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# Encyclopedia of World Cultures

## Volume IX

### AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Iteso

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ETHNONYMS: Bamia, Itesyo, Omia, Wamia

### Orientation

**Identification.** The Iteso comprise the second-largest ethnic group in Uganda and a significant portion of the non-Bantu-speaking minority in Kenya's Western Province. The Iteso of Uganda have not been well described, but significant studies exist of the political and economic dimensions of colonial rule in their territory. For the Iteso of Kenya, there are substantial studies of social organization, social change, and ritual processes. The Iteso have an undeserved reputation in Kenya for cultural conservatism, whereas in Uganda they have been described as being among the most economically adaptable of people. In common with many of the peoples of the Kenya-Uganda border region, they have a history of extensive multiethnic contact and have come to share many customs with neighboring peoples, although not at the expense of their identity or cultural distinctiveness.

**Location.** In Uganda the great majority of Iteso occupy Soroti District and some of the adjacent areas in the northeastern part of the country. Farther east and south, they constitute about half of the population of Bukedi District. These Iteso are separated from their more northern Ugandan colleagues by Bantu-speaking peoples, notably the Gisu, Banyole, and Bagwere. They are not separated spatially from the Kenyan Iteso of Busia District in Western Province, with whom they share a common border. The Iteso of Soroti District, Uganda, are called the Northern Iteso in the ethnographic literature; the Iteso of Bukedi District, Uganda, and Busia District, Kenya, are called the Southern Iteso. The Southern Iteso occupy the foothills of Mount Elgon and the surrounding savanna. The Northern Iteso environment varies from low and wet near the shores of Lake Kyoga and its neighboring swamps to high and arid in the north. In both areas, annual rainfall is separated into two wet seasons—the "short" and "long" rains. It varies considerably from year to year and locality to locality, averaging 150 centimeters a year in Kenya. The Iteso have always moved their households in response to changes in economy, politics, and climate. After the 1950s,

land scarcity and colonial (later state) control prevented the Iteso from adapting their economy to the environment.

**Demography.** The latest reliable census for Uganda (1969) lists 600,000 Iteso living in Soroti District and 65,000 living in Bukedi. Approximately 150,000 Iteso resided in Kenya in 1979. Population densities range from about 32 per square kilometer in the more arid portions of northern Uganda to over 500 in the densely populated areas of Kenya. In Kenya, where the population has increased dramatically in the late twentieth century, the majority of Iteso are now under 15 years of age. Life expectancy has also increased, but recent figures are not available. Until the 1960s, half of all children died before reaching adulthood.

**Linguistic Affiliation.** The Iteso speak an Eastern Nilotic language. The Eastern Nilotic Branch of Nilotic is divided into the Teso-speaking and Maa-speaking (Maasai) branches. The Teso Branch is further divided into speakers of Ateso (the language of the Iteso) and those of the Karamojong cluster, including the Turkana, Ikaramojong, Jie, and Dodoth in Kenya and Uganda.

### History and Cultural Relations

Iteso traditions relate that they originated somewhere in what is now Sudan and moved south over a period of centuries. It is not possible to calculate the time of this movement. A body of Iteso is said to have separated from the Karamojong and moved further south. This may have been a very early separation because the clan names and ritual customs associated with the second of two distinctive groups of Karamojong and Jie people are not found among the Iteso. Unlike the other Teso-speaking ethnic groups, the Iteso have never been transhumant or nomadic; agriculture has played as significant a role in their social, economic, and expressive lives as cattle have among the other groups.

