

# **Facing Mount Kenya; the Tribal Life of Gikuyu Study Guide**

**Facing Mount Kenya; the Tribal Life of Gikuyu by Jomo Kenyatta**

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# Plot Summary

Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of Gikuyu by Jomo Kenyatta is an anthropological, psychological, social, economical and religious study of the African people living in Gikuyu, Kenya. Told from an African standpoint, the book shows both the rich culture of the Gikuyu people, as well as the dangers of European influence over a population of people whose entire lives are based on social customs and religious ideas.

The author, Kenyatta, is a highly respected anthropologist who also happens to be the grandson of a medicine man of the Gikuyu. As a member of the Gikuyu society, Kenyatta is able to accurately describe and explain the traditions and customs of the tribe without European bias and misunderstanding. He is able to present a complete account of tribal life, while at the same time analyzing the effects of new European rule over the Gikuyu and over their lands.

Kenyatta begins by explaining the origins of the Gikuyu nation, and the familial system used within the tribe. He continues to discuss the system of land tenure, which is vital to the Gikuyu. Their entire political, social, religious, and economic structures are based on land; therefore, Kenyatta spends much time explaining how land changes hand, how it is used, and the consequences of European rule over the area. Following this, Kenyatta explains the economic structure and barter system of the Gikuyu nation, as well as the division of labor. He then discusses the various businesses that operate within the tribe, such as ironworkers, hut-building, pottery, basket making, skin tanning, and other professions. Kenyatta next examines the educational system of the Gikuyu, and compares it to the new educational system implemented by the European missionaries. He points out several flaws in the new system, and explains why the old system is vital to the Gikuyu way of life.

Next, Kenyatta presents the controversial subject of clitoridectomy, and discusses its use and place within the Gikuyu tribe. He also discusses the passage of young men and women through the various stages of initiation as they become productive members of society, and explains what each new stage means to the young men and women. Sexual relations are explained in detail, as are marriage ceremonies and rites of passage. The Gikuyu government structure is also explained and compared against the new government of the European missionaries in an effort to again show how the intrusion of the European into the life of the Gikuyu has presented many problems and challenges.

Religion is also explained, and a comparison of ancestor worship and the worship of God is made to clarify the use of each within the Gikuyu society. Kenyatta also explains here how the influence of the Christian missionary has confused the Gikuyu, and why the Gikuyu foundation of life is damaged by Christian ideas. He also explains that the new religions of Africa, known as the Watch Tower Movement, is a response to such conflicts of ideas, and he discusses how the group has risen, and the consequences of their power over the people. Kenyatta also discusses the use of magic within the Gikuyu nation, and the power of medicine men, or healers. Kenyatta concludes with a

discussion of the dangers of European influence, a call for understanding of Gikuyu customs and laws, and an urging for all who seek to help the Gikuyu to first learn their culture, history, and social customs in an effort to allow for progress without a loss of individuality and cultural identity.

# Introduction and Preface

## Introduction and Preface Summary and Analysis

Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu, by Jomo Kenyatta, is an ethnography of the Gikuyu tribe of Kenya, Africa. The book discusses the family life, political structure, land tenure policies, educational system, and religious system of the tribe, as well as discussing many other aspects in an effort to educate the public about the intricacies of this developing tribe.

The Introduction, written by Bronislaw Malinowski, a friend and instructor of Kenyatta, introduces the reader to several concepts within the book. Malinowski seeks not to introduce Kenyatta as an unbiased writer, but to point out that it is Kenyatta's own experiences in the Gikuyu tribe that make him able to write such an authoritative document on the tribe and their lives and customs. He points out that Kenyatta is highly educated, extremely intelligent, and one who uses his bias to properly expand the understanding of how the developing African nations view the concepts of Western ideas. Malinowski does criticize some of Kenyatta's confusing language, in terms of his occasional contradictions of himself. He closes by noting the importance of the document in terms of both a historical record of the tribe, and as insight into the mind of the progressive African.

In the Preface, author Jomo Kenyatta first gives geographical information of the location of the Gikuyu nation in Kenya, Africa. He proceeds to explain his reasons for writing the novel. Kenyatta, as a Gikuyu member, has learned the history and culture of the tribe through verbal instruction, but he feels it of utmost importance to write this information into an ethnography for other cultures to study and learn from. He closes by giving his credentials, in order to show he is qualified to write the book.



# Tribal Origin and Kinship System and The Gikuyu System of Land Tenure

## Tribal Origin and Kinship System and The Gikuyu System of Land Tenure Summary and Analysis

In Tribal Origin and Kinship System, Kenyatta explains the organization of the basic units of the tribe. The first is the immediate family. Over time, this group becomes large, due to the polygamous system of marriage, and thus, clans are the next family unit. The clan consists of more distant relatives of the family. The next grouping is the age group. This age group unifies the entire clan into specific activities. Kenyatta then tells the story of creation. Mogai, the creator, takes Gikuyu, the first man, to Kenya to live. He creates Moombi, a wife for Gikuyu, and the two have nine daughters. After a sacrifice, Mogai gives Gikuyu nine men to marry his daughters. The men agree to live in a matriarchal society in order to marry. Each clan is represented under the name of the daughter who gave birth to the first of the children in the lineage. Soon, however, the women become dominating, and the men seek to overtake their rule. To do this, the men impregnate the women simultaneously, and when they are very pregnant, they take over the land, with little opposition due to the condition of the women. This changes the society to a patriarchal society.

In the modern family, the father is the head of household and the owner of everything. He is treated with respect by his children and their age group. The mother is equally respected by both the family, and the children's age group. Since polygamy is practiced, wives treat one another as co-partners, but still singularly own their own homes, fields, children, and utensils. Children of the same mother are close siblings, whereas children of the same father are more like half siblings. The first and last child are considered particularly special. If a father dies without a son, his family group has ended, and ancestral spirits can no longer visit the earth. This is one reason for the polygamous way of life. The brothers of the father are all treated as fathers by the children. The sisters are treated with respect, but without the same authority. Cousins on the side of the father are treated as close kin. Grandparents are treated as parents, but are symbolically equal to children in the society. The sister of the mother is considered to be another mother to the children, unlike the sister of the father. The brother of the mother is the only one considered an uncle, and although he does have some influence over the children, it is not as strong as that of the brother of the father. The relationship between relatives by marriage is one of politeness and shyness. While both sides give support freely to one another, their relationship is more formal and less familial.

