

The Intra-Ethnic Relations among the Meru People in Meru and Tharaka-Nithi Counties, Upto 1963

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ABSTRACT

Before the advent of European colonial domination in Kenya, the Meru people witnessed a lot of interactions not only amongst themselves but also with the neighboring communities. These intra-ethnic relations were greatly influenced by the uneven distribution of the resources across the greater Meru region. However, these cordial relations were abruptly altered by the arrival of the colonialists who introduced repressive and retrogressive policies like pass laws which restricted the movement of people from one place to another. Several writers have written about the Ameru people but the concept of the intra-ethnic relations among the Ameru up to 1963 has not been adequately researched. This gave the impetus to this study that sought to investigate the intra-ethnic relations among the Meru sub-ethnic groups up to 1963. The study was carried out in the counties of Meru and Tharaka-Nithi. The study was anchored on the social systems theory. The data was collected from oral, archival and secondary sources. One hundred respondents for oral interview were sampled through purposive and snowballing techniques. Research instruments employed comprised the interview schedules and focus group discussions. It was found that the Ameru people had well defined and elaborate relations right from the family to council of Njuri Ncheke. It also emerged that the Meru people had myriad relations such as the blood brotherhood (*gichiario*) alliance, intra-ethnic batter trade, conflicts resulting from raiding and limited grazing fields, intra-ethnic cultural festivals held during the dry spell, naming of the age set systems (*nthuke*) after initiation and Njuri Ncheke conferences attended by elders from all Meru sub-ethnic groups. In addition to adding valuable knowledge to the field of history and related disciplines, the study contributes to the Ameru historiography.

Keywords: intra-ethnic relations, blood brotherhood, colonial domination, Ameru and sub-ethnic groups.

INTRODUCTION

According to Gichere & Ishida (2008), the Meru tribe is made up of eight sub-tribes. The Tharaka, Chuka, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Igoji, Imenti, Tigania and Igembe. Miiriga Mieru is the Imenti generic group while among the Tigania is Kiriene. Miitime sub-group is a hybrid of Igoji and Imenti. During the pre-European period, the Ameru sub-groups had their own tribal lands which were owned collectively by the clans. Mugwe assigned each group its territorial jurisdiction while at Igaironi. The administrative boundaries were created by the first District Commissioner (DC), Mr. Horne Butler (Kangangi) in 1908 when the British Colonial rule commenced in Meru. The same views are expressed by Parsons (2012) who states that the Meru ethnic group is made up of nine sub-ethnic groups. Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Igoji and Miutine are currently living in Meru. Miutine and Igoji however, are commonly grouped together with the South Imenti. On the other hand, Tharaka, Chuka, Muthambi and Mwimbi reside in Tharaka-Nithi county. The colonial government categorized the Meru tribe into two groups. Igoji, Miutine, Imenti, Tigania and Igembe were perceived to be more closely related. While the Tharaka, Chuka, Muthambi and Mwimbi were believed to be more distinct communities. According to Middleton and Kershaw (1972), the Meru tribe is a heterogeneous ethnic group comprising of nine sub-groups with diverse

customs. The Tharaka sub-group seems to have a more distinctive customs and language. Consequently, the sub-group is treated as a distinct ethnic group in the official Kenyan records. The other eight are classified under the composite “Meru”. Although the Meru sub-ethnic groups are distinct and heterogeneous, the Meru people had cordial relations that promoted oneness, unity and diversity as they co-existed peacefully. During the pre-colonial and colonial period, the Meru people interacted in several avenues. In some cases, they interacted among themselves while other times with their neighboring communities such as Maasai, Samburu, Embu, Akamba and Agikuyu.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The area of the study was the counties of Tharaka-Nithi and Meru covering all the constituencies. The area is populated by the following nine sub-ethnic groups: Igoji, Imenti, Tigania, Miutine, Igembe, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, and Tharaka. Owing to the fact that location of study is made up of several sub-groups, politics in this area has been marred by intra-ethnic political marginalization. Leaders from populous sub-ethnic groups have been elected and re-elected year in year out as they use sub-ethnicity as the factor of political mobilization. Nevertheless, the politics of sub-ethnicity in the larger Meru region has attracted insignificant scholarly attention. This, therefore, makes the area a suitable location for the present study.

Sampling method and sample size

The respondents were sampled through purposive and snowballing techniques. A sample size is determined by the size of the group under the study. In case of a minor sub-group a minimum sample size is 50 cases and 100 for a major sub-group (Kathuri and Pals, 1993). The greater Meru region is a major group hence the choice of 100 respondents.

Research Methodology

This research adopted the descriptive research design which enabled the researcher to collect data and analyze it thematically. The main purpose of this research design is description of the state of the affairs as it exists (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). The researcher consulted the oral and secondary sources. Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, internet and thesis. Informative elderly respondents were interviewed for oral data. The respondents were sampled through purposive and snowballing techniques.