Iteso clan names reveal a history of long-standing ethnic interactions. Names of Bantu and Northern Nilotic origin are found among them. The Iteso were probably well established in their northern Uganda heartland by the mid-eighteenth century, when they began to move farther south. The history of the Iteso and neighboring peoples has not been extensively documented. Traditions recorded among the JoPadhola indicate there were two waves of Iteso migration. The first was family based and peaceful. It was followed by a more extensive and aggressive migration that left the Iteso in control of a large swath of territory that by 1850 extended as far as the western highlands of Kenya. European travelers record extensive fear of Iteso warriors; nonetheless, the Iteso soon suffered reverses that caused them to draw back to their current territory in Kenya. Since then, the Northern and Southern Iteso territories have been separated. Relations with other societies throughout the precolonial period were alternately peaceful and acrimonious. As a result of spatial intermixture and intermarriage, Iteso elements and customs can be found among neighboring peoples and vice versa. Intermarriage has always been extensive. It is likely that ethnic identity hardened during the colonial period, as it has since, when resources such as land were newly defined as belonging to "tribes."

The Iteso in Kenya and Uganda were conquered by African colonial agents of the British and indirectly ruled through them. Western Kenya was transferred from Uganda to Kenya in 1902. As a result, the economic and political

histories of the Northern Iteso and the part of the Southern Iteso living in Kenya have taken vastly different courses. At independence, the Ugandan Iteso were far more wealthy than their Kenyan counterparts. This difference resulted from the status of Uganda as a protectorate reserved for "African development" and Western Kenya's status as a labor reserve for the European-owned farms in the "White Highlands." As a minority people in Kenya, the Iteso are not well known and have been viewed with some suspicion by surrounding peoples. On the other hand, the Kenyan Iteso have not suffered from the political destabilization in Uganda since 1970. Events in the colonial period and since have elaborated cultural differences among the Iteso that were regional in origin. The language of the Northern Iteso, for example, was extensively influenced by the Baganda people, who ruled the Iteso on behalf of the British colonial regime, whereas that of the Southern Iteso is in some ways closer to Turkana. As a result of living among Bantu- and Nilotic-speaking peoples, the Southern Iteso have probably been subject to a greater variety of cultural influences. The economic infrastructure is far more developed in Kenya than in Uganda, and cash income is also higher, reversing a pattern found in the 1960s. The Kenyan Iteso undertook considerable labor migration: most men between the ages of 60 and 80 have worked outside their home territory; many served in places such as Burma during World War II. In the early 1980s government-sponsored cooperatives that ran cotton ginneries in western Kenya failed to pay for cotton delivered by the Iteso and others. Consequently, they began experimenting with new cash crops, such as tobacco, grown with the aid of loans from large agricultural companies. In the early 1990s there was a partial revival of cotton growing, and the ginneries have been resuscitated.

### Settlements

The culture and social organization of the Northern Iteso has been sparsely studied. The material that follows refers primarily to the Southern Iteso. Settlements are dispersed: each household is usually situated at the edge of its own land but is frequently adjacent to other households. In the immediate precolonial period, Iteso households were combined into larger settlements centered around an important person called the *lok'auriaart*, "man of the cattle-resting place." For a considerable period of time after the establishment of colonial rule, these important men dominated decisions to settle, but households were increasingly dispersed. The primary organization in terms of which households currently cooperate and interact is the *adukete*, "those who have built together." This is a loosely defined territorial unit whose members do not always agree about its membership, not unlike an urban neighborhood. It is a network rather than a corporate group. Members of the *adukete* feel an obligation to help one another and settle disputes among themselves. Because people no longer move their households at will, there is a greater tendency for members of the same lineage to live near one another in settlements.

### Economy

**Subsistence and Commercial Activities.** Eleusine (finger millet) and sorghum are major food crops. In the 1920s colonial officials introduced cassava as a supplement to these staples and as a famine-relief food. Cassava, which the Iteso cook

with finger millet and sorghum, is planted in fields that would otherwise be fallow. Women grow vegetables in gardens next to their sleeping houses and gather various wild foods, especially mushrooms and flying ants, a delicacy. Men herd cattle, and the grazing of animals was regarded as a commonly held right until the late 1960s and early 1970s; there have been conflicts over the right to graze since then, and some people have fenced their fields. The primary cash crop was cotton, which was grown by men and women in separate plots (and for individual income) during the short rains. As a result, the labor demands for cash crops did not conflict with demands for subsistence farming. Many households have teams of oxen and plows; others trade their labor for the use of a richer household's teams. Newly introduced cash crops such as maize and tobacco are grown during the long rains and have caused considerable concern about how people will manage the conflicting demands of cash and subsistence farming. The primary commercial activities are trading in cattle, owning small shops, and (in Kenya) employment in such public-sector jobs as local administration and schoolteaching.

