A POLITICAL HISTORY OF MERU 1750 - 1908

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS AT KENYATTA UNIVERSITY

1992

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DECLARATION

This Thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other University.

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to analyze the historical process of the genesis and development of Meru political organization from 1750 - 1908. The study asserts that the political organization of Meru was a function of the interaction of complex layers of inter-related institutions.

It is evident that by about 1908 the Meru had evolved into a society in which political authority was not vested in any single individual or institutions; rather, political power and authority were diffused amongst various institutions and representative individuals. The thesis identifies and analyses these institutions including 'Mwiriga' (Pl. 'Miiriga') 'Kiama' (Pl. 'Biama') Age-set system and military units. The character and functions of leadership in these institutions is assessed.

The study also examines the effects of internal forces like geographical environment, religion and the role of disputes in political
evolution and organization. The impact of other communities including the Maasai, Kamba, Embu and Mbeere on the political institution is investigated.

Throughout the study, an attempt is made to portray the role of various institutions on the day-to-day functioning of the society. Ultimately, the form of political organization which emerged in the Meru pre-colonial society, is shown to have grown in response to the impact of diverse internal and external forces.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION .............................................. 1
Statement of the problem ................................. 4
Scope of the Study ......................................... 5
Justification of the Study ................................. 7
Literature review ......................................... 9
Premises ..................................................... 22
Theoretical Framework .................................... 23
Methodology ............................................... 27
A FORMAT OF THE CHAPTERS .............................. 31

CHAPTER TWO

MERU HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ......................... 32
Introduction ............................................... 32
Meru Origins: archaeological findings .................. 32
Historical linguistic sources ............................. 36
The 'Shungwaya' factor .................................... 40
Oral Tradition perspective, 'Mbwa' ..................... 42
Departure from 'Mbwa' .................................... 45
The settlement of Meru people ............................ 60
Conclusion .................................................. 63
## CHAPTER THREE

**THE FOUNDRING OF MERU 'MWIRIGA'** .................................. 65

**Introduction** ................................................................. 65

**The Origins of the 'Mwiriga'** ......................................... 66

Meru settlement and its impact on the evolution of 'Mwiriga'........... 83

**The composition of the 'Mwiriga'** ..................................... 102

**The role of the 'Mwiriga' in the socio-political organization** .......... 108

**Bloodbrotherhood relationship ('Gichiaro')** ............................. 122

**Conclusion** ................................................................. 133

## CHAPTER FOUR

**THE MERU COUNCILS ('BIAMA')** ........................................ 135

**Introduction** ................................................................. 135

**The 'Kiama' (Pl.'Biama') Councils:**

* a definition ................................................................. 135

**The beginnings of the 'Biama'** ........................................ 139

**The 'Biama' for the Uninitiated Ameru** ................................ 144

**The 'Kabichu' Council** ................................................... 145

**The 'Kiguumi' Council** ................................................... 148

**The 'Gaturi' Council** .................................................... 155

**The girls' Councils** ...................................................... 158
CHAPTER FIVE

THE MILITARY SET UP AND THE AGE-SET SYSTEM . 225
Introduction .............................................. 225
The military Units and age-sets system ...... 225

The establishment of Warrior Units
1730-1770's ........................................ 228
Initiation into military units and
creation of age-set system ....................... 235

The transition to military power; the retirement
('Ntuiko') of previous warriors and its significance
in the political arena .............................. 251
Age-set in power, warrior group and the Councils deliberation and linkages .......................... 256

The military exploits and impact on Meru political Character: a historical perspective ........... 259
Conclusion ...................................................... 282

CHAPTER SIX .................................................... 285
CONCLUSION ..................................................... 285
BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................. 292
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated lovingly to a Meru 'Mugambi', my late grandfather Shadrack M'Matiri wa Gatuguti (1870 - 1978) who nurtured my interest for historical events tenderly.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Tabitha Kanogo, a truly able and devoted scholar who supervised this thesis from the embryonic stage of writing a Research proposal to its completion. Throughout the process of writing, I found Dr. Kanogo's dedication, sincerity, patience, effective and affectionate counsel, invaluable. Her initiative to provide an enabling working atmosphere was most satisfying and went a long way to help produce this work.

The inspiring support of Professor H.A. Mwanzi, as the Chairman of History Department Kenyatta University, and his frequent inquiry into my progress was challenging and welcome! I am very grateful to Professor, H.S.K. Mwaniki, who lent me some of his precious books to use. The informal discussions I occasionally held with him were encouraging and enriched my
knowledge greatly. Mr. Tiras Miriti read my thesis drafts and shared with me his vast knowledge on Meru heritage. I owe him a great debt for his provoking questions which evolved deeper thought in the attempt to analyze Meru political history.

I am sincerely and deeply indebted to a vast number of scholars of diverse academic interests who formally or informally conscientized me about various issues with regard to the thesis. Of note is Mr. Kihumba Kamotho a teacher cum journalist who read and sensitized me on certain aspects which would have easily escaped my attention.

The aspiring students of history with whom I began my M.A. course provided a radiant social and challenging academic atmosphere. The members of staff of my history department enhanced my interpretation of history in various ways especially during the departmental staff seminars. I cannot, but thank them!
The initiative of my research assistants who all are students of history including Njagi, Kithinji, Mwiti, Magwa and Kibaara was as worthy as it was necessary! I would also wish to thank greatly Mr. Bojana who proof-read the thesis;

Patrick Ahutah who typed the work; my sponsor Kenyatta University; the staff of various information centres who assisted me and my beloved family members.

To all of them, those who felt 'tried' with me in the painstaking exercise and managed to persevere along, especially my prayerful mum and dad, I wish to tell of my infinite pleasure. Most dearly, I thank Joy for her goodwill.
LOCATION OF MERU DISTRICT IN KENYA (Source: Meru District Development Plan 1989–93)
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Meru are Bantu people living on the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya. The Meru district development plan for the year 1989-1993 indicates that the district covers an area of 9,992 square kilometres (Kenya 1989). To the south the district borders Embu, Kitui and Tana River districts to the south east, Isiolo to the north and north east, Laikipia to the west, Nyeri and Kirinyaga to the south east. The river Tana forms the boundary between Meru and Kitui to the south east.

Mount Kenya, the second highest peak in Africa stands to the east and the Nyambene hill ranking the second highest massif in Meru is to the north of the district. There are several other 'ridge-tops' scattered in the district. Mount Kenya has a gradual slope towards the north and east which forms the eastern plateau of Kenya. It has a height of 5,199 metres above the sea level at
the Mbatian apogee. Unlike the gentle slopes of Mount Kenya; the Nyambene slopes are sharper. The Nyambene range rises at 2,514 metres at Etiene zenith.

The presence of high massif in the district, together with other smaller ridges have an impact upon the climatical conditions of the region. These provide relief rainfall and create cool conditions. The district enjoys both the short and the long rains. In the pre-colonial period, a combination of factors including availability of rainfall and fertile volcanic soils made Meru lands especially the slopes of Mount Kenya and Nyambene range favourable for agriculture.

There are large rivers found in the district. These include Mutonga, Kathita, Thuci, Iraru, Ntungu, Mara, and Tana which cut profound 'incisions' in the igneous rock. Some of the rivers provided natural boundaries which separated Meru 'Miiriga' and villages and had an important influence in the evolution of political organization
in pre-colonial period. For example the major social and political ethnic sub-division which were evident by the beginning of twentieth century, were essentially separated by rivers.

There is virtual lack of statistical figures representing the people who lived in Meru in the pre-colonial period. In the colonial period, the population was less than a million people. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the district has a population of 1,113,800 people (Kenya: 1991).

Meru district was divided into two districts in April 1992. The new district is Tharaka Nithi comprising of the former Tharaka and Nithi Administrative sub-divisions including South Imenti, North Imenti, Timau, Tigania east and west, Igembe and Ntonyiri. In the two districts, there are a hundred and forty seven locations. These constitute eight political constituencies. In the colonial period Meru administrative divisions were three namely, Nithi, South Imenti and Imenti which included Timau and Central Imenti.
In the pre-colonial period, Meru had six natural sub-divisions (Miriti O. 1:6-5-1991). These were Igembe, Tigania, Tharaka, Chuka, Mwimbi and Imenti. Muthambi was part of the Mwimbi 'Miiriga' groupings which became a Socio-political entity in the late nineteenth century. The formation of Muthambi is discussed in the subsequent chapters. Both Miiitine and Igoji 'Miiriga' were part of the Imenti subdivision.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Existing literature, which is sketchy and fragmentary fail to establish the evolution and complexity of Meru political organization. The political dimension of such institutions as 'Miiriga', 'Biama', Military setup and age-sets system has not been adequately explored. Neither has the inter-relationship between the above institutions been established.

The role played by internal forces like geography and economy in the evolution of Meru political organization has not been adequately treated. Knowledge on the impact of neighbouring communities like the Maasai, Embu, and Mbeere on Meru political evolution is scarce and in some respects exaggerated.
Thus, the impact of internal and external forces on the political organization of the Meru has not been established. In effect then, many gaps both in terms of available and hitherto unexplored data and their analysis exists making the study of the political history of the Meru a priority research topic.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study analyzes the historical process of the origins and development of Meru political organization from 1750-1908. The study focuses on various institutions including 'Mwiriga', 'Kiama', age-sets system, and military units. The functions and the character of leadership of these institutions are identified and discussed. An attempt is made to establish the role of those institutions in the day-to-day functioning of the Meru society.
Further, the study examines the impact of both internal and external forces on the political organization of the Meru. The internal factors considered include geography, economy, social conflict and resolution while the external factors include neighbouring and distant communities who interacted with the Meru. At another level, the inter-relationship between social and religious institutions, especially with regard to the Meru 'Mugwe'-dignitary is investigated. The study synthesizes the disjointed literature with oral traditions in an attempt to produce more comprehensive reconstruction of Meru political history.

The date 1750 where this study begins is considered to be the time when the political institutions analyzed were emerging in their most rudimentary form. Then, the society was organized in small scattered bands. By about 1750, the Meru were settled in various parts of their present lands. It is therefore important that the origins of political ideas and institutions is traced to that period.
In 1908, the British administrators began to interrupt the indigenous political process and to transform it to suit their administrative plans. It was then that the Meru began to incorporate European ideas into their political organization. The study considers this period to be a significant watershed in Meru political evolution, hence its adoption as a suitable period to end the study.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

The reconstruction of African history is a painstaking undertaking that has concerned students of African history for many years. The purpose for which such efforts have been necessary are diverse, ranging from attempts to challenge Eurocentric approaches to the study of African history, discovering the trends and patterns of various facets of African history to determining its position in world history.

In the book: Reconstructing African Culture History, Greighton and Bennet (1967) underscore the
necessity to study the pre-colonial history of Africa especially the political systems so as to shed light on their past patterns. They argue that,

"greater understanding of the indigenous people of Africa is no longer purely a matter of academic interest and to understand them fully is to be aware of past currents and patterns ... the general bewilderment evoked by African political systems for instance in Europe and America might be alleviated by some knowledge of African political history."

The study demonstrated that societies like the Meru had a coherent and effective system of government; whether simple or complex, their political formations were not static. The study also attempts to redress the misconception that African political systems were 'primitive'. This study is a partial contribution to the understanding of African political history. This will be an important contribution to African political historiography since it helps correct the general misconception that African political patterns were 'backward', 'disorderly' or 'confused.'
Existing studies on the Meru society have ignored the political facet. Information about the political history of the society is inadequate and disjointed as the literature review reveals. This study strives to fill this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pioneer studies of African political organizations provided a glimpse into the nature of African political history in the pre-colonial period. Between 1940 and early 1960s, many studies on the African political systems were published. Among them were the works of Evans Pritchard (1940), Mair (1962), Tait and Middleton (1968), Schapera (1956) and Wagner (1956). However, these studies were largely anthropological. They gave descriptions with limited analysis of the political systems of various societies.
Other studies conducted gave the impression that African political systems like other aspects of African history had diffused from other parts of the world. The infamous diffusionist phenomenon made generalized conclusions regarding the study of African history (Seligman, 1930).