In 'The Gikuyu System of Land Tenure', Kenyatta first explains his vast credentials to discuss land tenure. He stresses the importance of land ownership, as the Gikuyu consider it the most important aspect of their society. Each inch of land is owned by an individual, while the entirety of the area is protected by all. According to legend, God



gave Gikuyu the land, and over time, his descendants outgrew it. They went to the forest to locate more land. Here they met a race of people who dug underground tunnels to avoid people and who eventually were swallowed by the land. Kenyatta notes these hunters likely simply moved from the area in reality, or that they intermarried with the Gikuyu. The new race was called the Ndorobo, and these individuals and the Gikuyu began having land transactions and goods trading. Kenyatta notes that although the Gikuyu use the phrase "our land", this is simply used in a sense of unity. He stresses this point because the European, on arrival, deemed all lands were communal, which is completely incorrect, and actually is directly against all principles in the Gikuyu tribe.

Originally, land was owned by the family who cleared the land of brush, the family who God gave the land to, or the family who claimed a portion of unclaimed land. Once all land was claimed, however, buying and selling land became common. Women do not inherit property, but instead obtain their own through marriage. A father will rarely sell his land without consulting his sons, who inherit that land on his death. However, he can buy or sell land at his discretion. When the father dies, the oldest son becomes the trustee of the land, and the ownership of the land switches from being owned by the father solely to being owned by the family as a group. If an outsider (mothami) wishes to obtain building or cultivation rights to this land, he or she must be of good character and at peace with the family. If given rights, he must also bring beer whenever he brewed it. If the oldest son abuses his rights as trustee, his land is separated from the land of the rest of the family and the rest of the land is reappointed to another representative. The moramati can then sell his land, but loses all rights to the land and to the ancestral spirits of his family.

There are some lands that are used for the good of the community, and these are pasture lands, public roads and paths, and sacred groves. These lands are owned by individuals but are used as common lands. Woodlands, on the other hand, are under the control of the land owners. Kenyatta blames these types of areas for the misconception of the European that the lands of the Gikuyu were communal. Marking the boundary of land is done only when the land has been purchased outright from another.

To buy land, a man brews beer and goes to the landowner. He cannot ask to buy the land outright, since land is sacred and a symbol of the mother of the people. Thus, the man tells the landowner he is in love with a lass on the property, and wishes to be accepted as a son-in-law. The landowner knows this parable, and replies in kind as to whether the offer is accepted. The two agree on a price of goats and sheep. Once the land is paid for, the elders come to the land and oaths are taken. A ram is slaughtered, and the stomach is removed. The elders and the purchaser and buyer move across the land, chanting fertility songs, while marking the land boundary with the stomach contents and trees and lilies. The skin of the ram is tied to the wrist of buyer and seller, uniting them in land ownership. There is then a feast. If any of the lilies or trees of the boundary are removed or die, they must be immediately replaced, either by the land owners or the elders.



Kenyatta then tells a story of a medicine man known as Mogo. After waking from a dream one evening, he tells the people he has seen the coming of the European, and that they will have large sticks that shoot fire and kill people. When the first of the Europeans come, they are treated warily, but with respect, and show the Gikuyu no harm. The Gikuyu, as a result, become bolder, and begin to invite the Europeans nearer to their homes, and soon grant them building rights. The Europeans soon kick the Gikuyu from their own lands.





# Economic Life and Industries

## Economic Life and Industries Summary and Analysis

In "Economic Life", Kenyatta points out the primary occupations of the Gikuyu people are agricultural and livestock rearing. Work is divided equally between the sexes. In home building, cutting wood, building fences, watching over land, and putting up frames falls to the men, while carrying lumber, housework, and thatching are the work of women. In the fields, men clear the land and tend animals, while women prepare the soil and harvest, but the planting and weeding is done by both, as is brewing beer and trading. Children are also expected to help with preparing the soil and with tending smaller gardens. Gikuyu has four seasons, and crops are planted in the season that fits the growing time. Once the crops are five inches high, the families begin to weed the fields. In some cases, families may invite friends to help, and give them food and drink as reward. Kenyatta notes that the European belief that Africans are lazy may be built on watching the celebration after such an event, and points out these individuals are not lazy, but simply work cooperatively to get a job done in a shorter time period.

When the crops are ripe, they are taken to market, where the Gikuyu generally use a barter system of trade. In some cases, there are fixed prices for goods, but in most cases, prices are bargained. Money is only used when one is trying to gain money for his hut tax. Women harvest the goods, store what is needed for their family, and then sell the rest. Cattle are a sign of wealth in the Gikuyu nation. Hides are used for bedding, sandals, and straps, but the cattle is of generally poor quality, and is of little real economic value. Sheep and goats, on the other hand, are highly valued in society as a standard currency. They are used for sacrifices, rituals, meat, clothing, and marriage insurance. The Gikuyu also trade with the neighboring tribes.

In "Industries", Kenyatta first notes that the Gikuyu are known for their ironwork. Legend says the people were taught to make iron by God, who wanted them to have better tools to kill animals with. Iron is used for spears, swords, knives, rings, bracelets, hammers, and other tools. The sand is first washed, and then dried. It is then placed into fire made from coals of a tree and a banana plant. A ritual is performed to ask the ancestral spirits and God for a successful enterprise, and then the assistants keep two bellows blowing to keep the fire going. The ore is therefore reduced to iron. It is left to cool, and in the morning, another ceremony is performed to thank the spirits for protecting the iron. Kenyatta notes these ceremonies are important, as the spirits can cause ironwork to be unsuccessful, resulting in bad swords or tools. The iron is then hammered together into larger pieces, which are then sold.