**Industrial Arts.** The primary occupations are carpentry, tailoring, butchery, and various indigenous skills, such as making the boards used for *elee*, a game of calculation played with seeds, which is the Iteso national pastime. Few of these are full time occupations. In some areas there are women potters, but blacksmithing is unknown. The Iteso of Kenya traded with the Samia people for their iron goods in the precolonial period.

**Trade.** There were a few markets at independence; some have grown much larger with the addition of government facilities such as schools and dispensaries. Market and cattle-trading days rotate among different major markets. These have also become centers for an extensive trade in dried fish and goods such as used clothing imported from the United States. Gas-operated grinding mills are now frequently found at market centers. Women pay for the grinding of foodstuffs through the sale of beer they have brewed and small amounts of grain and vegetables.

**Division of Labor.** The division of labor among the Iteso is characterized by the radical separation of the sexes in subsistence and ritual activities. Men are responsible for building houses and clearing land. Both men and women plant, weed, and harvest, but women are solely responsible for processing food crops, including threshing, grinding, and cooking. Although public rituals have largely disappeared among the Iteso, domestic and life-cycle rituals are regularly performed by women. Ritual is defined as part of their work—protecting the lives and health of the children of their households. Within neighborhoods, households regularly cooperate in tasks such as harvesting cotton; in this way, individual harvests are quickly garnered, and labor is fluidly distributed in a period of peak demand. The social mechanism underlying this cooperation is the beer party, which is also a context for cooperation between husbands and wives. People who do not work cooperatively and attend beer parties are judged to be *epog* ("proud" and thoughtless of other people's needs)—a very serious insult to the Iteso.

**Land Tenure.** Land was freely available during the precolonial period. Only improvements—for example, trees planted on the land—were owned. Today such trees are a source of considerable conflict because people own trees on

land belonging to someone else. Land was first sold in the mid-1950s, but registration did not begin until the early 1970s. Land was never held by corporate groups such as lineages, and thus the transition to individual landholdings was accompanied by less conflict than elsewhere in Kenya. Important men anticipated the impending land scarcity and moved their former clients to large, newly claimed land parcels. For the first time, some Iteso in Kenya are unable to grow enough food to feed themselves. They have to work at very low rates for wealthier, usually salaried, people.

### Kinship

**Kin Groups and Descent.** The Iteso are a patrilineal people with three levels of patrilineal descent, each defined by the activities associated with it. The nominal clans are nonexogamous name-bearing units associated with Iteso historical narratives and ideas about the inheritance of character. Nominal clans are divided into clans, within which marriage is forbidden. These exogamous clans are further divided into lineages, with genealogies three to five generations deep, whose primary duty is to supply support and attendance on ritual occasions such as funeral rites. The more closely related descent groups are bound by ties of sentiment but also divided by intrahousehold conflicts over property, which have emerged in the late twentieth century. Descent groups are not property-holding units but do figure significantly in Iteso definitions of their social universe.

**Kinship Terminology.** The Iteso use Hawaiian cousin terminology with bifurcate terms for the first ascending generation and descending generation from Ego.

### Marriage and Family

**Marriage.** Marriages are defined from two points of view: they are alliances between spouses but also between two exogamous clans. The first alliance is evident in the practical arrangements of setting up a household, and the second is expressed in ritual and healing practices. More than one-third of all men and a majority of all women are married polygynously. Although the number of men with four or more wives has decreased since the precolonial and early colonial period, it is possible that the total number of people married polygynously is increasing in the rural areas, as in many other Kenyan societies. The amount of bride-wealth has remained the same since the mid-twentieth century, but the time taken to hand over the ten to fifteen head of cattle has changed, from almost immediately after the birth of the first child to an extensive period of more than twenty years. Postmarital residence tends to be virilocal for women and neopatrilocal for men, who soon move into a new home on family land. Divorce is rare; even marriages said to end in divorce are often reconciled when the estranged wife returns after an extended period of time. Bride-wealth helps constrain the incidence of divorce because a man who receives cattle through his sister's marriage would have to return the bride-wealth (on which his own marriage depends) if her divorce were finalized. The result is a series of disrupted marital exchanges.