In his book, *A Political History of the Pare of Tanzania*, Kimambo (1969), has argued in part that, 'detailed studies of individual African political groups have long been needed in order to test the validity of the generalization made by Oliver and Fage (1962) about the common origin of African Kingdoms.' Kimambo's book which is a commitment to the political history of Pare clearly demonstrates how a society like the Pare evolved strong political institutions. However, we must be careful, to recognize that the prevailing forces which were responsible for Pare political evolution are not replicated in Meru pre-colonial society. What a study such as this derives from that work, is essentially the theoretical framework within which the Meru political evolution is studied.
The stages which the Pare or any other African society underwent in their political development, was a reflection of the impact of internal and external forces in their distinct environment. Mwanzi (1977) has shown that the interaction of internal and external forces transforms society. Experiences amongst the Pare were different from those of the Meru environment. However, in both cases, it is possible to show that factors within and without were responsible for the origins and development of political institutions.

Historical studies conducted in various societies of Kenya have given the political systems of those societies limited attention with the bulk of the literature discussing this aspect of history under the joint heading of social and political organization. The implication of this is that, social and political functions are absolutely intertwined. While one acknowledges the inter-relationship between political and social institutions, it is possible to distinguish
specific features which could allow for a specific study of a people's political history. Although focusing on political developments, the study also illustrates the relationship between social, economic and political processes.

Written records on the Meru pre-colonial history are scanty and the picture is more wanting with regard to literature on political organization. Some of the early writers who documented the Meru history produced ethnographic descriptions of the Meru customs. The most comprehensive of these were done by Lambert (1956) and Orde-Brown (1925).

Lambert, for instance carried out research on a vast geographical area which covered Kikuyu Embu, Ndia, Gichugu and the Meru ethnic subdivisions. One of the major weaknesses of Lambert's study is that he considered these societies as one; yet linguistically and culturally, those groups are different. He did not draw clear distinctions between Meru ethnic
sub-divisions. Similarly, he discussed all those
groups like Mbeere, Kikuyu, Ndia and Meru as being
the same. This tended to create a false universal
cultural whole comprising of different people.
This approach makes it difficult to identify and
distinguish characteristics specific to Meru
political organization. However, his contribution
cannot be ignored. For our study, Lambert's
analysis of the age-set systems and 'Kiama' are
significant.

Orde-Brown (1913), provides bits and
pieces regarding initiation among the Chuka and
Amwimbi. His work, *The Vanishing Tribes of Kenya*,
exhibits historical inaccuracies especially on the
political dimension. His work also covers a
fraction of the Meru society and therefore the
validity for its application in other sub-sections
of the society needs to be tested against data from
other regions.

Brief ethnographic descriptions of Meru
have been done by among others, Hobley (1910),
Laughton (1964), Middleton (1965), Dutton (1925) and Chanler (1893). These studies do not pay adequate attention to the political organization of the Meru.

Laughton (1964) sheds a gleam of light on the nature of Meru contacts with the Maasai especially their bloodbrotherhood relationship, intermarriages and warfare. He briefly retraces the historical background of the Meru society. There is little doubt that Laughton's effort should be incorporated in this study. Mboroki (1972) attempts to show the relationship between the Maasai and the Meru. However, Mboroki exaggerates the extent to which the Meru society was influenced by the Maasai community. Undue importance has been given to the interaction with inherent emphasis that the Meru were influenced by Maasai without showing what influence the Meru had on the Maasai. This study seeks to establish some balance. Another shortcoming relates to his view on the links the Meru had with the Maasai.
He limits the discussion on Maasai and Meru contacts to two sub-divisions, Imenti and Tigania yet the relationship extended to other sub-divisions. Notwithstanding this, he makes a contribution towards a fuller knowledge of the relationship of Meru and other societies.

The age-sets system which Lambert amongst others examined, is a significant institution. Hopkins (1929) and Holding (1942) offer a general coverage of the patterns and functions of age-sets system. However, their effort is by no means exhaustive.

One area which has been grossly ignored in the pre-colonial Meru studies, is that of the role of women in the political arena. Rarely has a place been found for women in the pioneer studies of Meru. The works discussing Meru pre-colonial society have a general emphasis on historical processes where men were seen as the sole players in the unfolding history while women were relegated to the domestic chores. The role women played in the political organization is blurred. Significant analysis of women's roles has been undertaken by Holding.
(1942) who gives insight into women's participation and contributions in the political negotiations. Holding's work is sketchy though a more representative image of the women's councils and their participation in society is portrayed.

Fadiman (1982) has made a valuable contribution to the study of the pre-colonial history of Meru. In particular, his analysis of the military organization of the Meru is by far the most comprehensive of Meru studies. However he concentrates on some sub-divisions of the Meru. Much of his attention is directed towards the Imenti people. He substantially ignores the Chuka and the Tharaka sections. Thus his work is not representative of the Meru sub-divisions. On the whole, he makes interesting contributions about the Meru military organization, age-sets system pattern among other areas he discusses.

The most useful of Mwaniki's researches for our study is his work on the Chuka people (Mwaniki 1982). Chuka is one of the sections
that form the present-day Tharaka Nithi district. The work treats the Chuka in detail and is so far the most comprehensive of the documents covering that region in the pre-colonial period. Mwaniki attempts an analysis of the interaction between the sub-division and other Meru sub-divisions. He shows the relationship between the Chuka and the neighbouring people such as Mbeere, Embu and Kikuyu. The work however, covers a small fraction of the Meru and is not representative of the whole society. Mwaniki's vast papers on diverse aspects of Mount Kenya people, also draw useful inferences about the cultural and political character of the Meru.

A most specialized anthropological contribution has been made by Bernadi (1989). He traces the origins of 'Agwe' (sg. 'Mugwe') who were important Meru religious and public dignitaries and
shows their significance in the day to day functioning of the society. This study is partly concerned with establishing the inter-relationship between the religious and political organization of the Meru society. To this end, Bernadi provides the main source of this information and particularly with regard to the impact of the 'Mugwe' office.

Further descriptions of Meru peoples in pre-colonial period have been given by Fr. Nyaga (1986). His outline of the various councils and the brief analysis of their functions is important. However, he has failed to adopt a representative approach. He discusses aspects in Tigania, Igembe and Imenti leaving the other areas unattended to. Father Nyaga addresses himself to such institutions as age-set system and military units and where he does; it is merely in a narrative form. Similarly, his chronological format is as weak as is exaggerated.
Rimita (1986) also deals with the history of Meru under the auspices of 'The Njuri Ncheke of Meru'. His book is at best a general survey of Meru history. The misleading title gives the impression that the book focuses on the 'Njuri Ncheke. In fact, the 'Njuri Ncheke' is given very brief examination in the text. He concentrates on the Igembe and Tigania sub-divisions. There are inferences that can be drawn on the Meru historical background and the establishment of the 'Mwiriga' institution.

There are a few studies committed specifically to different aspects of Meru political organization. These include Mboroki (1972), Muthamia (1974), and Kinyua (1970). These are unpublished B.A. dissertations. Their work revolves around different aspects of Meru political history and the scope varies from one text to the next. Muthamia's work attempts to show that the Meru evolved political institutions over several years. The treatment of pre-colonial history in Muthamia's dissertation is sketchy and limited in
scope. Only a small portion of his dissertation deals with the pre-colonial period while the remaining larger portion discusses the colonial impact on the Meru. Muthamia makes very little effort to date the various events and changes in the political evolution. This is a historical deviation which almost renders his work less credible.

Kinyua's (1970) dissertation gives prominence to 'Njuri Ncheke', the highest authority in the land. Kinyua's emphasizes the significance of 'Njuri Ncheke'. Arguably, the 'Njuri Ncheke' was the most known of all Meru councils. While Kinyua's treatment of the 'Njuri Ncheke' is vital, there is need to indicate that this council was not the only council in Meru. Kinyua has failed to link up the 'Njuri Ncheke with other councils and to show that the 'Njuri Ncheke' was only part of other councils but the highest authority.

The 'Njuri Ncheke' did not operate in isolation from
other councils. This council constituted the highest level of Meru political negotiation. The council operate in collaboration with other institutions to make the political whole.

The three, Mboroki, Muthamia and Kinyua, give us historical glimpse into the general political picture of the society. However, their works, reflect inadequacies that this study seeks to rectify. The relevance of their study is that they touch on the nature of political organization on a wide cross-section of the society.

To-date, the reconstruction of the pre-colonial political history of the Meru society remains sketchy and disjointed. The literature review shows that there exists fragmentary information produced by a number of people ranging from professional anthropologists, trained historians, clergy to colonial administrators. There is no detailed and comprehensive work by any historian on the aforesaid them. This is especially true of the
This study seeks to synthesize and analyze the scarce and disjointed information which will be complemented with other forms of data. It is hoped that this will produce a more comprehensive reconstruction of the political history of Meru society in the period 1750-1908.

PREMISES

This study assumes that the origins of political institutions and their development was essentially an outcome of internal factors; however, external forces were also significant. The leadership of various councils was drawn from charismatic members of the society. Such variables as wealth and age, wisdom, among others were qualities considered for leadership. Finally, it is assumed that there were significant relationship between political, social and religious institutions.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attempts to study African political systems have essentially been conducted within diffusionist and evolutionist theoretical frameworks. The diffusionist approach which dominated studies of African history in the first half of twentieth century, tended to view the 'civilizations' of Africans as a phenomenon diffused from other parts of the world to the continent.

Overly racist views were voiced by Seligman (1930) whose infamous 'Hamitic' theory depicted the 'civilization' of Africa as the 'civilization' of 'Hamites'. The 'Hamites' were considered to be non-Africans. Kimambo (1969) has argued that by 1962, the racist 'overtones' in Seligman's theory were being ignored but the impact of his views on African scholarship continued to affect the interpretation of African history. Many scholars tended to explain African history within the diffusionist frame of reference.
The reconstruction of African history is a continuing process and the scholars of African pre-colonial history must realise that bias in the interpretation of African history persists. A major way in which historical bias is perpetuated is by adapting wrong approaches to the study of indigenous societies. It is in this context that attempts to reconstruct Meru political history considers the diffusionist theory as biased and incompatible with the study. The approach has several weaknesses and the most salient need to be pointed out.

First, the diffusionist approach has the weakness of having 'one sided' characteristic which overlook independent evolution of African institutions. Second, the significance that the diffusionist approach gives to the 'conquest theory' assumes that, there existed 'superior' societies which overran 'inferior' groups (Kimambo 1969). What should be pointed out is
that, societies cannot be taken as having exclusively built their institutions without outside influence. Ideas that 'diffuse' from the neighbourhood, should not overshadow an attempt to show what internal factors and ability a society had in building up its political organization.

Murdock (1959) in his book *Africa: Its People and their culture history*, points out that African political systems share a common origin which he collectively calls 'African despotism.' He suggests that western Sudan was the probable place from which these systems originated. Oliver and Fage (1962) hypothesized that the African kingdoms had a common origin. They argued that these kingdoms could be discussed under the umbrella of 'Sudanic States'. Generalized conclusions such as these tend to emphasize the similarities of political institutions and situation in African societies. Definitely such generalizations inhibit other independent micro-studies of African
societies to determine the diversity and complexity in their political structures.

Meru is among many societies in Africa with their own distinct peculiarities. This study attempts to reconstruct the Meru political unit within the evolution theoretical framework. The idea of evolution is to be applied on the Meru in their settled lands from 1750 when the political ideas and organized units were at their simplest as noted elsewhere in the chapter. Where plausible, reflection of the period beyond 1750 can be made where data show linkages of the past events and the life at Mount Kenya.

The idea of evolution holds that societies are capable of evolving their own forms of organization. Some studies including Kimambo (1969), Vansina (1966) and Mwanzi (1977) have shown that African societies evolved their own ways of life. But this must be considered as an aspect that occurs and is influenced by circumstances of geographical environment and other internal
factors. The central thesis within which the Meru political character is discussed is the argument that a combination of factors were responsible for the political transformation of the community.