Also important to the Gikuyu is hut building. Huts are round with wooden walls and thatched roofs, and are built in a day. The home fire is lit using sacred fire sticks, or is kept going in the case of a rebuild. Each wife is to have her own hut, as is the husband. The hut of the wife, or the nyomba, is used for religious and magical ceremonies, and no strangers can enter. All entertaining is done in the hut of the husband. Family and



neighbors help to gather the materials needed and to help provide food for the builders. A feast is held, and several days later, the hut is built. A ceremony is held first in communion with the ancestral spirits. The men then build the outside of the hut, and the women thatch the hut while the men feast. At the end of the feast, a blessing is given. Finally, the fire is lit by a male and female child and the inhabitants can move in. The woman's hut is separated into small apartments, which serve as her bedroom, an extra bedroom, a store room, a room for the animals to be fattened, and another for the animals to sleep in at night. In the middle is the fire, and a small circle for guests. The traditions that must be upheld in the hut are that fire must be lit every night, someone must sleep in the hut every night, the wife can only have sex inside the hut and not during the day time, nor while food is being cooked. If it is done during meal preparation, the food must be thrown out, or those who consume it must be cleansed by a witch doctor. The man's hut has one or no partitions, as it is used primarily for sleeping and greeting visitors.

Kenyatta next discusses the weapons used by the Gikuyu. These weapons include spears, swords, arrows, shields, a variety of clubs, and slings. Spears vary in length from five to six feet, and are made from steel or iron and very hard wood. Swords are also made of steel or iron, with wooden handles, and are three feet in length. Arrows have heads of wood or iron, and are generally used for hunting. Shields are made from buffalo hides, which are soaked, dried, and then put into shape. Clubs are made for throwing at an enemy, and thus vary in shape and size, as is dictated by the owner. Only men are allowed to carry these weapons.

Kenyatta then describes other industries of the Gikuyu. Pottery is a common task of women, and knowledge is handed down to new generations. Men are not allowed near the molding-place, nor even to touch any of the materials. Pottery season is generally done when the crops are ripe, and again following harvest. The pots are used for personal use as well as sold to others. Basket making is also a job for women, but men are allowed to handle materials. Baskets are made of strings from shrubs that are beaten, stretched, and dried, and then wound together. These are then knitted together to form baskets. Trays are also used, but are sewn instead of knitted, and men usually make these. If a woman is seen making one, she is presumed to be widowed, with no male relation. Skin tanning is another industry, and is used to make clothing. Each family has one or two individuals who tan the skins and shape them for clothing. Skins are dried, and then the hair is removed either by hand or with a scrape. The elders' clothing is often made of fur.

Another industry is that of musical instruments. In general, the Gikuyu enjoy singing more than instruments, but they do have drums, a large rattle, small rattle, and a flute. The flute is played for enjoyment only during leisure time and only by men. It is made from bark or shrub, and are often replaced daily. The drum is used only in a few ceremonies and songs. Rattles are also used during dances. The large rattles are made of folded iron with iron bullets inside, and are worn by men during war dances. The small rattles are made the same, and are used as ornaments as well as to train children to use their right hands, as left handedness is seen as a sign of bad luck.



# System of Education, Initiation of Boys and Girls and Sex Life among Yong People

## System of Education, Initiation of Boys and Girls and Sex Life among Yong People Summary and Analysis

Kenyatta begins this section by noting that he hopes his analysis of the educational system of the Gikuyu helps Europeans understand the social structure of the Gikuyu and will help explain how this educational system helps unite the tribe. In the Gikuyu nation, the home is the school. The mother and nurse educate the very young through lullabies that discuss the history of the tribe and the family traditions. As they age, they are asked probing questions to make sure they are learning about the family and traditions. They begin to play games and pretend to fight, using wooden weapons. They also often play house. Fathers teach their sons to weed and how to handle a digging stick. He also teaches him the names of plants and roots, and their uses. He will also teach him the family business, if there is one. The mother teaches the girls in agriculture, as well, and in domestic duties. She teaches both boys and girls tribal traditions and customs and laws. Dances are ways in which the children gain physical strength. The children are also taught about health, such as avoiding disease. Kenyatta believes this method of training, which doesn't involve formal instruction, is more beneficial since the child is learning all the time, as opposed to during specific times of the day.

The first stage of youth is marked at four or five years of age, and is the piercing of the outer ear. The piercing of the lobe is done a few years later. Next, the child is circumcised at age twelve or thirteen. Circumcision is required for land ownership, marriage, warriors, sexual intercourse, and almost all other socially acceptable actions in the Gikuyu nation. The next stage is marriage. When a man has a child old enough to be circumcised, he becomes a low ranking elder. After two children are circumcised, the man becomes a member of the Court of Elders. These individuals have power over others and participate in ceremonies and politics. At the time of marriage, boys are taught how to court a female, when sex is acceptable, and how to offer sheep and goats as bargaining. Girls are taught how to behave when married, how to withstand childbirth, and how to act among other individuals.

Kenyatta notes this system of familial relations, both living and dead, as well as age groupings, are taught as fundamental underlying principles in Gikuyu education. Kenyatta fears that western education will cause the downfall of the society of the Gikuyu, as individualistic teaching would not allow for the necessary social structure of the clan. Kenyatta also points out that the European teacher coming to Africa should



learn the Gikuyu way, so he or she can understand why the European method of teaching causes a problem for the Gikuyu way of life, and for the Gikuyu individual.

In "Initiation of Boys and Girls", Kenyatta first defends the clitoridectomy for girls in the Gikuyu culture. He notes that several groups wish to ban the practice. Kenyatta points out there are many who also support the custom, noting its place in the community as a major milestone in the life of the female. Women cannot marry or have sexual relations if they have not gone through the surgery. The circumcision of both sexes is regarded as a unification of the entire tribe. Age grouping begins on the day of surgery. The day prior to the operation, the head is shaved, and the girl is massaged and adorned with beads. She is led in a procession to the location of the surgery. The location is blessed, ancestral spirits are appeased with offerings, and the initiates begin to dance. Boys run forth to a special tree to break the top branches as girls walk to the same tree. The children then take an oath to act as adults, to act a part of the community, and to keep the tribal secrets. Senior warriors then lead the initiates to the homestead, a ceremony of parting is performed, and the children return home to rest. The morning of the operation, the girls are fed special food and wear only a string of beads. They are taken to a freezing cold river, where they stand to numb their lower half. They are then taken to the hut. They sit between the legs of their sponsor with their legs spread. The genital area is doused in very cold water, a woman dressed in ceremonial clothing dashes from the crowd, and cuts the tip of the clitoris off each initiate. The wound is then covered in a mix of milk and herbs, and the crowd sings. The girls are walked to a hut and cared for over several days. Antiseptic leaves are applied often, and the incision area is particularly cleaned after urination. They are fed and are unable to go out for several days.