**Domestic Unit.** Domestic groups are established among the Iteso when a man marries a woman for the first time. Shortly thereafter they set up a spatially independent household, but under normal conditions, the husband's mother

supervises her daughter-in-law. Most Iteso men strive for more than one wife; polygynous unions are frequent, but in the late twentieth century they have been opposed by women. Households are composed of separate "houses" composed of mothers and their children. Cattle from bride-wealth are supposed to belong to this "house." Relations between full siblings are the most solidary in Iteso society. Children leave their natal household at marriage, and women most often go to live with their youngest son when he has married, effectively separating husband and wife at the end of their married life. As a result, Iteso households are complex but not generationally extended. Scarcity of land may change this pattern in areas where population is especially dense.

**Inheritance.** Men leave three kinds of property: land, cattle, and personal property such as shops and cash. Sons assume the right to family land when they marry; when an elder dies, any remaining land is divided among his unmarried sons. Cattle are inherited by the sons of each mother. Men may control the cattle that come into "houses" through their daughters' marriages, but at death only the full brothers of the married daughter have inheritance rights to these cattle and to cattle assigned to their mother from their father's residual herd. Male children without the cattle they must have before they can marry may be given excess cattle belonging to another "house." Other property is divided equally among all the sons. Women do not inherit male property, only female personal property such as clothing and household effects.

**Socialization.** Socialization is not elaborately ritualized among the Iteso. Weaning occurs at about 1 to 2 years of age. Children are indulgently treated until they go to school or begin to take up work tasks. Marriage is the most abrupt transition for women; it is somewhat traumatic—especially if it is with a much older man. Men's status transitions are easier because they do not move far away from their natal households. Attending boarding school, which is common in Kenya for the children who manage to get to a secondary school, may likewise be a traumatic experience. The primary context for local cultural learning was the grandmother's hut, where many children used to spend considerable time learning folklore and customs, enjoying storytelling and the expressive arts. The expansion of schooling has severely attenuated this significant setting for socialization. As a result, many young people currently grow up with very limited knowledge of their culture. Formal schooling will probably bring about extensive changes in the body of Iteso knowledge.

### Sociopolitical Organization

**Social and Political Organization.** The Iteso live in territorial units of increasing scale: the household; the neighborhood; government-defined units (the headman's area and the sublocation); the location (headed by a government-appointed chief); and the division, which also tends to correspond to the constituency for the Iteso member of parliament. In addition, the Iteso of Kenya recognize three dialect groups, which have had different external cultural influences.

The precolonial Iteso were organized into territorial units called *itemwan* ("fireplaces"—called "sections" in the anthropological literature; sing. *item*), which were the largest-scale political units and were organized for defense and political expansion. An *itemwan* may have been led by a successful war leader. The age system appears to have been extremely

different from one part of the Iteso territory to another. One constant element was the rituals associated with retirement from the status of elder. After performing them, retired men could no longer marry and were believed to have privileged access to the divinity.

Women's forms of social organization include special, ritually defined friendships, labor cooperatives, groups formed to heal illness caused by spirit possession, and, since the mid-1980s, church groups.

**Social Control.** The feud functioned as a significant mechanism for social control among the Iteso during the precolonial period. All members of a lineage were held responsible for the actions of their fellow lineage members. Witches and deviants, such as persons who committed incest, were either expelled or punished. Since the advent of colonial rule, neighborhood disputes have been adjudicated by a council of male elders and the headman. Disputes that cannot be settled at this level can be taken to the chief's meeting or to the district court. Values associated with ideals of male and female achievement, particularly those connected with childbearing, are very significant for the Iteso. Even the words for "adult male" and "husband" and "adult female" and "wife" are the same. All adult Iteso strive to become successful parents, and their sense of efficacy is tied to their reproductive status. Women are closely supervised from marriage through the end of their fertile period. One of the consequences of joining a cult of spirit possession is to provide contexts in which male supervision of female activities is not appropriate.