METHODOLOGY

This study derives information from two categories of sources namely: Primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include archival materials, unpublished materials and oral tradition.

Archival materials studied include Meru district annual reports, Safari reports, Political records and handing over reports. Those documents yielded useful information on the political aspects of Meru history. Consequently, unpublished materials were read included theses, dissertations, articles, seminar and conference papers. The secondary sources read were published books and articles on Meru.
After June of the same year this was followed with a systematic scrutinizing of the books and other documents in the libraries that deal specifically with Meru and more definitely on the political aspects. Library research was followed by archival research.

The main library research was carried out at Moi Library at Kenyatta University and Kenyatta Memorial library in the University of Nairobi. Other institutions included the Institute of African Studies (Nairobi), the Kenya National Museum, the British Council library, the Institute of Development Studies Nairobi and the MacMillan library among others.

The Kenya National Archives provided very useful data. This was especially so with regard to
materials written by administrators, missionaries and anthropologists. The Meru museum was also visited in Meru town. The research in these areas provided preliminary knowledge on the Meru history. Both available literature and oral information was analyzed.

Collection of oral data in the field was carried out among the Meru between January and June 1991. I enlisted the help of five research assistants, all undergraduate history students of Kenyatta University. The research assistants joined me in the field within the month of April when they were out for holiday. The researcher interviewed various knowledgeable persons. It was realised that even those 'knowledgeable' on Meru pre-colonial past (most of whom fall within the elderly stock) were uncertain about many events. While that was a problem often confessed by the interviewee, it was still possible to get much dependable information which formed an important primary basis for this thesis. This information was synthesized with written documents.
One major problem that was faced during the research was financial handicap. A grant expected from my sponsor, Kenyatta University, has not been released to date. Regarding the relationship with the community during the interview sessions, the researcher was able to conduct the research within a pleasant atmosphere as the researcher is not a stranger in the community.

To establish the nature of Meru political history both primary and secondary data have been utilized. The two sources of information have been found invaluable, and the researcher attempted a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of oral tradition data with fragmentary written works in an attempt to reconstruct decades of Meru political history in the pre-colonial period.

The study underpins the significance of the inter-disciplinary approach which is gaining credence in contemporary social science scholarship (Kizerbo 1981:345). Nevertheless, in the reconstruction of Meru pre-colonial history, only a limited level of this method is possible because, other than oral tradition
which has substantially explored the history of Meru, attempts by other sources like archaeology and historical linguistics has so far remained minimal and fragmentary. Thus the study will inevitably adopt a bias for oral tradition which forms the main reservoir of information for the reconstruction of Meru political history.

A FORMAT OF THE CHAPTERS

1. Chapter One: This chapter forms the Introduction to the thesis.
2. Chapter Two: This chapter deals with the historical background of Meru Society.
3. Chapter Three: This chapter Examiners the 'Mwiriga' as part of the Institutions that made up Meru political organization.
4. Chapter Four: The focus of this chapter is the various councils which operated in different lifecycles of Meru and are part of the political organization.
5. Chapter Five: The chapter analyzes the military establishment and age-sets system as part of Meru political system.
6. Chapter Six: This chapter is the conclusion of the thesis.
CHAPTER TWO

MERU HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is essentially a historical background of the Meru society whose political history constitutes the focus of the thesis. The aspects to be analyzed in the chapter include the origins of Meru people, movement and settlement in their present region. This gives a background framework within which the reconstruction of Meru political history will be undertaken in the subsequent Chapters. To understand the arguments relating to Meru origins, we should look at what archaeology, historical, linguistics and oral traditions yields.

MERU ORIGINS: ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS

One of the cardinal sources of the pre-colonial history of Africa is archaeology. Archaeological findings shed invaluable insights on man's existence, his environment and activities in time and space. The significance of archaeology, as a source of history lies in its ability to go back to a period for which written sources may be lacking and transcends the limitations of oral sources.
According to the available archaeological data, there were human settlements in Meru during the early stone age. The evidence comes from two sites at Lewa North of Mount Kenya with 'Archeulan' hand axes made from basalt dated over 100,000 years ago. Similarly, there are middle-age settlements represented by rock shelter dated ca. 100,000-40,000 BP. Late stone age occupation of the Meru country is said to have been reported near Kanjeru school in Tharaka dated ca. 40,000-2,000 BP. Evidence of Neolithic sites of equivalent period have been seen on the Tana river in Kiambere dam not far from Meru South (Wandibba 1986).

Cummings (1978) and Sopers' (1979) excavations and archaeological surveys have adduced evidence of early iron age-sites in Tharaka, Tigania and Igembe, which date about the 3rd century A.D. By about 500 A.D. or later, early iron age was translated into late iron age with Gatung’ang’a complex as the major variant found east, south and west of Mount Kenya from Meru to Nyeri.
From this dearth of archaeological data, a significant historical picture of human existence in the region can be sketched. The research inadequacies therein both in terms of limited geographical coverage and in the inexhaustive analysis of materials leaves a considerable gap in our knowledge of the area. For example, it is difficult to establish with due certainty the factors that characterized the evolution of the inhabitants.

What emerges from these archaeological excavations of the area is that proportions of human stock lived there. However, this idea is not corroborated by oral tradition; there exists absolute inconsistency in the two versions of the origins as will be shown later. Before looking at the historical linguistic evidence, we shall briefly make comments about written sources on Meru.

There are no corroborative written documents that could help substantiate
archaeological claims. Meru pre-colonial period did not produce written records since written sources, save for sketchy European travellers' diaries of the late nineteenth century, were rare and only began in the wake of British administration in Meru Land in the first decade of the twentieth century. Twentieth century literature comprises ethnographic, anthropological and historical works amongst others, built upon the traditions handed down over the years in the society. Worth noting are Fadiman's and Mwaniki's works amongst others. Their contribution to Meru historical understanding will be established as the thesis progresses.
The pioneer linguists who have studied the Mount Kenya Societies within which Meru falls have advanced the 'thagicu' hypothesis which has it that 'thagicu' was an ancestral home for Central Kenya societies.

One of the proponents of this 'thagicu' proposition is Bennet (1967:128). According to Bennet, 'thagicu' is a group of dialects or very closely related languages that are spoken to the east and south of Mount Kenya. Its speakers include the Kikuyu, Kamba, Embu, Mbeere, the Meru Congeries and Tharaka (Muriuki 1988:109). The term 'thagicu' has been reported in Kikuyu, Meru, Kamba and Mbeere traditions. McGregor (1909:31) for instance, argues that, originally the Kikuyu migrated from 'chagichu' a term alluding to 'thagicu'. Others like Dundas (1908:137) and Ehret, a linguist (1974:43) subscribe to the 'thagicu' hypothesis. Further, in a synthesized text A History of Kenya Ochieng' notes, 'the weight of available evidence would indicate that the occupation of Central Kenya by the ancestors of Embu, Chuka, Mbeere, Ndia,
Gicugu and Kikuyu started in Meru'. These arguments amount to one conclusion: that Meru was inhabited for a long duration prior to the occupation of the rest of Central Kenya province. However, the length of the period is not known so far but may have run for several centuries.

We must, however, observe that the linguistic studies have not established the language group which occupied the region. One still wonders whether 'thagicu' denotes Bantu speakers presently living in Meru District, the presupposed Cushitic and Nilotic stock, or the amalgam of all the afore-said language groups. Fadiman (1976:151) points out that a group of Bantu migrants who arrived before the middle of the eighteenth century in the area now known as Tharaka met another people living there, a section of whom he contends were variously called 'Thagicu', 'Daiso' 'Daicho' and 'Thaicu'. Mwaniki (1982) argues that 'Thagicu' may merely be a reference to the 'thagana migrants'. The term 'thagana' here refers to River Tana, upon which the Bantu migrants
of the legendary 'Mbwa' origins followed from the Coast of Kenya to the foothills of Mount Kenya and the surrounding eastern vicinity. The ideas about 'Mbwa' will be dealt with in the subsequent section on oral sources.

Mwaniki (1982) who doubts the linguists' claims on the basis of its paucity says that 'linguistic studies of the Central Kenyan people might have been more fruitful had linguists known that modern languages are not merely a fusion of Cushitic Gumba and 'thagicu Bantu'. The linguists have made feverish efforts in their studies of the language group of Central Kenya societies with a view to reconstructing their history. However, on the basis of established facts, we would observe that linguists have neither established concretely the language which is referred to as 'thagicu' nor have they answered the itching question of Meru origins. One still wonders what the name 'thagicu' itself means. What should be noted is that the existence of 'thagicu' is not a fact to be doubted as the name still persists in some sections of
Tharaka. However, the question as to who the 'thagicu' were is a nagging question that has yet to be answered.

Clearly evidence elicited by archaeological work and that of historical linguists seems to concur on one aspect: that there is a possibility of Meru having lived in Meru probably for a longer period than that suggested by oral sources. What is so far gathered by the archaeologist for example is evidence which goes a little further to suggest that the migrants of 'Mbwa' fame are likely to have affected a relatively small group of people, who have been culturally and linguistically absorbed by the Bantu population of the district (Wandibba, 1986).

Conclusions of this type can only be taken as pathfinders into the rather obscure question of origins because as said earlier, the two sources are lacking both in depth and geographical representation. There is a notable inconsistency existing between these sources and the oral tradition of the society. Before analyzing the
oral perspective, our attention will turn to views raised about the mythical 'Shungwaya', a place claimed to have been a central cradleland of the eastern Bantu communities within which the Meru are classified.

THE 'SHUNGWAYA' FACTOR

A host of scholars have postulated that 'Shungwaya' was a cradleland for several eastern Bantu groups which have been linked with this tradition. The authenticity of 'Shungwaya' is shaky and the tradition of the place as Kimambo (1968:197) states, 'has been understood by historians as a mythical dispersal centre to be located at some place on the Somali Coast probably at around the present port Durnford'. While peoples living at the Coast like the Pokomo and Nyika, have traditions speaking of 'Shungwaya', those in the interior like Kamba, Embu, and Kikuyu make no mention of 'Shungwaya' as their place of origin.
In his studies among the Kikuyu, Muriuki strongly refutes claims to the effect that the Kikuyu had any association with the 'Shungwaya' claims which he dismisses as baseless in the light of available evidence. Equally, Jackson's (1976) and Sabarwal's (1967) researches among the Kamba and Embu respectively show no evidence that those societies may have been living in 'Shungwaya' at any one time in their history.

Suggestions have been made by among others, Freeman-Granville (1963:130), Lambert (1950) and Hobley (1929), that eastern Bantu stock trace their ancestry to 'Shungwaya'. This tradition is doubtful and no research findings known to the writer affirms it fully. The tradition does not bear any concrete evidence that the Meru may have hailed from 'Shungwaya'. In fact, Fadiman refutes the story of 'Shungwaya' noting that 'existing data' do not even remotely suggest origins within the 'Shungwaya' region.

There is not a shred of truth adduced from the available literature that could indicate in
anyway that the Meru lived at 'Shungwaya' at any one period in their historical experiences. Oral research by this researcher also failed to confirm the 'Shungwaya' theory. This study suggests no new theory into the already infamous theories, but will assert that the 'Shungwaya' factor is more of a myth that blurs our historical vision about Meru origin than a factor that offers any enlightenment in our quest for the Meru cradleland.

**ORAL TRADITION PERSPECTIVE: 'MBWA'**

Much of the information gathered about the Meru pre-colonial history, derives from oral sources which embody nearly three centuries of the society's historical knowledge. However, Meru traditions have presented conflicting problems of interpretations (Ochieng' 1976:67). The consequence of this has been the emergence of different perceptions that explain Meru origins. Attention will not be paid to the notions of every scholar who has attempted the interpretation of
Meru origins. Rather, only prominent features emanating from the traditions will be discussed.

Before settling in their present land on the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya, oral tradition suggests that the Meru were living on a small island at the Coast of Kenya. The island is said to have been surrounded by vast waters, a suggestion that points to the expanse of the Indian ocean. The traditional descriptions of the island varies slightly in details but accounts are agreed that the said island was conducive to agriculture. Farming, keeping of herds of cattle, goats, hunting, fishing and gathering comprised the economic livelihood of the inhabitants.