All girls, once healed, are presented to the public on an even numbered day together as a complete age group. On that day, a sheep is slaughtered, and its skin is put onto the wrists of the boys and girls, who are then blessed by the elders. There is a ceremony where the mothers pretend to be in labor and the gut of a sheep is cut to symbolize the cutting of the umbilical cord and the rebirth of the children. The children are now seen as children of the tribe. For these initiates, for several months they participate only in singing and relaxing. Several months later, a final ceremony is performed for cleansing the youths. At this juncture, they are held to the laws of adults. Kenyatta notes that on rare occasion, there is infection, which can cause problems with later childbirth, but reminds readers this is very rare. He reiterates that people who find the surgeries brutal know nothing of the reasons behind the surgery.

In "Sex Life Among Young People", Kenyatta notes the genital surgery is the start of sexual activity. Dances are held where young people meet and begin courting. Fondling is common, and encouraged as proper and sacred. This practice, known as ngweko, is done in a special hut called the thingira. The age group gathers and shares a meal and drinks. Companions are chosen, and one couple goes to the bed. The boy removes his clothing and the girl removes her upper garment, tucking her skirt and apron between her legs to protect her genitalia. The couple lie facing one another and fondle one another until they fall asleep. While the European finds this practice appalling as well as sinful, the Gikuyu find it necessary and sacred as tradition. The young man is not



allowed to pull out the garment of the woman, to touch her with his penis, or to copulate, although close, intimate relationships may result in intimate touching. Both are expected to be virgins, and any intercourse is severely punished. Men caught trying to pull her undergarments away are ostracized and forbidden to fondle with anyone else. Sexual taboos include sex with family members and even being in the same thingira as a sibling. Any position other than missionary is forbidden, as is sex with a same sex partner. Boys can masturbate, but girls are strictly forbidden from doing so.



# Marriage System and The Gikuyu System of Government

## Marriage System and The Gikuyu System of Government Summary and Analysis

In "Marriage System", Kenyatta explains that families are important to extend the life of the clan. The marriage document binds the individuals and their kin. Men and women are allowed to choose their own mates. In the first stage, a boy and his friends visit the home of a girl he fancies. The girl either accepts, or asks them to come back another day. This is repeated until the girl either accepts or rejects the boy. If accepted, the boy tells his parents, who visit the parents of the bride to be. The boys' parents begin to collect sheep and goats for the dowry. Once all animals are paid, a feast is held to announce the engagement. In the fourth stage, a day is set to sign the marriage contract. Six sheep are slaughtered, a feast is held, and the bride and her family are given gifts. When the man has a hut suitable for his wife, he arranges with his parents a day to get the young woman. The day is kept secret from the woman. On the day, the boy's female relatives find the young girl and take her. She pretends to struggle against them. Finally, the girl arrives at her new home. The couple must report back to the families the discovered states of virginity. If impotence is discovered, the marriage is annulled. On the eighth day, she is admitted into the husband's clan. The Gikuyu system is polygamous, owing to the idea that men need several children. Men are able to marry as many women as he can support. Women marry between fifteen and twenty, while men marry at around twenty-five. Each wife is given her own land, and both the wives and their husbands work the land. Love, too, is shared between husband and his many wives. Taking care of the home is the duty of the wife, and taking care of the husband falls to the wives, in turn. When a friend comes from a distance, any of the wives may choose him to stay in her hut. This is thought of as social intercourse, and not looked down on at all. If she invites him in secret, however, it is considered adultery. She can also be divorced, and forced to return all wedding gifts and all parts of the dowry. Husbands may divorce the wife, or vice versa, if she is barren, refusing sexual relations, a witch, a thief, if she deserts him, or for gross misconduct. A woman can also divorce for drunkenness, impotence, and ill-treatment. If barren, methods are first tried to solve the issue. In divorces with children, the child is left with the father and the mother returns to her parents.

In "Gikuyu System of Government", Kenyatta recounts a tale of the first ruler, who was tyrannical. Tired of his rule, his people revolted. The government became democratic. A feast was held all over the country and a constitution was written. Each village elected an official for the council that wrote the Constitution. The Constitution noted that people were free to own land, that people, after circumcision, should participate in government, and should be full members of the tribe, that there should be a governing council of elders, all young men should be warriors, in times of need, the people will be asked to



contribute goods for the good of the tribe, the government is made of rotating generations, all people must be married, and criminal laws were defined. The first governmental group, the ndemi generation, separated the people into groups. The family unit formed a family council. Next was the village council, and then the district council, and the national council. All councils worked for the good of the clan. Kenyatta notes these methods of government worked until the British came, and introduced their own, autocratic government.

At circumcision, the boy becomes responsible for his own actions. He joins the junior warriors, and his weapons are blessed in a ceremony. Twelve rain seasons later, the junior warrior becomes a senior warrior. When a man marries, he joins the council of elders, but only as a lower elder who learns from the true elders. When a man has a child to be circumcised, he is initiated into the council of peace. A feast is held, and the man is blessed in his home by the elders, promises to keep the secrets of the elders, and he is made a member of the full council. When a man's wife is passed child bearing stage, he is initiated into the religious and sacrificial council. He pays a ewe, which is taken to the sacred tree by the few members of this council, and slaughtered. This symbolizes the man's dedication to God. Following this ceremony, the man is one of the esteemed few who can perform religious ceremonies at the sacred tree. Each age group in the military has a leader who keeps harmony and discipline in the group. Each regiment has its own songs and dances. The target of war was often land and cattle ownership, with few women being killed. The cattle was divided between the regiments, and the warriors went home. Tribal wars were often economic in nature, and were fought as a means to avoid famine. Natural barriers often helped certain tribes win these wars. In some areas, friendships were forged, and together, two tribes invaded others. Fighting in these wars was brief.