**Conflict.** The Iteso are a very egalitarian people and have a quite justified reputation for independent action. They tend to settle conflicts before they reach the formal legal system. There are a number of sources of conflict. The first is interethnic: the Iteso still see themselves as disputing with their traditional enemies. Territorial disputes occur pertaining to the number of seats the Iteso should have in parliament and to the boundaries of the location in which they live. During the 1970s, when land was first registered, land disputes were a major source of conflict—especially between sets of half-siblings or the descendants of in-laws who had chosen to live together. Disputes between neighbors (over cattle grazing) and between husbands and wives (over the allocation of labor) are now frequent. These are the product of land scarcity and changing patterns of cash cropping, which now conflict with the labor demands of subsistence.

### *Religion and Expressive Culture*

**Religious Beliefs.** The Iteso believe in a divinity with different aspects, variously called *akuj*, "high," or *edeke*, "illness." Other entities in their pantheon included the Ajokin, little spirits of the bush, who invited people who met them to feast, providing they kept the invitation a secret. Under missionary influence, the Ajokin have come to be identified with the devil. *Ipara*, spirits of the dead, figure prominently in their lives, but there are no special shrines for propitiation. The *Ipara* are selfish and do not enforce good behavior so much as demand propitiation. When they possess people, the *Ipara* bring with them exotic spirits from other cultures who harm or make ill the people possessed. Catholic missionaries have had considerable influence among the Iteso, and almost all of them had been baptized by 1990. Women are especially involved in the church. The African priests at the missions

have successfully advocated the organization of local cooperative groups called "Christian communities."

**Religious Practitioners.** Most Iteso religious practices are either associated with transitions in the life cycle or are ways of managing misfortune and illness. Women are the primary religious practitioners. The performance of domestic rituals is defined as part of their "work." In addition to domestic ritual, women predominate in cults of spirit possession. Men serve as diviners and healers, and some specialize in "blocking" the effects of the spirits of the dead. In the precolonial period, men who had been retired through the age system acted as intermediaries between the divinity and the people.

**Ceremonies.** Domestic ceremonies take place in the household and include naming rituals, the complex rites associated with marriage and birth, and rituals held to heal ill children. Mortuary rituals also take place within the household and involve a series of ceremonies that invoke the entire complex of social relations of the dead person. The rituals of the age system took place outside the home in the "bush" and were organized in terms of the symbolic attributes of various animals. Domestic rituals and healing rituals such as those associated with spirit possession draw on much the same symbolic repertoire, a good deal of which involves the ritual dramatization of female agricultural and child-rearing tasks.

**Arts.** The plastic arts include pottery making by women and musical-instrument making by men, some house decoration, and, traditionally, cicatrization for women. These are all purely aesthetic and have no religious significance. The verbal arts—which include a cycle of trickster tales, proverbs, female storytelling, and male rhetoric—are far more developed.

**Medicine.** Iteso medical practices are derived from multiple sources and include a range of Western medicines purchased at stores or obtained at government clinics; locally known herbal cures; and resort to religious practitioners, such as curers of illnesses caused by spirits of the dead.

**Death and Afterlife.** At death, the body is separated from its *eparait* (spirit), which goes to live in the bush. The spirit ideally moves deeper and deeper into the bush, but in practice many spirits return to bother the living. Spirits of the dead are greedy: they require offerings of food and drink. As a result of mission influence, spirits of the dead have come to be associated by some Iteso with the Ajokin, little creatures of the bush, and both of these have come to be associated with the devil. The skeletons of dead people are exhumed after a number of years so rituals can be performed to "cool" them and make them more kindly disposed to the living. Older Iteso are very concerned that their children will bury them in coffins and prevent this practice, thus suffocating the dead in the earth. Funeral rituals are a major focus of Iteso ritual life, and many Iteso point out that they are a primary reason for having children: "Without children, who will sacrifice at the head of your grave?"

