KAMBA LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Kikamba is a Niger-Congo Bantu language. The most common dialects include: Masaku (Machakos), South Kitui, North Kitui, and Mumoni (Kilungu). These regions are in Machakos County, Kitui County and Makueni County. The Machakos dialect is considered the standard variety of the four dialects and has been used in the translation of the Bible and most Kikamba books. The Kamba have a widespread art and music tradition. Basketry, pottery and sculpture work from the Kamba tribe can be found everywhere from Nairobi to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. Although Christianity is becoming increasingly prevalent among the Kamba, traditional religion is still important. Kamba traditional religion is based on a high god called Ngai and various ancestral spirits. The Kamba believe that when one dies he or she simply moves to the world of spirits called aimu. The Kamba also believe in witchcraft and magic, and use diviners and sacrifice to communicate with the spirit world.

The Family unit (Musyi) is central to Kamba culture. Men are traditionally involved in economic activities such as trading, hunting, or farming. Women are traditionally responsible for farming a plot of land and providing food for the family although in contemporary times women hold the same occupations as their male counterparts. Women also take care of the children and are seen as having ultimate authority and knowledge by children. Children refer to their mothers as 'Mwaitu' (our One). The extended family structure is very important and the line between nieces and nephews is often blurred. Names are also important in Kamba family culture. The first boy is traditionally named after the paternal grandfather and the second after the maternal grandfather. Girls are named in a similar fashion but with respect to their grandmothers.

The staple foods of the Kamba, are isyo, which is made of maize and beans, and Muthokoi, which is made of pounded maize and beans.
WHO SPEAKS KIKAMBA?

The Ukambani has been home to the Kamba for at least four or five centuries. The Kamba traditional creation story holds that Mulungu or Ngai (God), who created the universe, also created the first Kamba man and woman and placed them on top of Mount Nzaui in the fertile Mbooni Hills. The Kamba traditionally were both traders and nomads. They traded cane beer, ivory, brass amulets, tools, weapons, millet, cattle and ndawa sya miti (medicinal plants). In contemporary times, the Kamba are still traders and agriculturalists but also engage in many professions in larger cities such as Nairobi. The Kamba traditionally organized themselves into clans called Mbai, flexible social and territorial groups based on lineage on the father’s side of the family. Male elders oversaw and governed the Mbai. Several Mbai living in the same geographic area formed villages called Utui. Government-appointed chiefs and assistant chiefs have since replaced the male elders but the Mbai culture still exists.

WHY STUDY KAMBA?

Kamba, also sometimes referred to as Mukamba or Akamba in plural form, is a major language of Kenya with 4 million speakers and growing. There is also a small Kamba speaking population in Tanzania. The Kamba make up about 11% of Kenya’s population. Kikamba is widely spoken on various radio and television stations, particularly in Kenya’s Eastern province. The Kamba people call the land in which they reside Ukambani. Students may be interested in studying Kamba who want to study abroad in Kenya, work for an NGO, work for the government, or learn about the rich cultural and historical traditions of an indigenous Kenyan tribe might want to study Kikamba.

Kamba sculpture works are well-known throughout the world

Traditional Kamba music

A Kamba girl

A cultural celebration

Traditional Kamba clothing

Kamba men in traditional dress