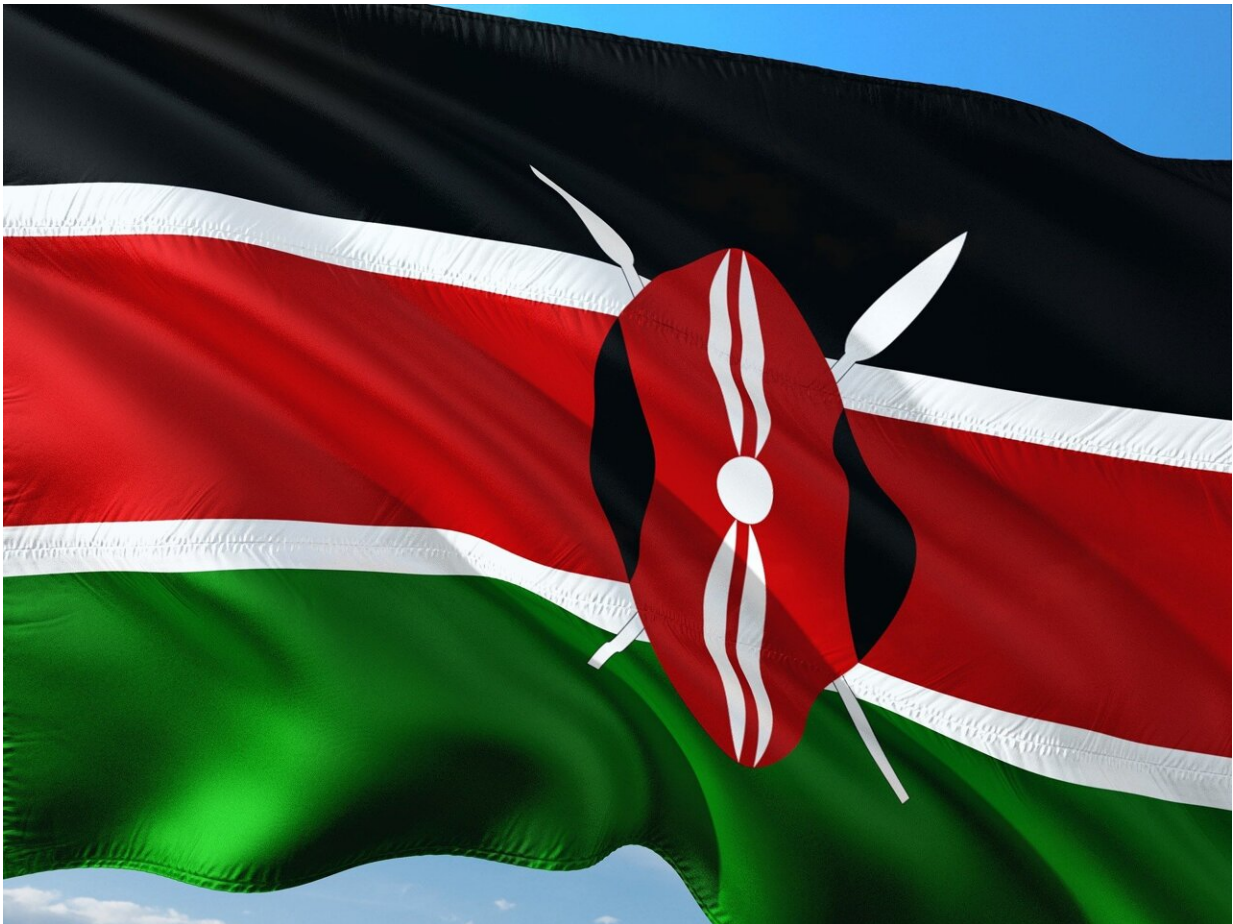


Atheism in Kenya: Why accurate numbers are hard to come by

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The accuracy of statistics on religious affiliations in sub-Saharan Africa

is questionable. This makes it difficult to assess religious trends.

The issue has come to the fore recently in Kenya with the release of statistics around [religious affiliation](#). In particular, the fact that the census showed that [1.6% of Kenyans](#) identified themselves as atheists, agnostics or as following no religion in particular. In the parlance of the census, they were classified as "nones."

But is this number accurate? I think it's doubtful. There are two major reasons why.

The first is that religious statistics are highly politicized because they're associated with ethnicity and politics. Across the continent, there has generally been a tendency by politicians to co-opt religious leadership for their campaigns.