Theoretical Framework

The study used the social systems theory which was put forward by Talcott Parsons in 1951. Other scholars associated with this theory are Francis Abraham, Emile Durkheim and Niklas Luhmann. The theory argues that the society is a complex system comprising interconnected and independent components. The proponents of this theory further posits that the social phenomenon can be understood by studying the whole system and how its parts relate. That's you can't evaluate its parts independently. This is because any change in any of its parts ultimately will affect the functioning of the entire system. The theory was appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to evaluate the intra-ethnic relations among the Meru people as a whole group and demonstrate how the various Meru sub-ethnic groups were interconnected and interdependent components of the entire Meru nation up to 1963.

KEY FINDINGS

Raiding and Inter-Sub-Ethnic Groups Conflicts

All the Meru sub-tribes after settling in their respective regions they concentrated on their internal affairs. Chuka people remained the target and whenever other Meru sub-divisions wished to replenish their cattle; Chuka was looked upon as the internal traditional enemy. Mwimbi fought battles with Chuka and they were able to evacuate the Chuka from their areas and pushed them across river Maara. The victorious Mwimbi people established

themselves in the vacated land. According to the traditional assertions, Muthambi was born out of battle. They were born from the remnants of Mwimbi warriors and the Chuka prisoners of war mostly women and children who were spared in the battle (Fadiman, 1993).

The aforementioned data resonates with oral data from Mukara (O.I, April, 2025) from who states that Tigania and Imenti interacted through raiding of livestock and beautiful ladies. Each of these two sub groups invaded the other and confiscated a reasonable number of cattle, goats and sheep. At times they would also kidnap ladies who were perceived to be beautiful. Upon getting back home they would hide the captives until such a time when their people paid a ransom in form of a heifer in case of a lady or a bull if he was a man who was held hostage. The informant reveals that the exercise could in some cases result to death of some people who took part in raiding. For a successful raiding, planning and strategizing was done for a period of time. Raiding was also carried by a large group of men who were believed to be energetic and well trained in warfare. The same sentiments are expressed by Kanake (O.I, 26/4/2025) who states that there was rivalry between the Tharaka and Mwimbi. The hatred between the two sub-ethnic groups was due to the raiding activities involved. This state of affairs was compounded by the land dispute that existed there for many years. Every group claimed to own the land occupied by the other group. As mentioned earlier, raiding was carried out by warriors who also happened to be the defense wing of the two sub-groups.

The Blood Brotherhood Alliance

The *gichiario* relationship came into existence as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century and later became a common practice in the entire greater Meru region. *Gichiario* relationship was established between the warring *Miiriga* with sole aim of creating an amicable alliance. At first, the *gichiario* began at the lower level of *Miiriga* but gradually grew into a complex set of relationships between major Meru sub-ethnic groups and eventually extended to include the neighboring societies. In blood brotherhood relationship, people tended to pledge their loyalty within their respective *miiriga*. The *miiriga* groups evolved and acted as the centers of socio-political activities where the practical and theoretical matters were handled. *Miiriga* affairs would be cascaded to the sub-divisions and across the entire Meru section when need arose (Mbae, 1992). In support of when the blood brotherhood came into existence among the Ameru, (Bernard, 1959) states that the *gichiario* existed among the Meru people long time before the colonial period. The writer believes that among the Ameru sub-tribes *gichiario* would be initiated through different ways. The most common and the earliest means of developing *gichiario* was through human blood sucking. In this method, the participating individuals were required to slit their hand using a sharp object. The participants were required to suck the blood from one another. The *gichiario* was exogamous since marriage between such members was prohibited. The writer went ahead to state that with exception of Gitie, Imenti and Tharaka were related by blood brotherhood.

These socio-economic relations bound the people together and reminded them their common history (Muthamia, 1991). To stress the need for *gichiario* among the Meru people, Bernard (1959) opine that the Meru experiences of sharing common tradition and ancestry remained memorable. Those involved in *gichiario* were therefore expected to display an immense hospitality to each other to promote peaceful co-existence and pledge to defend one another in case of an external invasion. On different occasions, when the Meru were faced with natural disaster problem as that of famine or an external threat such as an incessant raid by the Maasai and other neighboring communities, the spirit of brotherhood and the need to mobilize as a single people became imperative.