Pioneer researchers of the Meru tend to disagree in principle whether the island which the Meru refer to as 'Mbwa' is acknowledged by all as the place of origin. Fadiman (1982), on the other hand posits that 'traditions dealing with the origins of every Meru section except the Chuka' regard 'Mbwa' as their ancestral home. Mwaniki
(1982:243) records that, 'the Chuka were (and are) adamant that Chuka are Chuka and not 'Miiru' (Meru). Other than the Chuka, the claims about 'Mbwa' are a household talk throughout Meru.

The specific place referred to as 'Mbwa' is doubtful. The Meru speak of the island as having been close to the shore. When tides ebbed away from the island, movement to and from the shore was possible and the gathering of marine edibles became accessible to the islanders. The handed down story of 'Mbwa' is easily reconstructed by Meru custodians of knowledge. These comprise mainly the elderly. However, details are occasionally lost in their failing memories.

A proposal put forward by Fadiman (1976:140) suggests 'Manda' as the possible island called 'Mbwa' although Meru traditions so far do not mention such a term in their historical accounts. Fadiman's suggestion has not been supported by any other researcher especially from other fields like archaeology or historical
linguistics and his claims so far remains poised between fact and myth. Meru informants apparently do not affirm that 'Manda' was the island where they lived but universally emphasize on 'Mbwa'. According to Maingi (0 I:23-4-1991), 'Mbwa' is the only place where the Meru lived. He argues '... we lived at 'Mbwa'... we lived there for many seasons... that was our home'. Although it is difficult to say with certainty where 'Mbwa' is, we admit that it must have been a significant place in the historical experiences of the Meru. For example, Meru oral traditions argue that they lived on the island before moving to their current land. Most of the people interviewed for this study speak of 'Mbwa' as their place of origin and beyond that, they argue that they left the place in the wake of stringent hardships. The events that made them leave the island for the new areas deserve analysis.

DEPARTURE FROM 'MBWA'

Oral sources do not say how long the Meru lived in 'Mbwa'. What is recalled is that about
last decade of seventeenth century or the first
decade of eighteenth century, 'Mbwa' island was
invaded by a light-skinned people called 'Nguo
Ntune'. In 'Kimeru' language 'Nguo' denotes
clothes and 'Ntune' means red. Judging from the
linguistic connotation, Nguo Ntune could be
interpreted to mean two things. First, that the
people who invaded 'Mbwa' island were wearing 'red'
clothes. Second, that, the people who attacked
them were fair-skinned. The 'fair-skinned'
interpretation emanates from the fact that in Meru,
'Nguo' is sometimes symbolically applied to refer
to skin and one with a fair skin may be referred to
by the colour red (ntune). So a fair-skinned
person for instance would be called 'Muntu Umutune'
(a 'red' person). If this were to be the case
then,logically by 'Nguo Ntune' the people referred
to were a light skinned stock. Other than dwell on
semantics, let us state that, the Meru were
attacked by a people either with fair-skin or
wearing red clothes.
In their descriptions of their encounter with 'Nguo Ntune', the Meru point out that the invaders were very ruthless. According to Magana (01: 2-3-1991), 'the 'Nguo Ntune' used 'guns' to shoot us... they even beat us with cords'. The reminiscence of this Meru elder about the brutality meted out to them by the 'Nguo Ntune' is characteristic of what many other custodians of knowledge on the Meru attested to. The invaders waged war against the islanders beating them decisively. This defeat is explained by informants as the effects of 'Nguo Ntune's' use of guns against their spears and clubs. Informants also speak of the invaders craftsmanship in battle which involved ambush and the savage burning of their living shelters. After the defeat of which accounts vary as to how it was conducted, the 'Nguo Ntune' put the Meru into captivity in their own island.

Thus, a fear-lurking, immensely grisly period began for the Meru who served under their captors' whim. The duties with which the 'Nguo
Ntune' charged the Meru included farming, herding cattle and goats stolen from them by the invaders. They also procured ivory for their captors.

It is difficult to establish exactly who the Meru captors referred to as 'Nguo Ntune' were. In the seventeenth century, sporadic battles between the coastal towns and the Portuguese were experienced. The reasons for these wars which had turned the coastal towns into a field of battles were diverse. The most recurring of the causes was trade. Other than the Portuguese who attacked the coastal towns, skirmishes ensued occasionally amongst the Arabs and Swahili groups. It is possible that one of the coastal Arab groups or the Swahili invaded the 'Mbwa' island and enslaved the inhabitants.

The Meru informants are silent about the exact identity of 'Nguo Ntune.' It is not clear whether they were Arabs, Swahili or Portuguese. According to M'Ruciu (01:4-4-1991), 'Nguo Ntune' came and attacked us ... nobody knew whom they were'. Apart from failing to define who the people called 'Nguo Ntune' were, the reasons for their
invasion is still not clear. However, from 'Nguo Ntune's' interests, we can make out a few inferences.

First, as the invaders enslaved the islanders and subjected them to harsh treatment, it is likely they may have been a band of displaced people from other islands who were looking for new areas of settlement and were bitter about their earlier experiences. It is also probable that the invaders were after cheap slave labour to promote their commercial interests as they forced the Meru to gather and transport ivory to destinations of 'Nguo Ntune's' interest. This explanation however, does not bring us any closer to finding out who the 'Nguo Ntune' were. Whatever the case maybe, what the Meru emphasize is the brutal treatment meted upon them by the 'Nguo Ntune' which eventually forced them out of the island.

The relationship between the invaders and the islanders turned out to be very poor and the Meru felt the need to forge an escape for freedom.
The idea to run away was good but how to overcome the supposedly mightier 'Nguo Ntune' stood as one of the key stumbling blocks before them. The Meru elders took a brave decision to approach the 'Nguo Ntune' for permission to leave the island. The request made to 'Nguo Ntune' was met with a disappointing response.

Several difficult demands were asked by the 'Nguo Ntune' as conditions for permitting the Meru to leave the island. Then, as the Meru recall, they were led by a charismatic leader. The leader was called 'Koome Njue' who was entrusted with the responsibility to arbitrate for Meru's release from enslavement. We shall outline the conditions that 'Nguo Ntune' put before the Meru as the hurdles to be overcome in exchange for their freedom.

The story about the tasks which the Meru were to fulfill as conditions for their freedom is eloquently told, but as in the case of other stories about origins, each version bears its own peculiarities as a result of distortions occurring
over time. However, the main trends of the accounts concur. For our interest, we shall only emphasize the main traditions of the conditions and resolutions emphasized by informants. We shall ignore trivial disparities in the account.

One of the demands made had it that the Meru should produce sandals bearing the hair of a 'cow'. To this unreasonable demand, it is said that the prophet, 'Koome Njue' asked the elders to make the sandals from a dried skin of a cow, cut from the lower part of the neck (M'Mwarania 01: 3-4-1991, Kirigia Of: 5-2-1992). This initial task was overcome and the 'Nguo Ntune' asked for another demand.

The second task required that the Meru produce a calf 'which would excrete white dung'. 'Koome Njue' once more thought about it and advised that a calf be fed with white lime and milk. The result was satisfactory as required. This Meru ingenuity did not please the 'Nguo Ntune' and a third condition was imposed on the Meru.
The third condition demanded that the Meru remove a fruit from a deep hole inserted by 'Nguo Ntune.' The difficult part of the demand was that the Meru had to remove the said fruit without physically going into the hole. Neither should they use a stick to remove it. To this challenge, 'Koome Njue' asked the Meru to put sufficient water into the hole so as to get the fruit afloat. After this was done to the bewilderment and disgust of the captors, another task was set before the Meru, which turned out to be their final stage of struggle under the 'Nguo Ntune.'

The wisdom and tact displayed by the islanders in dealing with the problems posed by their captors amazed and infuriated the latter. The 'Nguo Ntune' demanded that the Meru make a long spear which would connect the earth with the sky. This task was insurmountable and proved the 'Nguo Ntune's height of arrogance and their unwillingness to release the Meru.
'Nguo Ntune' knew the Meru would not succeed in fulfilling the demand put forward. On realising their inability to fulfill this task, 'Koome Njue' felt that time had come to forge an escape. He told the captors that the task asked was hard and required about a week within which a great fire would be used to make the spear. However, the Meru did not intend to make a spear. All the preparations were calculated and false strategies to facilitate the Meru's escape from captivity. The fire which was made, is said to have been for forging iron, ostensibly meant to burn the Meru's dwelling shelters - a clever blackmail that would deter the 'Nguo Ntune' from discovering the trickery of 'Koome Njue.'

The story goes that 'Koome Njue', the esteemed prophet, asked for human sacrifice that would enable him foretell the safety of escape and how to cross the 'great waters.' Volunteers presented themselves before him and upon performing the necessary rites, he was able to pave way for the people to look for new places of settlement.
This version is diffused in religious mythology characteristic of many stories of origin about pre-colonial African societies. The legend almost alludes to the biblical testimonies such as that recounted about 'Moses' leading the Israelites from captivity in Egypt to Canaan. However, we shall not get entangled with scriptural or legend of other respective African societies, but judge the Meru perspective by its own distinctive tenets and integrity.

The traditional Meru story is told wittingly giving prominence to the wisdom of 'Koome Njue' who organized for the Meru to leave 'Mbwa'. What transpires from this is that, the escape from the island under the strict surveillance of 'Nguo Ntune' demanded shrewd and imaginative leadership. Whether that was solely seen in the person and genius of the famed 'Koome Njue' or another sage of the day, we are led to believe such leadership existed. Further, the story shows that the Meru knew that human abilities were beneath another powerful power, God, to whom their leader
sacrificed and this may explain why their origin story spot religious inclinations. The reference to persecution may tell us what sparked off the migration of the Meru from coastal settlement to the distant hinterland at the foot of Mount Kenya. The fear of possible re-capture and extended enslavement partly explains why the idea to settle in any area within the coastal proximity did not appeal to the Meru.

Diverse stories are given about the route taken and the obstacles encountered together with the adjustments that became a must in order to cope with realities obviously different from those encountered on the island. When the Meru departed from 'Mbwa', they followed the river Tana. The river was important in their movement because they were able to graze their livestock along the green pastures sprouting on the banks of the river. The Meru probably began to move from the coastal region at the close of seventeenth century or at the beginning of eighteenth century (Muriuki 1974:60). Fadiman (1982) argues that these people 'were living on the 'Manda'
island probably as late as A.D. 1700'. There is no consensus amongst scholars about the specific period when the Meru started their journey towards their present lands, but at least in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Meru were already on their way.

When the 'Mbwa' migrants left the island, and began entering the mainland, they assumed the name 'Ngaa' (Fadiman 1976: 147). 'Ngaa' is a name referring to the umbrella shaped thorny trees called 'Migaa' (acacia) which the migrants passed across before entry into the Mount Kenya zone. Meru itself is said to be a Maasai word acquired on arrival at Mount Kenya (Jacob 1965). Meru oral traditions however, consider the name as having existed even at the 'Mbwa' island. The tradition about 'Ngaa' is not widely known among the Meru informants. In fact, many informants emphasized repeatedly that the name Meru is the only one that existed in their lives. Earlier research done by Fadiman (1976) contend that the name 'Meru' was acquired on Mount Kenya and so far he is the only scholar known to this researcher who holds the view that Meru were once called 'Ngaa'.
We can draw conclusions about the two names: 'Ngaa' and 'Meru.' One, it is possible that the Meru may have known themselves as 'Ngaa' at one stage in their history. However, over time this disappeared probably as a result of the failing memories of the custodians of knowledge. Alternatively, it is possible that the name was applied temporarily at one stage of Meru history. The latter proposition might be possible in an instance where only a band of the migrant 'Mbwa' people assumed the name. It is not clear whether the term Meru was adopted before or after the Ameru's arrival in Mount Kenya, but it is a title accepted universally amongst Meru sub-
divisions as one which existed all through their history. We opt to adopt the case of Meru to mean the Bantu community living on the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya in preference to 'Ngaa' which is more uncommon and uncorroborated by existing traditions.