In the family, the father is judge, and resolves issues within the family. If serious, heads of many kins are called together. Both individuals in the dispute make their statements, a discussion is had, and a decision is made. In cases of non-family disputes, the council of elders is called. A day is selected for the case, both men pay court fees, and the case is heard in open court. Judges are appointed from the council, and the case is discussed. Meat is roasted and eaten, and a decision is given. If a party does not agree with the decision, an appeal is granted, and the case is heard again. Three oaths control these proceedings. The first is the muuma, which holds the person to telling the truth. The second is the koringa thenge, which ensures the person is not claiming lands that are not his. The third is the gethathi, which is used in criminal cases to ensure honesty. Kenyatta notes the courts are now mostly decided by bribes. Criminal cases are tried the same way as civil cases. In murder cases, the clan affected would raid the clan of the murderer, and attempt to kill him or one of his kin. Elders determined compensation for the life, and ensured it was paid by the murderer. Loss of limb was also payable in goats, sheep, or cows. Adultery and rape were punished through fines, as well, as was theft. Habitual thieves, dangers to society, and witches or wizards were put to death for their crimes.



# Religion and Ancestor Worship and The New Religion in East Africa

## Religion and Ancestor Worship and The New Religion in East Africa Summary and Analysis

In "Religion and Ancestor Worship", Kenyatta notes the importance of relations with ancestors. He explains there are three types of spirituality: those of deity worship, communion with ancestors, and sacrificial practice. The Gikuyu believe in a single god, Ngai, who is believed to reside in Mount Kenya. Birth, initiation, marriage, and death all require communion with Ngai. When seeking help from Ngai, only the family group, including the ancestral spirits, may ask for help. Individual indiscretions are solved through communion with the ancestral spirits. Sacred trees serve as churches. Ngai appears as nature, such as stars. In general, prayers are not offered to Ngai, as he is not to be bothered unless it is necessary. Thunder is the sound of his movement, and lightning is his weapon. During public gatherings, the people may pray for peace from Ngai and for good harvest. No sacrifice is given, as sacrifice is only done in dire circumstances. If a man is ill, medicine men are first sought. If that fails, the ancestral spirits are soothed, in case they are angry. If that fails, Ngai is appealed to by the entire clan and the spirits. Priests do not exist in the Gikuyu religion, but the elders are responsible for the sacrifice to Ngai, the most serious religious event. Wise men or seers are thought to communicate directly with Ngai.

If rain fails to fall normally, a sacrifice is made to Ngai. The seers are asked if they have received word, and asked to communicate with Ngai. They report what has angered Ngai, and what animal is to be sacrificed. The animal is located in detail, elders are located, and two small children are located to join the sacrifice, as they are pure at heart. A sacred tree is located for the ceremony, and a day is chosen. Beer and milk are taken to the tree, along with the sheep, elders, and children. A prayer is recited and the lamb is strangled by the elder as the children wrap their hands around the throat. The lamb is roasted, and the elders eat of each joint. The lamb meat is then placed on the fire along with the bones, chants are made, and the ceremony is complete. Kenyatta tells readers there is less rain now due to the destruction of the forests. Members of the tribe believe Ngai is angry for their detribalization, their lack of communion with ancestral spirits due to a loss of land, and their overall confused positions due to the British invasion.

There is also a planting ceremony. An elder recites a prayer to the mountain, and the woman and children plant seeds with purified digging sticks. In the purification of the crops, the same elders who performed the sacrifice for rain meet in the middle of the village with a lamb and herbs. The lamb is again killed by strangling and roasted, and the stomach is mixed with herbs. After the feast, the stomach, herbs, and bones are





placed into the fire, and torches are lit from the fire. The elders then take the torches and light small piles of brush in each field, as well as relight the home fires in each hut.

In the harvesting ceremony, a lamb of specific markings is chosen for sacrifice to thank Ngai. The lamb is killed at the tree, and the stomach contents are mixed with the sap of the tree and the bark. The lamb skin is dipped in the mix and cut into small strips, which are then wrapped in leaves. The elder pray, and the parcels are buried in crossroads throughout the village.

There is also a ceremony to chase away illness and disease. When an outbreak occurs and medicine fails, evil spirits are blamed. An evening is chosen to fight them, and notices are sent out or communicated verbally to villagers. On that evening, horns are sounded, and men, women and children beat the bushes from their homes to the river, to scare out the spirits as they yell loudly. War horns are shouted as the people reach the river, and they throw their clubs and sticks into the river, thereby drowning the spirits.

As mentioned, age groups are important, and a son arguing with a father has to appease not only the father, but the ancestral spirits, as well. Elders are seen as symbols of respect. Kenyatta compares the communion with ancestors to the leaving of a place for a deceased relative at a dinner table of the European. The ancestors are not prayed to, but are given gifts of respect. There are spirits of the mother and father, clan spirits, and age group spirits, and collectively, these are the tribal spirits.

In "The New Religion in East Africa", Kenyatta notes there has been a rise of different religious groups in Africa. He attributes this to the fact that the European disregarded the African religious beliefs. They condemned polygamy, which is vital to the communal tribe. Africans were forced to choose only one wife and her children, but the African had to in order to learn "white man magic" or the ability to read and write. Thus, new religions were founded by the African to combine the Christian faith with the ways of the Gikuyu. In particular, the Watu wa Mngu are seers who have given up all property to do Ngai's bidding. Their prayers are a blend of Christian faith and prayers to Ngai. They often attempt to heal the ill, and at times appear to succeed. They believe in polygamy, as the Bible dictates, and believe in communion with ancestors, who are treated like the saints of the Christians. As the group grew, the government began to arrest them and condemn them as agitators. During court, they simply prayed. They were deemed a danger to the government, even though they participated little in politics, and a clash with police in 1934 resulted in many dead religious members.



# Magical and Medical Practices and Conclusion

## Magical and Medical Practices and Conclusion Summary and Analysis

In "Magical and Medical Practices", Kenyatta explains there are eleven types of magic. Charm and protective magic is used to protect against certain dangers. This is simply security against animals and other harmful entities. The magician makes a magical powder, places it into a horn, recites magical chants, and the hunter or individual is given instruction on how to use the charm. Love magic is split into two kinds. The first obtains the love of many for an individual and is considered dangerous, in that the individual must be able to support those who will love him. The man is taken to a hyena hole, and a ritual is performed where the magician chants and makes cuts on the joints of the man's body, then has him drink magic potion. More popular love magic is used to obtain the affections of a woman. In some cases, magic is used to get rid of competition, and in others, is used to simply appear more attractive. All love magic requires a link with the beloved. Kenyatta suggests this magic works by telepathically sending mental messages to the beloved. Healing magic is used to cure illness otherwise not curable by medicine. The magician arrives with healing magic in a gourd. The sick person spits on the magical mixture to ensure a link to ancestral spirits. Chants are done, and the magician speaks a magical formula at the sick. A hole is dug, into which a magical mixture is placed to chase away evil. The man pretends to vomit the sickness into the hole as the magician chants. Kenyatta believes this works due to spiritual healing. Hate magic is used to destroy friendships, such as in the case of wanting the affections of someone already in love with another, or in the case of a businessman with a successful rival. Hypnotizing magic is often used in courts, and are employed through speech.