Tharaka and Chuka refer to each other as brother or sister depending on gender involved. It is believed that the two share a common ancestry. Historically, the parents of Tharaka and Chuka belong to the same ancestry. Ciapandi gave birth to Chuka while Tharaka was born by Chiangoi. Their brotherhood date back many years even before pre-European period. This is evident as the two sub-groups of Meru have not been engaged in any kind of conflict. Up to date, they treat one another with a lot of decorum and respect (Karimi, O.I, April 2025). The same sentiments are echoed by Icheria (2016) who believes that Chuka and Tharaka refer to each other as a brothers. The writer states that the Tharaka and Chuka, historically are siblings of the same father but of different mothers. Ciampandi was mother to Chuka while Tharaka's mother was Ciangoi. Blood brotherhood also existed and still exists between the Muthambi and the Tharaka. This blood relationship was exogamous in nature;

intermarriage was prohibited between the members of these two sub-groups. The Tharaka, Tigania and Imenti are “blood” relatives because they share some clans, however, they can marry. This information is corroborated by Ciamurea (O.I, April, 2025) who claims that the Chuka and Tharaka Patriach, Ciambugi, at first settled at Kambandi in Chuka region. He had two wives, Ciambandi and Ciangoi who were ever squabbling. He was forced to split his family and Ciambandi was instructed to move with her children to the east. The today's Tharaka people are her descendants. Ciangoi remained at Kambandi and gave rise to Chuka people we have today.

The Age Set Naming Ceremonies

M’Ithangatha (O.I, April, 2025) posits that Tigania and Igembe elders occasionally held joint meetings at Muruuta to deliberate on the naming of the *nthuke*: age-set. Every age-set was given a unique identification which was arrived at by the elders from both sides. After a lengthy discussion, the elders could come up with a single name for that particular *Nthuke* for both sub-ethnic groups. It was now the responsibility of elders to hold meetings in their respective regions to communicate to the residents the names of the age-set of that specific period.

Commercial Activities

The interaction among the Ameru revolved in form of trade and inter-marriages and were maintained (Peatrik, 2020). The Meru sub-tribes actively participated in trade. Although they traded with other tribes like Embu, Agikuyu and Akamba, much of trading activities were conducted amongst themselves. The trade was necessitated by the uneven distribution of resources. The Ameru traded among themselves in order to acquire what they lacked. For example, Tigania sold salt, cassava and yams. From Tharaka, the other sub-tribes got millet, goats and honey. According to (Marigu, O.I, April, 2025) the Imenti people sold potatoes, bananas and arrowroots. Trade was an important economic activity that strengthened the bond among the Ameru. Trade was conducted through barter method, where goods were exchanged with other goods from other sub-groups.

Intermarriages

There were intermarriages among the Meru sub-groups as well. The Ameru sons were free to marry from any sub-tribe with exception of those who they had *giciaro* with. Even those sub-tribes that deemed to be their enemies, their sons and daughters could marry. This new relationship was seen as a way of watering down the enmity that previously existed. There existed different ways of dowry payment, it was the bride’s side to abide with the rules and regulation that guided the payment of dowry in respective sub-ethnicities (Munya, O.I, May, 2025).

Labor Migration

In some cases, Meru sub groups interacted through labor migration from one area to another within the nearby region and beyond. In most cases, the movement of people from one sub-tribe to another was due to food shortage. For instance, Tharaka people used to go to Imenti, Tigania and Chuka in search of foodstuffs. They would offer their labor and in return get foodstuffs. These movements were persistence during the dry seasons where they experienced frequent drought and famine. From Imenti, the Tharaka would get banana, arrowroots, sweet and Irish potatoes, maize, arrowroots and yams. The Tigania also used to visit Imenti people while looking for job opportunities. Some were hired as herdsmen while others worked on farms. The meagre wage they got was sent home to buy foodstuffs. Once the dry season was over, they would go back home and continue with their duties. This was mostly done by the youthful men. Aged women and men were given food for free without working or paying for it. This shows how the Meru people were generous and hospitable. Igembe also did the same (Inyingi, O.I, May, 2025).

Intra-Ethnic Cultural Festivals

During the dry spell, the Meru people across the entire greater Meru region used to organize and hold cultural festivals where individuals from different Meru sub-ethnic groups showcased their talents through traditional dances and songs (M’Ithangatha, O.I, 2025). By doing so they preserved the Ameru culture, values and norms

while at the same time appreciating diversity and integration. It is during these ceremonies intermarriages occurred hence strengthening the bond between the participating parties. It was the sole responsibility of the council of elders to plan for the ceremonies; the dates and the venue.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the Meru people had an elaborate and well-structured socio-economic and political relations since the pre-European period. The Meru sub-ethnic groups though were located in different geographical locations, they still maintained their perennial close ties through numerous ways such as blood brother-hood, intermarriages, trade, labor migration, raiding and warfare, cultural festivals and naming of the *nthuke*. These intra-ethnic relations played critical role in promoting diversity, unity and socio-economic posterity. Many times the Meru sub-tribes acquired what they lacked through better trade or given for free especially among those who had blood brother-hood relationship. Moreover, intermarriages strengthened the bond between the involved sub-groups.

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