The Meru travelled inland along the river Tana for most of their journey from 'Mbwa' to the lower parts of Mount Kenya. M'Ruciu (OT: 14-3-1991) observes that, 'the river was important for fishing. Fishing was part of the migrants' economic activities. Floods and inhospitable swamp forced them occasionally to veer away and follow seasonal streams. All through the threat of enemies, possibly the infamous 'Nguo Ntune' pursuing them, heightened the resolutions to go further and further away from the coastal environment. The migrants' anticipation that an enemy might attack was frightening thought throughout their sojourn. Memories of 'captivity' at 'Mbwa' remained alive. In his reminiscence of the handed down tradition, Mwoga (0 I: 5-4-1992) says that ... 'long after leaving 'Mbwa' we feared the 'Nguo Ntune' ... we
different 'Miiriga' was maintained. Such interaction was in form of trade, intermarriages or blood brotherhood relationship ('Gichiaro').

People tended to lay their loyalty within their respectful 'Miiriga'. On Mount Kenya, the 'Miiriga' groupings evolved as centres of social and political activity where theoretical and practical affairs were dealt. When it was necessary the 'Miiriga' affairs extended to the sub-divisions and the Meru as a whole.

The relative ease and freedom to settle on any area encouraged the Meru to move and settle all over the territory. Also, economic interests played a significant role in the expansion of the 'Mbwa' migrant. While in search of suitable agricultural land or the need to hunt for a variety of game to be found in Meruland, bands of the migrants easily drifted out of contact. Various groupings settled in different parts of Meru building their loyalties more and more upon their respective 'Miiriga' groups than to the Meru at
large. This partly explains the fragmentary 'Mliriga' groupings that characterized Meru from about 1850 and continued to be the hub of socio-political affairs in the pre-colonial period.

In various places, the Meru set up 'Gaaru' (Warrior-barracks) as a defense measure. The location of a 'Gaaru' was partly determined by significant geographical conditions. Usually a hilly place was considered viable as warriors would be able to view the surrounding clearly. In addition, a place near a river was considered suitable. Meru rivers are important 'buffer' zones which could not be crossed easily especially during the rainy seasons when they are flooded. Thus the rivers were difficult to pass and stood as important 'barriers' against enemies into Meruland.

At any rate, the rivers were a handicap because they made it difficult for members of the society to interact frequently and easily especially in the rainy seasons.
The 'Mbwaa' migrants did not occupy the vast Meru territory overnight. Rather, the settlement of the people was a gradual process.

External influences mainly of the neighbouring societies such as Embu, Mbeere, Kikuyu and Maasai came to bear on the Meru. Both internal and external needs led to the creation of larger political cohesion within Meru to put up with the changing challenges. In the subsequent chapters, the evolution of political institutions and the inter-relationships of these institutions will be attempted. The relationship between the physical terrain, its settlement and the evolution of the political organization is further discussed in the subsequent chapter.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to establish the origin, migration and settlement of the Meru whose political history forms the central interest of the thesis. At the moment we 'infer' rather than make
definite conclusions about Meru origins in view of existing evidence. The main source of data from which the political reconstruction is attempted, is oral tradition handed down in the society. Oral tradition shows that, by about 1750, the 'Mbwa' migrants were in their present lands and rudimentary political ideas and formations were emerging. The group that oral tradition mentions, is the recent Bantu migrant said to have been living at 'Mbwa'. At Mount Kenya, this group adjusted their lifestyle from an island people to a highland stock. Significant institutions including the 'Mwiriga', 'Kama', Age-set system, and military units evolved providing an important form of political organization which is analyzed thereafter.
CHAPTER THREE

THE FOUNDING OF MERU 'MWIRIGA' *

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the 'Mwiriga' institution which was one of the institutions that made up Meru political organisation. The 'Mwiriga' is to be analyzed in the chapter as part of and not as a separate segment of the political whole of the community. Where applicable, the inter-relationship with other institutions is shown. More specifically, the chapter focuses on the origin of the 'Mwiriga' and the impact the period of settlement had on the evolution of the institution. In this, the effect of geographical and economic factors are discussed. The composition of the 'Mwiriga', the various duties and their actual execution and the hierarchy of authority is treated.

The chapter argues that the 'Mwiriga' was an important institution as it assumed a focal position within which political negotiations took

* 'Mwiriga' ('clan') - a socio-political unit, composed of several families.
place. An attempt is made to bring out the political whole of the community. Finally, the establishment of bloodbrotherhood relationship (Gichiaro) is discussed with a view to showing its significance as a form of the socio-political alliances that emerged within the 'Mwiriga' and Meru society at large.

THE ORIGINS OF THE 'MWIRIGA'

The origins of the Meru 'Mwiriga' dates back to a time when the 'Mbwa' migrants had not reached the foothills of Mount Kenya. Nevertheless, the institution achieved significance during and after the period of settlement. This is the period when clearly defined patterns and functions of the 'Mwiriga' became evident in the political establishment.

The Meru left 'Mbwa' when 'Ntangi' age-set was in power. In the same period when their journey started, the 'Mwiriga' institution was
found. There were three 'Miiriga' which came up then, namely: 'Njeru', 'Njiru', 'Ntune'. Taking those names in the literal terms would be erroneous as they were embodied into the linguistic metaphor of the people.

The names given to those initial 'Miiriga' had symbolic connotation of the time of crossing the 'un-identified' river which traditions claim was a main obstacle before the Meru set off for their freedom. The order of crossing the river was in three categories: those who crossed at night were called 'Njiru', the group that went over the river at dawn became 'Ntune' and the remaining section of the people that made it in the daytime were named 'Njeru'. Consequently, the names assumed the identity of the three respective groups.

According to Holding (1942:59), the 'Njiru', 'Ntune' and Njeru...'mean respectively the black people, the white and the red' This implies people of different colours. An
interpretation denoting that the three groups were different on the basis of colour would have no ground for truth. Considering that Meru is a Bantu language spoken by groups generally of black complexion, the community cannot therefore be defined or grouped into any 'race' or colour categories. This would be an unworkable categorization.

The clues into the meaning of the 'black' 'white' and 'red' can be gathered from the Meru's perception of different shades of the day. In their judgement, 'Njiru' (black) signify a night's pitch-darkness. It was on such dark nights when a section of the people crossed. The 'Ntune' (red) group was so named in reference to the colour of the sky at dawn. 'Njeru' (white) referred to the remnant group which crossed the river in broad daylight. There is a general belief among the Meru traditional sages that those three 'Miiriga' constitute the total number of Meru 'Miiriga'. Consequently, it is explained that subsequent 'miiriga' were in fact 'branches' of these three.
This argument, partly explains the reason why any attempts to provide a comprehensive list of the total sum of the many 'Miiriga' mentioned in the society is difficult. There is also an argument especially among the Igembe and Tigania sections of the Meru which consider some 'Miiriga' existing today in the region as having emerged independently of 'ntune', 'Njeru' and 'Njiru'. This version suggests that several other 'miiriga' developed under different circumstances. When meru were leaving 'mbwa', their leader ('Koome Njue' - possibly the first Meru 'mugwe') consulted with 'Mugongai' (a seer). Both agreed that sacrifice to their God (Murungu) was necessary. The volunteers for ritual performance were given names (Mboroki 1972; Kiunga 01: 13-1-1991). Again the names were diffused in symbolism.

The volunteers were 'Kiuna', 'Gaita', and 'Muthetu' (Nyaga 1986: 152 - 153; Rimita 1988: 10; Bernadi 1989:60). by volunteering, the three people showed exemplary bravery and dedication to the cause of freedom for their fellow
people. Subsequently 'miiriga' were named after them as a sign of honour. The 'miiriga' said to have emerged were 'Muntu-Waita', 'Amuthetu' and 'Kiuna'. Each of the name given had specific figurative meaning. The first volunteer, 'Gaita' was the man who chose to be like the biblical 'sacrificial lamb'. He volunteered to be sacrificed for the sake of his country men. 'Muthetu' took the second position to be sacrificed in case where the ritual of the first person did not bear the expected results. He was symbolic of 'Muthetu' (soil) meaning he chose to be like meru soil without a soul in that he was willing to overlook his personal worth to be sacrificed so as to save his people.

The third person, 'Kiuna' denoted one who volunteered and stood in readiness to offer himself for 'sacrifice' in the event of the rituals of the first human sacrifice failing. This was a necessary condition that had to be fulfilled before Meru left 'mbwa'.
However, one issue that should be addressed, is whether really the Meru culture permitted human sacrifice.

Two dimension of the issue about human sacrifice can be suggested. One, on the extreme, the story tellers' have deliberately exaggerated the story, therefore speaking of the persons associated with the origin of the 'miiriga' as very brave people who could transcend physical pain to save their fellow men from 'bondage' at 'Mbwa'. It is probable that their 'sacrifice' and cooperation in the struggle for freedom was construed as, or symbolically likened to 'actual physical sacrifice'. The second probable factor is that of 'incompetent' handling of traditional information which result to distortions of facts. Two forms of 'incompetence' noted during the field research include one, the diminishing memories of the elderly who fail to recall the past events correctly. Second, the successor of the dying remnants of elders, the younger people, take the
traditions with little regard. These two forms of weaknesses produce dual incompetence which exists and may persist thus distorting oral history and it is likely that this may result in the peculiar theory of the alleged human sacrifice.

During the course of migrating, 'Antubeguna', a name given to a separatist group stood yet another 'Mwiriga'. On the route, this group initially decided to separate from others and operate independently. However, after realising the need for the social cohesion of the community and the folly of breaking away, they extended their support to the main migrant group. Remnants of this 'Mwiriga' still live in pockets of Tigania and Igembe in such places as Uringu, Antuamwari and Ikana.

From this information, we get the idea that the 'Mwiriga' institution was 'hatched' at the initial movement of the Meru departure from 'Mbwa'. In their sojourn the Meru emphasized on the unity of the whole group. There was a kind of a 'nation' consciousness as opposed to a consciousness of the
'Mwiriga'. It was only after reaching their present lands that the fuller definition of the 'Mwiriga' in terms of bloodbrotherhood, residence in given geographical sections and functions became known. It was also at the present land that 'Miiiriga' unit were established.

There is every need to comment on the pattern that the journey took. The journey was based on two principle factors. These factors probably overshadowed the evolving 'Mwiriga' at that time. First the common experiences of ancestry at their 'Mbwa' residence bound the people together in a group. The 'Mwiriga' grouping was subsidiary. Second, the presence of 'Mugwe', a man of profound religious propensity, united the people. These two factors were the main focus of attention throughout the journey and they strengthened the migrant's sense of belonging. The cohesive organization which characterised the journey was noted by one of the pioneer researchers on Meru history who argue that during the 'exodus' the Meru became a 'single
nation' (Bernadi 1989:04). Fediman (1982:31) argues that the unity which characterised the migrants was to an extent of possessing common cultural institutions. Fediman does not however, identify the specific 'cultural institutions' which he implies were commonly possessed.

Unity was deemed especially important for overcoming any danger on the way (Magana 01: 14-4-1991; M'Maingi 01: 3-2-1991). The society's immediate interest was to follow their religious leaders' instructions to new places of settlement. The unity of any society is based on given and acceptable values. Among the Meru as noted earlier, unity and respect fostered on the common 'Mbwa' experience and the diligent leadership in the person of 'Mugwe'.

One interesting factor is that, on Mount Kenya, the unity that existed during the journey was replaced by new values' that brought 'new' patterns of organization. Instead of the single group establishing itself in whole the 'Mwiriga' groupings assumed major significance as
the centre of loyalty and cohesion. This put the question of the Meru as a 'nation' prior to 1750 to test and we need to discuss what 'new' values or challenges dictated the change.

To argue that the people began to separate from the main 'Mbwa' group questions the purpose of the 'Mugwe' as the guiding and unifying factor in the society. Did the presence of the 'Mugwe' all over sudden drift into oblivion? And did their common tradition cease?