Destructive magic is considered to be witchcraft, and is extremely hated. Prior to European colonization, witches were condemned to death. First, the person was proved to have killed someone by poison. The person and all witchcraft items was brought into court, and all items were tasted by the person. If successful and without death, the person then had to give oath he or she was not a witch, and was then set free, but monitored. If lying, this meant disaster for his or her family. If he or she refused, or was caught later doing witchcraft after release, the death sentence was given. The man or woman was then burned to death. In some cases, the witch was instead crucified. Now, Kenyatta notes, all medical men and witches are treated the same, and all are subject to prosecution. His own father was condemned for witchcraft. The poison by which witches use to kill is simply poisonous herbs in nature. Only the wizard's secret council know how to make the poison, and their meetings are highly secret. Parts of the poison mix include genital organs of male and females, breasts, tongues, ears, hands and feet, and other parts of animals or humans. These parts are taken from the already killed.

In the "Conclusion", Kenyatta reiterates that all parts of the Gikuyu culture must be examined and understood, as none stand on their own. The key is the tribal system. The family group as the base structure is important. The importance of land ownership, he notes, is vital in understanding the key method of survival and status, and the ties to ancestral spirits and kin. He reiterates his belief that learning in the family environment is healthy, and that it is needed in the unified society of the Gikuyu. He again notes the importance of initiation ceremonies. He closes by stating that all these components make up the life of the Gikuyu, and that all must be understood and preserved in order to help the African advance.



# Characters

## Jomo Kenyatta

As both the writer of the novel and a primary character in the novel, Kenyatta is the voice that gives all information contained within the novel. Writing of his own personal experiences within the Gikuyu tribe, as well as about customs and cultures he knows of through his upbringing in the tribe, Kenyatta provides readers with a complete and entertaining view into the culture of the Gikuyu tribe. He is a passionate man, well educated, and one who believes strongly in keeping the culture of the Gikuyu alive, even while attempting to help the tribe to move forward into the new world of progress and industrialization. Kenyatta sees the validity in helping the Gikuyu forward, but also wishes to help the tribe retain their origins, their customs, and their lives as free men and women of Africa. It is clear through his writing that he feels the European has invaded the lands of the Gikuyu and have taken away their freedoms. Kenyatta, through his work, seeks not only to help preserve the Gikuyu tribal history for generations to come, but also seeks to enlighten European invaders about the culture in an effort to help preserve the life of the people.

## Bronislav Malinowski

Bronislav Malinowski is a professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Having played a part in the education of Kenyatta, Malinowski has a personal relationship with the writer of the book. In his introduction, Malinowski lists several key components to the novel, and reminds readers to note specifically that Kenyatta seeks not to bias readers against detribalization, but instead to encourage those visiting the area and attempting to help the tribe to learn more about their customs and structure before they attempt to change them. Malinowski recognizes the bias within Kenyatta, but points out that he uses the bias to an advantage in the book and does not seek to bash anyone, but instead uses the bias to educate. He sees this as a rare gift, and one that adds a layer of depth to the novel that other ethnographic accounts lack. Malinowski also points out that the African bias contained within the novel only serves to help convey an understanding of how the African sees Western influence and how such influence presents a dire situation for the African. He adds that, even when discussing magic, Kenyatta seeks not to convince the reader he is right, but instead simply to convey a belief system. Malinowski openly admits that such a belief is likely to be criticized for lack of evidence, but again notes that Kenyatta seeks not to prove such concepts, but simply to note their existence in the life of the Gikuyu. Malinowski therefore, in his opening statements, prepares the reader to read the novel in a way that seeks to understand the life of the Gikuyu without judging or seeking justification for claims made within the novel.



## Ancestors

Ancestors play a vital role in the novel because they are important in the lives of the Gikuyu people. Ancestral spirits are often sought for a number of rites and rituals among the Gikuyu, for by inviting the ancestral spirits to participate, the family is able to truly present a unified family group. Insulting the ancestral spirits can result in dangerous conditions for the Gikuyu, as the wrath of the spirits can cause bad luck and misfortune, and thus ensuring that all ancestral spirits are communicated with is vital to the life of all Gikuyu.

## Mwene-Nyaga

Mwene-Nyaga is the term for the God of the Gikuyu. Mwene-Nyaga is thought to live on Mount Kenya, which is why prayers are often directed toward the mountain. Mwene-Nyaga cannot be seen by mortals and takes little interest in the lives of man. However, when a family group, along with their ancestral spirits, presents a unified prayer to him, Mwene-Nyaga is likely to respond favorably. In fact, individuals are not allowed to directly speak with Mwene-Nyaga, but instead must speak through the family group. During ceremonies asking Mwene-Nyaga to relieve drought or famine, sacrifices of animals are often done.

## Family Group

The family group, or mbari, is the primary factor in the life of the Gikuyu. The mbari consists of the father, mother, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. This family group multiplies rapidly as a result of the polygamous way of life of the Gikuyu. This family group is the most vital group for the Gikuyu, as it is this group which provides land, education, shelter, and the unity necessary for many rituals of the tribe.

## Clan

The clan, or moherega, is the extended family group of the Gikuyu. As mentioned, the family group grows rapidly, and thus, soon is forced to spread out over vast distances. This group is still strongly tied together, however, in the clan, and the clan still gets together for many important rituals such as weddings and initiation ceremonies. In this way, again, the sense of unity is maintained even over great distances.

## Elders

The elders are another important group of people to the Gikuyu. Eldership only occurs once a man is married, and this first stage is only preliminary. Once a man has a child old enough to be circumcised, he is considered eligible to be an elder. It is the elders who take care of the political lives of the people and who complete many of the rituals



needed in the Gikuyu life. Elders are responsible for the rituals of land tenure, initiation, marriage, drought, famine, and all other important aspects of life. They are the respected members of society, and as such, are vital to the continued prosperity of the tribe.

