



A Cultural Guide to the Luhya People

The Luhya homeland is located in western Kenya just north of Lake Victoria. The Luhya represent 14% of the population in Kenya and live in a fairly densely populated area surrounded by farmland. Based on their language, they are classified as Bantu people. The word Bantu means "human beings." There are eighteen sub-tribes of the Luhya, each one is called a "house" and is related by linguistic and cultural characteristics.

If you visit Common Ground Program, you will be introduced to the Luhya people.

History

It is widely believed that the Luhya migrated from either Sudan or Ethiopia. They had a ruler called Mumia who gained recognition as their chief. The Luhya were at war with their Nilotic neighbors the Teso, Nandi, Maasai, and Luo when they first settled in their homeland. Not surprisingly, many Luhya still chose not to intermarry with these neighbors. The Gusii and the Luhya, both agricultural tribes of Bantu origin, occupied the land between the Western slopes of Central Highlands and the Lake Victoria basin. The Nilotic Luo inhabited the lake basin and lived on fishing and subsistence farming.

Religion

Christianity was first introduced to the Luhya in the early 1900's by missionaries. Today, although Christianity still has a strong base within the Luhya culture, they have maintained some of their traditional beliefs blended with their more modern biblical beliefs. The traditional Luhya religion featured animism and spirits. Funerals are held in high regard as a custom to please and honor ancestral spirits. Today, the Luhya practice Christianity and they refer to God as "Nyasaye". They also believe in "Were" the God of Mount Elgon whom they worship using portions of the Bible to educate their converts.

Economy

The western Kenya area, which is home to the Luhya, possesses rich and fertile highland soil. Because of this, agriculture is a large part of the economy. The Luhya raise finger millet, sweet potatoes, peas, bananas, sorghum, and livestock. Cash crops such as sugar cane and cotton are also sold in the markets on Lake Victoria and the surrounding areas. Many Luhya have given up their tribal ways of life and have moved into towns and cities to find work in the urban communities. They also raise cattle and sheep; the boys look after the herds while the girls help in the fields and with food preparation.

Language

There are about 3 million speakers of Luyia in the Lake Victoria area of Kenya. The word Luhya actually refers to the people, whereas Luyia refers to the language. Not all Luhya speak the same language; some of the various languages spoken are Bukusu, Nyore, Hanga, Saamia, and Ragooli. Whether or not there is a definitive Luhya language is debatable. The most common languages used among the different sub-tribes are Swahili and English.

Family

Between Luhya it is not only possible to inherit the wife of the brother (okhukerama), but also to marry the sister or cousin of a wife, with her in life or after death (eshibeyo). While some groups accept small animals such as sheep or goats as dowry, among other groups these are absolutely unacceptable. This kind of offering could be an insult to the future relatives. In a family the oldest child (omwana wambery) and the youngest (makhokwo) have special privileges in many situations, including the inheritance of properties. Maternal uncles have special privileges on their nephews.

Current Luhya Issues

With an estimated annual birth rate of 3.5%, one of the highest in the world, Kenya's population is expected to triple by the year 2020. This rate of population growth poses particular problems for Kenya, given the limited availability of arable land. Only 18% of Kenya's land can support agriculture without irrigation. These regions are now generally overpopulated. This population growth rate reflects, an increasing birth rate with a reduced death rate, particularly infant mortality, resulting from improved standards of nutrition and hygiene.

The Luhya in particular are struggling to maintain their language and traditions due to encroaching modernity and intermingling with outside groups. However, the Luhya are among those tribes that actively educate their young people about their tribe's culture and traditions.