The Meru 'Mugwe' did not only remain as an acceptable personality but turned into a overlord of the entire religious realm. He became the ultimate voice in political consultation. The prominence of 'Mugwe' remained indispensable and indisputable. The role of the 'Mugwe' was central and was taken with so much reverence. Bernadi (1989) in his well researched book says' "Mugwe niwe gitina kia Ameru", meaning that the dignitary was the Meru bedrock.
On the other hand, the Meru experiences of sharing common traditions and ancestry remained memorable. On different occasions when the Meru were faced with a natural disaster problem as that of famine or an external threat—(especially the incessant raids by their Maasai neighbours), the spirit of brotherhood and the need to mobilize as a single people become imperative. The reasons that contributed to the fragmentation were related to the peculiarities faced by the newcomers and we will now analyze these factors.

The period when the Meru were settling in Mount Kenya is very important in explaining the whole question of the pre-colonial history of the community. The changes that occurred had a lasting impact shaping their history in all forms—social, economic and political. The cohesion that marked the group found new challenges that started a gradual process of change and adjustment compatible with a sedentary living which they adopted.
The process of the organization which was adopted was typically fissisporous. This entailed a pattern where small bands moved from the original group and occupied the diverse geographical terrain (Magana 01: 5-3-1991, M'Rubane 01: -4-1991). In the words of Bernadi (1970), in the period after arrival, clans ('Miiriga') of the present highland groups underwent gradual fission. The groups moved all over to different parts of Meru. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Laughton (1944) who states that within Tharaka, 'sizeable bands from the main body' began to separate going into the forested mountains and the surrounding sections.

There is a significant name that emerged in Meru oral traditions regarding the place where Meru began to fragment into various groups. The name 'Kagairo' is evoked by Meru informants as an important place at which the migrant group from 'Mbwa' settled and from which they eventually fragmented to forge different pathways that led to the occupation of various parts of Meru. Other
closely related names like 'Ugairo' 'igairo', are mentioned. They probably are a distortion of the word 'Kagairo'. The place 'kagairo' is believed to be in Tharaka section of the Meru. When the Meru migrants left 'Mbwa', they eventually approached the lower parts of Mount Kenya at Tharaka region. It is in Tharaka and specifically at 'Kagairo' where the migrants forged to different directions (Laughton 1944; Bernadi 1989; M’Ituranthi 01: 14-4-1991; Mwitari 01: 15-4-1991).

The terms 'kagairo' 'igairo', or 'ugairo' should not be considered to imply a geographical location for such a location is non existent in Meru and would be confusing to locate it as a geographical area. 'Kagairo' simply means a place where a people 'divide' or something is 'divided'. The names were assumed to explain the 'act' of the division and where that occurred is supposed to have been in Tharaka. It is also a mistake to
regard 'Ugairo' as denoting a given period of time. It is this mistake which Fadiman (1982:31) subscribes to when he argues that in the 'period' that Meru refer as 'Kagairo' the 'Mbwa' waves divided into bands. This reference to 'Kagairo' as the period instead of 'place' is a fallacy which probably resulted from a deficient interpretation of oral information or the inability to comprehend and subsequently translate the term from 'Ki-Meru' language to English appropriately. 'Kagairo' was the final dispersal area where the Meru probably lived for an 'un-specified' period before settling in their present region.

Another less evoked place as yet a probable region where fragmentation took place is 'Nkondi' also in Tharaka. Among the proponents of this information are Mboroki (1972), Thuranira (01:23-4-1991), Magwa (01: 5-3-1991), Mpindi (01: 18-5-1991). 'Nkondi', is a place between two of the most prominent hills in Tharaka - Ntugi and Kijege. Ntugi in particular, is recalled and is even
incorporated into a memorable song about the events of the sojourn.

Songs, for the purposes of reconstructing the history of the pre-colonial Africa, where the oral traditions have been sustained by word of mouth, are important repositories of historical happenings. Every song however, cannot be taken as carrying the whole messages of historical events as they were sang to fulfil different interests in the society. However, the elements that have historical linkages cannot be ignored. A verse from one of the songs that touch on the moment of residence at Ntugi gives interesting illustrations. The verse goes thus:

Iraria ii U Mburi x 2
Iraria Irararira Ntugi
Iraria ii U Mburi!
The goats ate
They ate and 'slept' at Ntugi
The goats ate!
In this verse, there are two issues that we should explain; the terms 'Mburi' and 'Ntugi'. Ntugi is the name of a hill in Tharaka. In the verse, there is emphasis that Meru goats grazed at Ntugi and even spent a night there (Irararira - 'slept' at). The phrase 'slept at' was not a 'night's stopover'. It is symbolic of an actual living at the place overtime. In a society where words were loaded with symbolism, 'slept at' suggest an unspecified period in which the Meru settled at or within Ntugi hill in Tharaka. How long the Meru lived at Ntugi is not our immediate concern but our most essential question regards the mention of 'Ntugi' hill as a place where the Meru had a significant 'stopover' before taking advantage of the expansive surrounding. Of course the reference to 'Mburi' (goats) reminds us that, in their sojourn, goats were part and parcel of their domestic animals.

The conclusion that can be drawn from all these claims is that the Meru started to form into
groups at the time of settlement. Again, whether this was to facilitate settlement or not, the fact to note is that the division had an impact on the whole system of their organization. The actual place where the separation occurred may not be as yet known. The inference that can be made however, is that judging from the written information; and the oral interviews, Tharaka sub-division remains the most likely place where the fragmentation took place.

The reasons that may have led the Meru to scatter about the territory may not have been necessarily political. Neither were they solely social or economic. A combination of these explains best the nature of Meru settlement. Our concern will not be to deal with these causes except for the sake of establishing the impact of the pattern on the political organization of the Meru.
The early history of a people is an important basis for analyzing the institutions that emerge since institutions do not just evolve in a vacuum. Among the Meru, the period of settlement was both momentous and eventful. The period was characterised by change. The people had to adjust to a new environment; organize themselves socially, politically and exploit the economic opportunities available in the territory. Departing from the mere need for survival that characterized their journey from 'Mbwa' to a new ambition to establish strong economic basis on the land, was a task which entailed a gradual process of re-organization. This is the process in whose context the 'Mwiriga' institution is defined. To understand how the 'Mwiriga' entrenched itself, we shall first show how the settlement occurred as there is an intimate relationship between the settlement pattern and the evolution of the 'Mwiriga'.
In the period of settlement, economic interests were paramount. While residing at 'Mbwa', the Meru practised agriculture. During that period, they cultivated, hunted, fished and kept livestock (M'Makinye (OF: 13-6-1991). During the migration, circumstances could not allow such expansive economic practices. Ogutu (1986:50) recognizes that, 'hunting and gathering were the predominant' modes of economies. He suggests, these 'may have increased or diminished during the course of migration'.

In Meru territory, hunting and gathering did not remain the 'predominant' undertaking. rather, it was complementary to a range of other economic activities. Hunting was a specialised activity and consisted of hunting of various animals. Hunters were called 'Athi' (sig. Mwathi). In some parts of Meru a hunter is referred to as 'Muthoi or Muthogi', a term which was synonymous with bee-keepers. The Meru attempted bee-keeping as part of their economic activities.
'Athi' is a name which has sometimes been taken to mean those inhabitants who Mwaniki, Leakey and Muriuki argue lived in Mount Kenya forests. In our discussion, 'Athi' will only be viewed in reference to a section of 'Mbwa' migrants who took to hunting game as an economic activity, hence the words 'Athi ba Nyomoo' (animal hunters). Hunting as an economic activity was practised by some people in Meru who became distinct enough to constitute their own 'Miiriga' and norms that evolved to cater for their attendant interests. The whole process started when in small bands they scattered in pursuit of animals and honey. The forested areas presented plausible grounds for hunting varieties of game including buffalo (Mbogo), steinbok (Nthia) and bushback (Nkurungu).

Most of the hunters lived on the periphery of the forested areas maintaining symbiotic relationships with the agricultural community. Possibly because of living on the forest edge, Fadiman (1982) identified this group as the 'fringe community'. Within their bands, however, hunters
became very cohesive. This cohesion was largely founded on economic relationship and it came to impress upon the 'Mwiriga' institution in it that, the 'Athi' formed their own 'Miiriga'. The 'Athi' group was divided into two. There were the senior hunters called 'Wathi-Utune' and the junior hunters, namely 'Wathi Wiru'. The difference between the junior and senior hunters was a question of status achieved in the service of hunting. What is significant to note is the fact that due to their hunting interests, some Meru groups therefore chose to separate from their compatriots in pursuit of this economic livelihood (Mungania 01: 14-1991).

In the same vein, grazing dictated movement. On arrival, the Meru people had livestock in their possession. The pastures were not concentrated in any area, but in various places and this encouraged wandering while grazing (M'Inoti 01:26:4-1991). It was from the Tharaka section of the Meru that some of the migrants'
veered away from the main group herding their domestic animals.

About grazing, there is a misconception emanating from Laughton (1944) which should be redressed. He argues that the Meru groups 'followed where their cattle led', leading them to the places where they eventually settled. This interpretation suggests that the herds actually led the people other than the people leading them. This kind of argument derive from the fallacious theoretical perception of Laughton, a classic anthropological writer who believed there was an unusual attachment to cattle in the society such that owners of cattle would take after them.

In spite of sentiments of this type, what can be stressed is that because of the need to graze, the Meru gradually traversed the Mount Kenya territory in different directions hence, getting further and further from each other. Another of the major economic interest which led to further dispersal of the Meru was the search for suitable
agricultural land. This search made people to drift out of contact from each other as all could not cultivate crops on the same place. Meru informants indicate that many crops were planted in two of the usual planting seasons. The fertile soil was conducive to farming and right from the moment of settling, the newcomers took immediate advantage of the economic opportunity (M'Itiria 01: 5-5-1991).

The crops that were planted include: pigeon peas (nchugu); bananas (Marigo), sweet potatoes ('Ikwachi' bia murijo) pl. mirijo)/mwiteria), yams (inwa), arrowroots (matuma), finger millet (ugimbi), cowpeas (nthoroko), millet (mwere), sugar cane (igwa), sorghum (muya) burush millet and black beans (nchabi-pelichos lablab). The latter was a staple food of the community. According to Mburugu (01:11-4-1991), all those food crops were common in all parts of Meru. However, the concentration of the food crops was not the same in all the sub-
divisions. In the drier areas for instance, pigeon peas (nchugu) were more common than in the moist wet areas.

The relief of Meru had a significant impact on the agricultural economies. Bernadi (1970:13) a geographer, argues that, '... two mountain masses (Mount Kenya and Nyambene range) lend striking diversity to the physical landscape and hence to the resources available for agriculture.' In this diverse setting, the Meru evolved a distinct pattern of traditional agriculture. In the interest of exploiting the various economic opportunities, the Meru had to move to different parts. In effect, they re-organized themselves into different 'Miiriga.' Gradually therefore, they ceased from being a single group or 'nation' and formed several groupings.

'Geography' as Mwanzi (1976:VII) explains, 'may not fully explain why a people chose a certain area for habitation. But once settled in a given area, the geography of the area does affect a
people way of life’. This argument is acceptable and applicable in the case of the Meru in their pre-colonial history. The role of geography in understanding the organization of a society can be construed as part of the complexity of relationship that establishes the way of life of a community.

Diarra (1981:316) rightly states that, ‘each community has reacted in its own way to its surroundings’. Though geographical environment is acceptibly a pertinent factor in the organization of a people’s history, no community responds with similar exactness with another because of environmental disparities, which prompt each society to be analyzed against its specific place. On the whole, for Africa, to use the words of Diarra (1981:316), 'it is important to look at certain geographical peculiarities which can throw light on the geographical and political history'.

