically had few rights in Kisii tradition (ibid.) However, according to an article posted on the Kisii.com Website, the impact of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) on families means that men now have fewer wives than before because their first wives are fearful of their husbands contracting AIDS (ibid.). The article also states that women are now "entitled by law to a share of any inheritance" (ibid.).

In Kisii culture, the dowry is in the form of cattle (ibid.). Cash is most often used today, but not exclusively; cattle are still sometimes used as payment (ibid.). For further information on Kisii marriage customs, please refer to KEN41968.E of 20 October 2003.

The Kisii practise female genital mutilation (FGM) on girls (IRIN 11 June 2004). The practice is almost "universal" among the Kisii (Population Council Dec. 2004, 2). However, according to one source "there has been a shift from 'traditional' to 'sanitized' methods, whereby parents [are] now paying large sums of money to medical professionals to perform the rite on their daughters" (ibid.). A study entitled *Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting Among the Abagusii in Nyanza Province, Kenya* provides corroboration for this information

(ibid., iv). This practice still occurs even though FGM is illegal in Kenya under the terms of the Children's Act of 2002 (ibid.). One of the reasons it is still happening is that "only light sentences" are given to those who perform FGM (ibid.).

Throughout history and still today, soapstone carvings have been one of the most famous exports of the Kisii (Oak Park Elementary School District 97 n.d.).

For information on attitudes toward witchcraft among the Kisii, please refer to KEN38973.E of 10 May 2002.

Relationship with Other Ethnic Groups

There have been many disputes with other ethnic groups over the years (Minorities at Risk Project 31 Dec. 2000).

The information provided in the following paragraph was provided in a 5 January 2005 telephone interview by an associate professor of social sciences from Jackson State University, who is Kisii, and who works mainly in the area of the rights of women and girls within the Kisii ethnic group. She stated that land is the main reason tensions have existed between various ethnic groups, such as the Maasai, Kalenjin and Kipsigis. The Kisii have had one of the highest rates of population growth in the world, although AIDS has had a major impact on this growth (Kisii.com n.d.a). They depend greatly on agriculture. Everyone "scrambles" for access to this land. Fathers must, for instance, provide each son with a piece of land. As a result of land becoming scarcer, the Kisii have negotiated with neighbouring ethnic groups for the use of their land. This practice worked well at first, but in recent years members of those groups have said that the Kisii can no longer use their land. Shifting boundaries between ethnic groups have created tensions.

Additional information was provided in 16 December 2004 correspondence from an assistant professor of history at the University of Mississippi, a specialist on the Gusii. In his opinion, "[s]ince the 2002 elections ethnic conflicts as a whole in Kenya have declined." He added, however, that violence between the Kisii and the Maasai still occur sporadically, "primarily over grazing land and cattle theft." This information was corroborated by the *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2003*, which stated that there are still conflicts between the Maasai and Kisii (25 Feb. 2004).

In addition, the assistant professor indicated in his 16 December 2004 correspondence that although Gusii men have the reputation of being violent, "Gusii men are not much different [from] men elsewhere in Kenya." The assistant professor stated that "[t]here is no overt hostility toward the Gusii by other groups in Kenya. They garner national attention now primarily for their politics" (16 Dec. 2004; see also *The Nation* 25 Feb. 2002). Finally, he stated that intermarriage does occur "between Gusii and people of other ethnic groups" (assistant professor 16 Dec. 2004).

The associate professor at Jackson State University stated in a 5 January 2005 telephone interview that Kisii members cannot leave their ethnic group, because even if they leave their homeland, they will always be Kisii.

Please refer to KEN38935.E of 16 May 2002, KEN 37431.E of 16 July 2001 and KEN37423.E of 13 July 2001 for further information on tensions between the Kisii and other tribes in Kenya.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Publications: *Africa Research Bulletin*, *Africa Today*, *Europa World Yearbook*.

Internet sites, including: BBC News, Minority Rights Groups International, World News Connection.

Oral source: Professor and Director of the Linguistics and Cognitive Science Program at the University at Albany.

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