## Members of the Age Grade

Members of the age grade are another important group within the Gikuyu tribe, as well. From the circumcision ceremony forward, members of the age group do things together for life. Their marriage ceremonies are intertwined, as are their initiations into various stages of adulthood. These age groups provide a constant social group for each individual, and are needed for many ceremonies and rituals.

## Gikuyu

Gikuyu is the equivalent of the Christian "Adam". It is believed the Mwene-Nyaga created Gikuyu and then led him to his beautiful land, which is Kenya. Gikuyu is therefore seen to be the founder of the Gikuyu tribe, and, with his wife Moombi, is believed to be the creator of man. With his wife, he had nine daughters. After a sacrifice to Mwene-Nyaga, those nine daughters were given nine husbands, and their children were the first of the Gikuyu lineage.

## Moombi

Moombi is believed to be the equivalent of the Christian "Eve". Moombi was created by Mwene-Nyaga as a companion and partner to Gikuyu, the founder of man. Together, they had nine daughters, which were the mothers of the first of the Gikuyu lineage.



## Objects/Places

### Mount Kenya

Mount Kenya is a prominent mountain in Gikuyu and is believed to be the residence of God.

### Gikuyu, Kenya

Gikuyu is a country in the center of Kenya, Africa, and is home to nearly one million people.

### Polygamy

Polygamy is a system of marriage that allows an individual to have more than one spouse. The Gikuyu are a polygamous society.

### Calabash

A calabash is a vine grown for fruit, which is dried and used as a container for liquid, due to its bottle shape.

### Bloom

A bloom is the metallic iron that is the result of the heating of ore by ironworkers of the Gikuyu people.

### Circumcision

Circumcision is a rite of passage of Gikuyu young men that involves the removal of the foreskin on the penis.

### Clitoridectomy

A clitoridectomy is the female rite of passage in the Gikuyu tribe, and involves the removal of the clitoris.



## **Dowry**

The dowry is the money, goods, or property given to a wife and her family by the soon to be husband when she agrees to marry.

## **Watch Tower Movement**

The Watch Tower Movement is a religious movement in Africa that seeks to combine Christian ideas with the ideas of the African nation.

## **Ndarugu Forest**

Ndarugu Forest is the location of a conflict between the Watu wa Mngu religious group and the police, where three of the religious group were killed.





# Themes

## Detribalization

One of the primary themes of the novel is the dangers of the detribalization of the people of Gikuyu. Jomo Kenyatta presents an image of a culture bound together through unity and loyalty, and through a sense of public and social responsibility that is taught to children from birth through the entire culture. The native Gikuyu educational system, taught by parents, teaches social and family responsibility. The political structure of the Gikuyu is based on these same ideas of social and tribal responsibility, as are the marriage ceremonies, age grading customs, and all other customs and social norms of the culture. From birth, children of the Gikuyu are taught that it is only through unity and community that the people can survive. Their customs, sometimes looked down on by Western societies, are accepted because they too ingrain this concept of unity.

Kenyatta points out that the European influenced detribalization of the Gikuyu people threatens the entire livelihood and existence of the Gikuyu nation. According to Kenyatta, the educational system of the European teaches individuality and knowledge only, instead of teaching social and familial responsibility. He believes this threatens the existence of the group because without a sense of unity, community, and working together, the social structure will collapse and will thus end the existence of the group. Since religious beliefs require a communion with ancestral spirits, and since the religious teaching of the European prevents such a concept, the religious structure would fail. Since the Western religion also outlaws polygamy, the marital system of the Gikuyu would fail. Since the educational system encourages individuality and education over land tenure, the agricultural system would fail, and this would end the sustainability of the group. In this way, he notes, the detribalization of the Gikuyu is not an enhancement to their existence as the European would like to believe, but is instead a threat to their entire way of life. Kenyatta urges the European intruder to learn about the Gikuyu before attempting to "help" the group, so that Western ideas of advancement and literature and progress can be combined with the Gikuyu way of life so as to improve the Gikuyu culture, as opposed to destroy it.

## Ethnography of the Gikuyu People

Another main theme of the book is simply the presentation of the ethnography of the Gikuyu people. Kenyatta not only seeks to help Europeans understand the group they are trying to assist, but also seeks to preserve the Gikuyu systems through the actual recording of information in a way that is presentable to the entire world. He admits several times in the novel that the customs, morals, and traditions presented in the book are not written down anywhere within the history of the Gikuyu, because the Gikuyu have no real written language. While they have language, their traditions are not to write



down their history and their customs, but to teach those customs and ideals to their children through song, ritual, and other physical forms of teaching.

By presenting a complete ethnography of the Gikuyu to the world, Kenyatta is seeking to record the information for future generations who may lose some of the verbal teachings as a casualty of detribalization. By scientifically dissecting the main rituals and customs of the Gikuyu, Kenyatta is able to present the reader with a broad understanding of the basics of the tribe in such a way as to explain some of the fears of progress these individuals have. Such information is vital, not only to preserve the history of the Gikuyu people, but also to help European's perhaps understand the culture better, so they can attempt to incorporate vital components of the society into their plans for progress.

## Unity

The theme of unity is another that is strong throughout the novel, and this theme is a central component to the culture of the Gikuyu. Kenyatta points out several times in the book that the entire culture is based on the cooperation of others to provide a strong basis for a community. First, there is unity in the family. The family unit makes up the first component of the Gikuyu society, as does the extended family unit. These units call on one another for help, for education, for land, for food, and for support for many rituals. Even the deceased family members are called on at times to pray to God, as the presentation of a cohesive family unit, including ancestors, is vital to the religious aspects of the society. In addition to this sense of unity, the age group is also a primary component to the culture, and one that adds another layer of unity. Members of an age group spend their entire lives with one another, and go through the many stages of life together, as a group. This group is vital for the progress of the entire community. Still further, the elders form another level of unity for the group, and many of their rituals rely on the entire community for support. Without such unity, many of the tribal customs would be useless. This unity, according to Kenyatta, is one of the most important aspects of the Gikuyu tribe, and one that is threatened by ideas of European progress in the area.