Among the Meru, the geographical conditions played a role in the type of political organization that evolved. For instance, Fadiman (1982:27).
states that the 'Meru military concepts and strategies have always been primarily influenced by the surface features and ecological pattern of Mount Kenya.' During the settlement era, Meru physical features influenced the choice of the place to inhabit (Mburugu 01: 14-4-1991). The ridges, rivers and land fertility influenced the concept of a good place to settle in view of its economic viability and security (Mutegi 01: 18-4-1991). A 'ridge-top' was considered important because it enabled a good view of the surrounding. This was an important security measure. The well drained hilly areas were also conducive to the cultivation of a variety of food crops.

We should point out that the hilly areas were not necessarily the only areas where the migrants considered ideal for security arrangements. It is significant to note this because the hilly grounds were not seclusively inhabited for security reasons. The hunters preferred the edges of the forest and they offered advice to the agricultural community regarding the
insecurities as they knew how to scout better along and into the forested areas. The selection of the places where the military barracks were located was determined by many factors including geographical suitability. The place where such a military barrack ('Gaaru') was developed was expected to be accessible to rivers and a clear vicinity to enable the warriors to have a clear view of the surrounding. Although the warriors, as a must, built artificial fortresses with sticks and sometimes reinforced them with stones, where the environment had features conducive to defence, it was most attractive.

The presence of Mount Kenya standing enormously above the sea level had a lasting impact on the inhabitants. The Mount Kenya whose age dates back to the eruption in tertiary times (Schaemann 1955:5) and the more recent Nyambene range provide rich volcanic soils on their slopes. They also provide relief rainfall. This made the slopes of both Nyambene and Mount Kenya favourable
for habitation because of their agricultural potential.

Various rivers were and still are important to the community. The major of the rivers include: Mutonga, Kathita, Mara, Ntunguu, Ruguti among others, which are deeply entrenched into the ground creating valleys that make them difficult to cross. Unlike in the present period when bridges are constructed to facilitate movement, the situation was different in the pre-colonial period when crossing rivers was attempted on logs; a number of which were occasionally swept away in rainy seasons. The rivers inevitably acted as 'buffer' valleys between one 'Mwiriga' and another. This had consequences on the community in it, that contact was discouraged by the dangers of crossing the deep rivers.

Therefore, different families clustered in their chosen areas with the rivers often forming natural and rather arbitrary boundaries. The general unaccessibility amongst different 'Mwiriga'
led to isolation. Solidarity shifted slowly from the compact migrant group to the 'Mwiriga' institution. These individual 'Miiriga' evolved into distinct entities over time. This created disparities which were disadvantageous on occasions of external attacks. The smaller 'Miiriga' were vulnerable to external attacks as is shown in a later chapter. During internal problems like major famines which occasionally struck the society, the 'Miiriga' groupings were found incapable of handling the catastrophe singularly. In fact, it was the creation of 'Biama', important Meru socio-political councils that bridged the geographical and other disparities which tended to distance the 'Miiriga'. It will be seen in a subsequent chapter that the councils went beyond the 'microscopic' level of 'Miiriga' to penetrate most of Meru sub-divisions and by the beginning of twentieth century, the whole Meru country was being initiated into a cultural, linguistic and political as a whole.

Right from the start, the Meru waged war against groups of 'Uru' (Maasai) and 'Mwoko'
(possibly the Rendille). The Boran who were drawing towards Igembe and Tigania directions also proved to be menacing cattle raiders. Occasionally, the Embu raided the Chuka subdivision (Mwaniki 1985:28), with more protracted battles remembered in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Those raids which will be expounded profoundly thereafter, mounted a general insecurity that made the Meru exploit their physical environment cleverly as a form of defence. Therefore each 'Mwiriga' had not only to set up a military barrack (Gaaru) but had also to choose its location intelligently within its geographical location. Each 'Mwiriga' identified a settlement area with ideal geographical location for military purposes.

The way the environment influenced pre-colonial societies of Africa, was dependent on the type of environment in question. Lensiki (1966:161) writes that, 'in the development of pre-colonial Africa-political systems, the environment
had significant role to play'. In Tanzania for instance, Kimambo (1969) brings out succinctly the inter-connectedness between the environment and political developments of the Pare people summing up the inter-relationship thus. 'environment factor had a significant influence on historical development upon Pare'. Upon Meru, there existed inter-relationship between the environment and the choice to settle in given geographical areas and the economic practices. This emphasis on the inter-connectedness however, cannot be taken, or emphasized arbitrarily as all history answers are not produced by geography.

The consequences of the environment on the Meru were not always positive - there was a marked disadvantage caused by the physical features. The rugged or uneven terrain reinforced by rivers cutting deep incisions into the igneous rock, acted against societal solidarity founded in the period of migration. Because of geographical delimitations, the 'Mwiriga' grew within given territorial areas with each 'Mwiriga' wielding
authority and loyalty of the membership within. This established the 'Miiriga' as 'exclusive entities' yet all these groupings were a 'compact entity' earlier at the period of their residence at the legendary 'Mbwa' 'home' and up to the moment of settlement.

The separate 'clans' ('Miiriga') became more distinct and cohesive in this period of settling (Bernadi 1970:36). Bernadi does not tell us how solidarity was vested in the 'Mwiriga'. Neither does he show us how fragmented the society became. The 'Mwiriga' assumed a kind of a loosely independent characteristic with its own authority. There was some form of autonomy at the early period of settlement, and it is this background of the 'Mwiriga' assuming their own independence that can explain the fragmentary political pattern that characterised the society. This should not whatsoever be equated with infamous statements such as 'statelessness' or be seen as a form of 'primitive' formations. Rather, it should be appreciated that at this level, the Meru evolved
the 'Mwiriga' institution. Ideas, decisions, negotiations and socio-political dealings done at the 'Mwiriga' level gave the institution its significance and status to be seen as a political enclave.

There is no consensus reached regarding the number of Meru 'Miiriga' in existence. Laughton who made some feverish attempt to count them, drew a total of eighty six units. Yet even that number does not correspond to other scholars' observations. The records of a handful of scholars including Maxwell report (1929:29); Holding (1942:59); Lambert (1950:10); Dundas (1915:238, 240:229) and Chapion (1912:84, 85-89) do not agree on the number of Meru 'Miiriga'.

The enumeration of the 'Miiriga' formed before or after the arrival of 'Mbwa' migrants would be a good way of reconstructing the people's history. Contemporary informants in Meru, believe that the 'Miiriga' were more than one hundred, yet they fail to recollect the names of those 'Miiriga'
or even provide a chronological order of their formation. Mere names cannot give the values attached to the 'Miiriga' and their function in the society. The names assumed at the start (especially 'Njeru', 'Ntune' and 'Njiru') were sustained but new names also emerged as the 'Mwiriga' institution continued to grow with further fusions. Moreover, the names can be viewed as part of the diverse characteristic which the 'Mwiriga' institution realised.

The position of the 'Mwiriga' in the political arena merits special attention. We should note that, the various 'Miiriga' groupings, continued to consolidate within given geographical areas of residence. This led to consolidation in those areas. In the long run, this led to the identifiable major sub-divisions recognized as living in specific geographical residence and encompassing the 'Miiriga' groupings therein.

The emergence of the 'Miiriga' in real sense, occurred in the period of settling in the
present Meruland. There is an impression that at that time the community was 'fragmented'. This impression emanates from the fact that prior to this time, a nation is said to have been built or at least there existed a deep consciousness of the people as one stock.

The economic and geographical factors, provide an acceptable explanation of the splitting of Meru into groups. In reality, the splitting was not anything more than the creation of the 'Miiriga'. The evolution of the 'Miiriga' was a stage in Meru historical development. It should not be seen as a stage of disagreement or one in which the people feel apart because of any undue reasons. The existence of the 'Miiriga' did not lead to severing interaction among the Meru. However, it enabled people to lay loyalty to their respective 'Miiriga' and subdivisions before extending it to Meru at large (Muthamia 01: 25-4-1991). People talked about the 'Miiriga' they
belonged to more oftenly than they regarded themselves as 'Meru' people. In their conversation therefore, the people evoked the 'Miiriga', making less reference to the word 'Meru' though they were conscious they were all members of 'Meru' society and further children of the 'Mbwa' legend.

The cohesion within and between given 'Miiriga' should not be exaggerated. Sometimes animosities developed within or between the 'Miiriga' leading to feuds occasionally overshadowing the fact that those 'Miiriga' were 'branches' of Meru. This can be explained partly as the result of the peoples operation in different geographical settings that made the 'Miiriga' the principle enclave upon which both the theoretical and practical social and political affairs of the society were based. In spite of the geographical distance which sometimes seemed to be the natural and 'unfortunate' handicap to social and political consciousness of the group, interaction did exist.
Trade, intermarriages and blood brotherhood brought people together, and even reminded them of their common history. Again, groups of 'Miirega' merged creating major Meru sub-divisions that have continued to be reckoned to date such as Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Mwimbi Chuka and Tharaka. Both the process of mutual interaction and the need to create stronger defensible units encouraged the merging of 'Miirega' into single strong sub-divisions.

So far we have discussed the general development of the 'Mwiriga'. We have also examined the impact of the period of settlement on the moulding of the institution. We have also seen that the various 'Miirega' gradually merged to form larger sub-divisions. In a later chapter, the 'Biama' are seen to evolve within those 'Miirega'. An important aspect that needs to be examined is the composition of the 'Mwiriga'.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE 'MWIRIGA'

The establishment of the 'Mwiriga' was effectively entrenched by the middle of eighteenth
century. Being a member of the 'Mwiriga' was not a privilege of any individual or any special part. It was a right of birth! All the members of the Meru did not belong to the same 'Miiriga'. There were many 'Miiriga' which increased with population increase. In Meru, nobody could talk of not belonging to a 'Mwiriga' because one was born into it - becoming a member by birth. Before marriage, women belonged to the 'Miiriga' of their parents. After marriage, a woman joined the 'Mwiriga' of her husband. Nobody would wish to be severed out of his or her respective 'Mwiriga' as that would mean being ostracised from society. In circumstances where one failed to conform to the norms and authority of a 'Mwiriga', such a consequence as being cut off from it, could be imposed which meant being denied participation in the society's affairs and practices embodied in the institution.

Among the Tharaka, it was after circumcision that an individual was recognized as a full member of the 'Mwiriga'. This is when the society took the individual as an adult licensed both to marry and partake in oaths that bound many
society's secrecy especially in decision-making and approval of owning property (Mpindi 01: 14-2-1991; Magwa 01: 13-3-1991).

Strangers were also accorded membership status among the Meru 'Miiriga'. When a stranger sought refugee status, consultations with the elders' councils were made. The elders approved or disapproved the strangers' admittance into the Mwiriga. Usually the acceptance of a stranger was accompanied by certain fee, in most cases consisting of domestic animals, goats, sheep and cows. Loyalty and commitment to the interest of the Mwiriga was expected (Mutwambugu 01:5-2-1991).

The act of being initiated into a 'Mwiriga' was referred to as 'being born into' (Guchiarwa) a 'Mwigiga'. Through blood-brotherhood, many members of the Maasai origin were accepted in the Imenti and Tigania 'Miiriga'. They were initiated into three 'Miiriga' as a way of establishing amicable relationship between the two societies which helped
diffuse possible feuds. In Katheri a number of Maasai people sought membership into Meru 'Mwiriga'. During the age-set of 'Nturutimi', of 1854, many Maasai were initiated into Meru 'Mwiriga'. In 1890s, during Meeme, 'Kiriamana' and Muthamia age-sets, more groups of the Maasai who were escaping from civil strife back home and the effects of drought and famine entered Meru. They settled in Imenti and Tigania 'Mwiriga' where they were accepted after meeting appropriate traditional requirements.

Many Meru families sometimes lived in the same area. Thus, a ridge would sometimes be occupied by members closely related by blood. This means that, the 'Mwiriga' could not only be defined in terms of the geographical residence. Rather, both geographical residence and blood relationships were the appropriate ways in which to regard the membership into the institution.

The continued expansion within the territory found families moving to settle on areas
far from those of their parents or grandparents. Over time, and as a result of the geographical distancing, members of the same 'Mwiriga' could be found far away from each other (Kaumbuthu OL: 12-5-1991). This created the dangers of members of the same 'Mwiriga' engaging in inter-marriages which was not only socially prohibited but was perceived as a practice that could result in catastrophes for both the victims and the 'Mwiriga' at large. Additionally, the possibility of the same members engaging in warfare against each other, was anticipated. In many instances therefore, the Meru evoked their 'Miiiriga' even in ordinary conversation.