[According to some surveys](#), people generally trust [religious leaders](#) more than politicians. It, therefore, makes sense for politicians to enlist these leaders.

Anthropologists Yonatan N Gez, Nadia Beider and Helga Dickow point to a number of examples in their [study](#) on this issue. In Chad, for instance, due to the protracted civil war between 1965 and 1979, the 2009 census was withheld due to implications for the demographic balance of Muslims and Christians. And in Nigeria, Muslim leaders threatened to boycott the national census if the category of "religion" was included in the questionnaire.

The academics warn that these examples show that census reports in Africa should not be taken at face value when it comes to religious affiliation.

The second reason that the accuracy of statistics on religious affiliation

is flawed has to do with the way census questionnaires are designed, particularly around the category of "nones." The use of the category varies widely. In some countries, it is used to encapsulate a range of groups that are not affiliated with religion. In others, it's left out completely. [A study](#) of 105 census reports in Africa found that only 64 employed the category of "nones."

These problems explain why [census data](#) could be showing a stable and very low percentage of African "nones." This runs counter to the global trend of [declining religiosity](#).

The difficulties in correctly projecting "religious nones" on the continent has further been highlighted by the three anthropologists in their [study](#). They say estimates of this category vary greatly, depending on the design of each piece of research. This includes the sampling methods used and how questions are framed.

For example, a 2012 Gallup poll pegged "religious nones" in sub-Saharan Africa at 7%, the highest estimate. In the middle are the most extensive data sources on the topic, the Pew Research Center (2010) and Afrobarometer (2018). Both put "religious nones" at 3.2%. At the bottom is the World Christian Encyclopedia's estimate of just under 1%.

And now, the latest census figures (2019) suggest that 1.6% of Kenyans are "nones." The "nones" as measured in Kenya include a range of groups such as atheists, agnostics and humanists, pointing to a broad scope and lack of precision. The website of the [Atheists in Kenya Society](#) also includes a range of groups with different orientations but united by non-belief.

Trends in religious following

Data shows a global decline in religiosity. A [comparative study](#) of 1980

to 2020 indicated the following global trends:

- "practicing religion" group stayed below the 40% mark,
- "non-religious" group fell from around 16% in 1980 to around 13% in 2020,
- "non-practicing" group rose from 24% in 1980 to almost 34% in 2020,
- "atheists" pretty much stayed on course around 21% during the period.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of the "practicing religion" group remained at around 81–82% over this period. The "non-practicing religion" group stayed around 15%, while the trend for "atheists" oscillated between 4% and close to 2%.

It is against this backdrop that the Kenyan census data stands out.

The difficulty with most surveys, including the state-run [census](#), is that the questions are not clearly defined—or key factors that distinguish different cohorts are ignored, sometimes deliberately to skew the outcomes. The religion question is considered unambiguous and definitive. However, religious pluralism is [commonplace](#) in much of sub-Saharan Africa.

The morality question

Religious affiliations are typically believed to influence individual behavior. [Global trends](#) reveal that in countries with a lower GDP, there is a higher likelihood of people associating belief in God with morality. Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa are countries with lower GDP per capita and have shown greater affinity with belief in God to have good moral values.

In the West, younger populations tend to show less concern for belief in God in order to have good values. In Nigeria, and presumably in Kenya too, no such age difference is visible in claiming that belief in God is essential for having good values.

There seems to be a [small difference](#) between how Protestants and Catholics fare in this equation. In Kenya, more Protestants than Catholics claim that God plays an important role. The sentiment is similar in South Africa, too—Protestants 98%, Catholics 97% and people from traditional religions 92%.

Given these statistics, atheists in Kenya have their work cut out in gaining larger support from society to freely co-exist. However, lumping them in the broader category of "nones" makes them less visible as a distinct group.

Conclusion

Atheists face an uphill struggle in Kenya.

The [Atheists in Kenya Society](#) has battled state authorities over registration. Their application was initially declined in January 2016 before being approved the following month. In April of the same year, the country's attorney general suspended the society's registration. Two years later, after an appeal filed at Kenya's high court, registration was reinstated.

The society, however, has a long way to go to convince the rest of Kenya to embrace a secular life. If Kenyan atheists want to [lobby](#) for a secular mode of life and have [prayers](#) removed from schools, then they need to convince the larger society as to why atheism matters in the country. They also need to address the underlying assumptions of freedom in a secular society.

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