# Style

## Perspective

The novel alternates between using a first person and third person perspective. For much of the book, the author uses a third person perspective as he discusses the culture of the Gikuyu from the standpoint of one who is examining the culture. This is beneficial, since it conveys a sense of scientific reasoning and anthropological study, which is the bases for the book. This perspective allows the author to explain the rituals and customs of the culture in specific detail without interjecting unnecessary emotional information. This helps to create a reliable narration of the concepts in the novel.

At times, however, Kenyatta is able to interject his own experiences into the novel, using a first person perspective. As the son of a Gikuyu medicine man, Kenyatta has been witness to and participated in many of the rituals, customs and social situations he discusses in the book. As such, Kenyatta is able to explain in great detail the reasons for many of the customs in the novel that some of different cultures may not understand. This helps to provide a deeper understanding of the culture that would otherwise be impossible to convey. However, this personal interest in the lives of the Gikuyu also makes Kenyatta a somewhat biased author. Several times in the novel, Kenyatta is critical of the European missionaries who have overtaken the area and is supportive of customs in the Gikuyu culture that others find barbaric and improper. While this bias lends to the credibility of the author as a passionate member of the Gikuyu community, it also presents a one sided argument against European expansion into the area, and against European attempts to help the Gikuyu nation.

## Tone

The tone of the novel ranges again with the perspective used at the time within the novel. In some cases, such as when Kenyatta is explaining the concept of land tenure or the ideas of ancestor worship, the tone of the novel is instructional and objective. The author seeks only to convey factual information in these sections, and his presentation of this factual information is without any personal reflection. In some areas, however, the novel becomes more combative, as Kenyatta seeks to present his own ideas of European expansion into the Gikuyu nation, and seeks to defend some of the customs of the tribe. The tone does lend bias to the novel, but also serves to help show Kenyatta's passion about his ideas, and of the Gikuyu tribe in general. When Kenyatta defends the educational system of the Gikuyu, his tone is combative but also logical, in that he presents his arguments in well thought out, reasoned ways that help to explain his concepts, rather than simply bash the ideas of others. In this way, Kenyatta's tone, even when not objective, only helps him to convey a deeper understanding of the themes within the novel.

## Structure

The novel is 326 pages in length. The book begins with an introduction by B. Malinowski, a professor of Anthropology at the University of London, and a friend and teacher of Kenyatta. Next, the author presents a preface that thanks relevant individuals for their assistance and introduces several of the concepts of the novel. There are then twelve chapters of unequal length, each of which is numbered and titled. Each chapter presents an entirely new topic involving the Gikuyu people. Following these twelve chapters is a conclusion by the author, which summarizes the main themes presented within the book. A glossary follows, which presents a listing of the Gikuyu words used in the novel and their meaning. Finally, there is an index referencing main ideas in the book and their location within the novel. The information in the novel is presented with clarity, and although there are several uses of Gikuyu words, each word is explained, both in the text and in the glossary. This helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the language, as well as of the culture in general.

## Quotes

"...we have to recognize the fact that an African who looks at things from the tribal point of view and at the same time from that of western civilization, experiences the tragedy of the modern world in an especially acute manner." Introduction, p. ix

"For the extinction of a kinship groups means cutting off the ancestral spirits from visiting the earth, because there is no one left to communicate with them." Tribal Origin and Kinship System, p. 15

"The Gikuyu lost most of their lands through their magnanimity, for the Gikuyu country was never wholly conquered by force of arms, but the people were put under the ruthless domination of European imperialism through the insidious trickery of hypocritical treaties." The Gikuyu System of Land Tenure, p. 47

"Apart from these legends and stories which have been handed down from generation to generation, we have no other records to show exactly when and how this evolution took place." Industries, p. 70

"Each official statement of educational policy repeats this well-worn declaration that the aim of education must be the building of character and not the mere acquisition of knowledge. But European practice falls short of this principle; knowledge is the dominating objective in the European method of teaching in Africa as a whole and, as long as exams rule, it is hard to see how anything else can be given primary importance." System of Education, p. 117

"This policy has been based on preconceived ideas that the African cultures are 'primitive' and, as such, belong to the past and can only be looked upon as antiquarian relics fit only for museums." System of Education, p. 120

"In the eyes of the Gikuyu people, the submission to a despotic rule of any particular man or a group, white or black, is the greatest humiliation to mankind." The Gikuyu System of Government, p. 189

"It is only when humans are in real need that they must approach [Ngai], without fear of disturbing him and incurring his wrath." Religion and Ancestor Worship, p. 229

"...until recently it was the prevalent opinion that the Gospel could be better preached and interpreted to ignorant and degraded savages by less intellectual and less educated men." The New Religion in East Africa, p. 261

"The education, especially reading and writing, was regarded as the white man's magic, and thus the young men were very eager to acquire the new magical power..." The New Religion in East Africa, p. 262



"[Witchcraft] is used exclusively for nefarious purposes and, as such, its practice is against the ethical and moral laws of the community." *Magical and Medical Practices*, p. 288

"He realizes he must fight unceasingly for his own complete emancipation; for without this he is doomed to remain the prey of rival imperialisms, which in every successive year will drive their fangs more deeply into his vitality and strength." *Conclusion*, p. 306



## Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel, Kenyatta stresses the need for the European "intruder" to gain an understanding of Gikuyu culture in order to effectively educate the natives. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not? Why does Kenyatta believe this is true?

Kenyatta defends the use of the clitoridectomy in chapter six because the practice is embedded in the culture and societal laws of the group. Do you think this argument is valid? Why or why not? What are your opinions of the procedure? Why do you feel this way? Be sure to explain your answer using information from the book.

Explain the marriage proposal and marriage process. Kenyatta notes the European misunderstanding of this custom. What does he say causes the misunderstanding? How could such a misunderstanding be solved?

What is the difference in the Gikuyu culture between ancestral worship and the worship of God? What are each used for? Is this distinction important? Why or why not?

There is much focus in the book on how a sense of unity, partnership, and community responsibility is fostered in the Gikuyu culture. What aspects of the culture foster this sense of community? Why is this important? What are consequences of ignoring such responsibilities?

Kenyatta notes there is no homosexuality within the Gikuyu tribe. What reason does he give for this? Do you agree with his statement? Why or why not? Be sure to explain your answer in terms of Kenyatta's argument.

Why is land important to the Gikuyu people? What does the land provide for them? How? What does land ownership symbolize? What are benefits of owning land? What happens to those who do not own land?