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IVAN KARP

## Jacobites

ETHNONYMS: none

### Orientation

The Jacobites, today numbering some half a million, adhere to a branch of Christianity that is most commonly known as the Jacobite church. They are to be found mostly in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Following the Mongol invasions in 1258, some emigrated to northern Mount Lebanon, where they settled among the Maronites, their spiritual cousins. There are settlements in northern Syria—around Homs (Emessa) and Hama and also in Damascus—organized into some six parishes and subscribing to the Catholic branch. Those around Aleppo date from after World War I. Jacobites in Syria numbered some 100,000 in the mid-1970s, with about a quarter of them being Catholic.

### History and Cultural Relations

The Jacobites have been referred to historically as members of the "West Christian Church," also of the "Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East." Jacobite missionary activity, dating back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, led to the establishment of a branch in the Malabar region of southwestern India. The apostle Saint Thomas is credited with laying the foundation for the Malabar church.

The Jacobites came into being under this name as a consequence of the intense Christological controversies that took place during the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Arian heresy—which stressed that only the Father was the true God, the Son being subordinate—prevailed (not to be overturned until the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381). Grounded as they were in the Aramaic culture and history of the Syro-Iraqi region, it was inevitable that they would be drawn away from the Greco-Roman church, which eventually triumphed as the official religion of the empire.

The Jacobites were one of the Eastern churches that espoused Monophysitism, a by-product of the Council of Chalcedon of 451, which was declared heretical when Emperor Justin I caused fifty bishops who espoused Monophysitism to be excommunicated at the Synod of Constantinople, in 518.

Monophysites henceforth were to be suppressed at the highest level of the state church. Reprieve was gained under the Empress Theodora, who urged a policy of reconciliation on her husband, Emperor Justinian, and who was therefore hailed as a champion of Monophysitism. This policy changed quickly under Justin II, however.

The Monophysites of Syria came to be known as Jacobites, probably named after Jacob Baradai, a monk who lived in a monastery near Edessa (present-day Urfa). He journeyed to Constantinople in 540 to plead the cause of Monophysitism. Imprisoned for fifteen years with other bishops who shared his convictions, he was subsequently consecrated bishop of his sect and sent to Syria to organize it. He later consecrated Severus, who was to succeed Severus as patriarch of Antioch in 512. Some say he ordained two patriarchs, eighty-nine bishops, and countless members of the clergy. He is often called "Bishop of Edessa," but, as attested by the chronicler Gregory Bar Hebraeus, he had no fixed see. According to another tradition, the name derived from Jacob, the biblical patriarch. One Jacobite deacon alleged that his people were descendants of Jewish converts to Christianity, and still another source claims that the name came from Saint James, brother of Jesus and first bishop of Jerusalem. Regardless of the name's origin, before long the Arab tribes in the region that had been Christianized came under the leadership of this church, including the two dominant ones—the Taghlib in lower Iraq and the Banu Ghassān in lower Syria. They anchored the see of their faith at Antioch and, like the Syrian Orthodox and Byzantine-rite patriarchates, refused to surrender to the dictates of Constantinople.

Antioch had been the preeminent seat of early Christianity (it was the place where Christians first declared themselves), and it remained so until the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which sought to diminish its centrality by elevating the bishopric of Jerusalem to a patriarchate. The Jacobites were driven from Antioch after the death of Severus in 538. The term "Jacobite" was not even their own choice, but was given to them by their Greek Orthodox rivals. They readily accepted it, however.

The Jacobites' conflict with the Greeks, as with the other Eastern Christians who were opposed to them, was both theological and national, or ethnic: it was a contest between Syriac thought and Hellenistic culture. Moreover, the Christianity of Antioch was greatly influenced by the Jewish faith, as preached