To establish amicable relationship between the 'Miiiriga', bloodbrotherhood alliances were forged. The alliances began as relationship between 'Miiiriga' but gradually grew into a complex set of relationship between major Meru subdivisions and even extended to include the neighbouring communities. The general
bloodbrotherhood (Gachiaro) relationship took place as early as the first decade of nineteenth century and became a common practice throughout the rest of the Meru pre-colonial period.

The expansion of 'Mwiriga' created a situation where geographical residence was not the absolute way of defining the 'Mwiriga' in which one lived. At times, quoting one's 'Mwiriga' and not their geographical location or home was possible. Some of the original names of 'Miiriga' like Njiru, 'Njeru' and 'Ntune' were oftenly evoked. Holding (1942:31) states that in 'giving his(clan/'Mwiriga') name, a person will sometimes add that, he is 'Anjiru', 'Njeru' or 'Ntune'. Thus, the criteria for specifying the membership of a person's 'Mwiriga' was based more on the names given than where the 'Mwiriga' lived in the land. Having outlined the founding and the composition of the 'Mwiriga', we now turn to analyze its duties. It will be illustrated that the 'Mwiriga' was the hub of social and political affairs and that the
institution's duties were inter-related with those of other institutions.

THE ROLE OF THE 'MWIRIGA' IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The 'Mwiriga' was the hub of social and political interaction amongst the Meru. The institution was like a theatre in which political drama unfolded. The analogy here is suggestive of the significance of the institution. It was the basis and sometimes the backbone of interaction.

The functions of the institution cut across the social, political and economic spectrum. Its duties did not solely revolve around the institution but were also intertwined with such other institutions as 'Biama' age-set systems and military units. The ultimate role of the institution was to safeguard members within and without the society.

As discussed, all members of the community were members of a 'Mwiriga'. Their total way of
life constituted the character of the institution. To enable the institution to function, it was vested with authority diffused in the representative individuals within the institution.

Authority in Meru began in the family. The family was the smallest social and political unit in the society. In the family, authority stemmed from the father. It is important to understand the basis of authority from the family level in order to appreciate the patriarchal nature of the 'Mwiriga'.

The term 'father' refers to the 'head' in any family. A family in a Meru setting basically was composed of a man, his wife (or wives) and children. One can talk of wife or wives because both polygamy and monogamy co-existed. In Meru there were no 'female husbands'. Leadership in the family was essentially in the hands of the family head. He was also the representative of his family in the 'Mwiriga's social and political affairs.
When a man who was the head of a family died, his eldest son would assume authority. The son would work in liaison with his mother and the perternal uncles and cousins. When such a son was a minor, he would not assume authority until a time when he was mature. Maturity in Meru customs was marked by circumcision. So, it was after circumcision that a son could assume full authority of his deceased father. According to Njogu (01:1-3-1991) 'mwana uria Mukuru njaa anga'anene na ithe' i.e. the elder son in a home is the equivalent of his father. The family should be seen as the root of authority. Power sharing between the women and men at the family level was not equitable. Although women played a significant role in the social and economic life, the political system was male-dominated. This was clearly demonstrated at the family level where a son was to assume the authority of his father in an event of death. Although decisions made by the eldest son were made in consultation with his mother, the son was more dependent on the advice of his uncles and cousins.
than the mother. A significant bias that encouraged the men to dominate the political affairs, is the type of socialization that took place after initiation of boys. Usually the initiates were taught that the 'Mugongo' (country) was in their hands and not the women. This type of encouragement inculcated a deep sense of male chauvanism that was even hostile to women as the men considered themselves as the sole authority. This made it seem as if there was only one form of authority in Meru where women were subservient to men's whims.

In a case where a man had no son to inherit him, his brothers or uncles would be the 'caretakers' of the family playing the role of the men. They assisted the deceased's wife. When the family head was afflicted by any major problems such as sickness, insanity or anything else which made him incapable of carrying out his duties effectively, the elder son was taken as the appropriate person to take over the family leadership.
In a situation where the son would be uncircumcised, he could not assume duties fully until he went through the rite. This is because tradition did not consider uncircumcised boys as adults. So a brother or perternal uncle or cousin to the deceased or incapacitated men, would assume the responsibility until such a young person would be considered eligible as an adult.

From the family level, the 'Mwiriga' was the next body which wielded authority. This is where the authority of the father would be checked. 'Mwiriga' is the unit where the society affairs revolved. In Meru as already shown, each individual was a member of a given 'Mwiriga'. the 'Mwiriga' was considered an essential institution in which affairs were discussed. It was the second level after the family and its authority therefore surpassed that of the family units. The heads of different families constituted the body that manned the 'Mwiriga' affairs. The 'Mwiriga' as a unit was formed by an amalgam of families. The 'Mwiriga' discharged its duties through the 'Biama' existing within it. Our chapter four specifically examines the 'Kiama' institution.
When the pioneer 'Mbwa' migrant were settling; the 'Miiriga' groupings were small in population. Overtime, the population was expanding. The 'Miiriga' was assuming a very central role in the affairs of the people. People scattered in different parts of the land and faced different challenges. Inter-family quarrels over land, theft, murder or other crimes, were problems that the 'Miiriga' sometimes faced. Minor problems were solved by individual persons, or a few elders. However, crimes that could not be solved by individual families, or a few elders within a village became an affair of the 'Miiriga'. A crime like murder, was a 'Miiriga' problem, and
sometimes required resolutions from the supreme Meru 'Kiama', 'Njuri Ncheke'.

The heads of different families within a 'Mwiriga' constituted the governing body of a given 'Mwiriga'. The 'Mwiriga' heads selected amongst themselves special 'agambi', people with charismatic qualities who in actual sense stood as the 'Mwiriga' leaders. These leaders formed a specialized council at the 'Mwiriga' level called 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga'. The social and political affairs of the 'Mwiriga' were directly placed under these charismatic elders.

The 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga' was an essential body within the 'Mwiriga' as it was vested with the authority over the members therein. It performed the legislative, executive and the judicial roles of the 'Mwiriga'. The social political oriented issues were discussed by the 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga'.

The military units were under the 'Mwiriga'. Within the military units, a specialized warriors' council was established
called 'Ramare', sometimes referred to as 'Ramare ya Nthaka (Council of warriors). All military functions were governed by 'Ramare' in liaison with the 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga'. The questions of initiation of boys, their training and assignment of duties were directly under 'Ramare'. However, because the warrior units were part of the 'Mwiriga', it was the 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga' which remained as the overlord of the military affairs.

The social aspects as marriages, various forms of entertainment including songs and dances were organized by the 'miiriga'. The 'Mwiriga' should not be seen as an institution of resolving disputes. Rather, it should rightly be interpreted as the hub of social and political negotiations. The 'Mwiriga' had the authority to discipline an individual who committed a crime. The punishments imposed were commensurate with the nature of crime in question.
The issues arising within the 'Mwiriga' were brought forward to the 'Njuri ya 'mwiriga'. The elders met to discuss any issue brought forward. The venue where the 'mwiriga' met to discuss was located within the geographical area of the 'Mwiriga'. However, the venue did not remain permanent. When the number of members of a given 'Mwiriga' increased, some of the people left to settle in other parts. In the nineteenth century, members belonging to a certain 'Mwiriga' could be found in various parts of the country.

Population increase was not the only factor that encouraged people to move to other areas. Traders would choose areas of their own trading convenience. Warfare also sometimes displaced people and made them to move away from their area. This was the case in the middle of nineteenth century when the tension and feuds between Maasai and some Imenti 'miiriga' caused some Imenti people to scatter to different places when diplomatic relationship failed. So, a complex of factors made people to move and consequently live away from the
initial geographical location of their 'miiriga'. As a result, therefore, the venue for meetings was changed from time to time as need be. The permanently established venue was that for 'Njuri Ncheke' (Meru Supreme Council) which was located at 'Nchiru' in Tigania. The 'Njuri ya Mwiriga' discussed 'Mwiriga' affairs at the venue of their own convenience.

The length of time within which the 'Mwiriga' elders sat to discuss the 'Mwiriga' affairs was determined by the nature of issues which were to be tackled. Generally, in the settling of disputes between two individuals or two families, the 'Mwiriga' elders chose a day and the convenient meeting place. The discussion would take a day or even several weeks until a resolution was reached. Where a problem could not be solved by the elders through discussions and consultations, such other form as oathing was adopted. For instance, to ascertain whether a suspected thief stole or not, an oath was sometimes administered in public. One common form of oathing
in Meru was that in which a goat was supposed to be beaten to death while some words were invoked. A victim in a case was to beat the goat with a stick repeating words advised by the elders administering the oath. This was a form of oathing where one was to swear that he or she did not commit an alleged offence. It was assumed that, whoever accepted to beat a goat before a jury composed of elders and consequently lied would die as the killed goat. This form of oathing is discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

The 'Mwiriga' had a responsibility over its members. It was the duty of the institution to safeguard the interest of its people. In the second half of eighteenth century, the 'Mwiriga' was evolving norms which became the governing principles for its members. There were norms to be observed in all areas, social, religious and political. In all, respect for the elders was to be taken seriously. The elder people in the society were usually accorded respect especially in
views of the fact that it was from their ranks that the leaders of the 'Mwiriga' and the whole Meru country drew.

In the nineteenth century, the 'Mwiriga' was a centre of activity. All forms of activities were initially dealt with at the 'Mwiriga' level before being taken further to the most authoritative jury, the 'Njuri' 'Ncheke' when need be. People looked to their 'Mwiriga' wherever there was anything for discussion which would not be dealt with at the family level.

In the family level, we saw that men tended to dominate the political-oriented affairs. We must also add that the women played a role in that unit because they were indeed the ones who advised the young people about their adult roles. Although after circumcision the initiates' life was dependent on other men's wishes, women still would give words of advice and caution to their sons. They would, for instance, advise them to adhere strictly to the society's norms. It also happened that in homes where women had husbands
who were 'agambi', such women also discussed with their respective 'agambi' some of the judicial matters. This was at an informal level but their inputs no doubt was incorporated in the 'agambi's formal discussions in public meetings. The only anomaly is that, rarely did men want to quote women in public meetings. Rather, men would quote oftenly other notable 'agambi', either living or dead. This 'male-ego' denied the women a voice in the public meetings and also a chance to contribute fully to the political organization of the Meru.

Women however, organized their own private meetings in which they discussed matters affecting their lives. On some occasions, they would meet to discuss brutal treatment such as unjustifiable beating. On more private aspects of their lives, they would discuss cases in which irresponsible men failed to fulfil their marital obligations. These would range from failing to provide shelter, or material form such as foodstuff. In a situation where a man also failed to attend to or participate in the procreational obligation of marriage without
reasonable cause such as impotence, or any other form of disability, women would recommend some form of punishments where they considered a man guilty. The punishments ranged from attempts to ridicule the man in question in songs, cursing or refusing to serve and attend any functions conducted by such a man. In some cases, the women would take their problem to the 'Njuri ya 'Mwiriga' when they deemed it necessary. Their case would be listened to and appropriate action taken.

One would correctly argue that various forms of activities were carried out at the 'Mwiriga' level. It was an institution which evolved in the nineteenth century as the centre of social, political and religious activities. Religious activities such as offerings, sacrifices were essentially conducted at the 'Mwiriga' level though major aspects went across inter-'Mwiriga' or the Meru at large.

The 'Mwiriga' existed as important points of political negotiations. In the Meru social and
political process alliances were established between the 'Miiriga' or the major Meru subdivisions that emerged. We shall look at the nature of the alliances.

**BLOODBROTHERHOOD RELATIONSHIPS (GICHIARO)**

'Gichiaro' is a word which refers to a type of relationship that the Meru evolved at the beginning of nineteenth century. To start with, this was intended to perpetuate good co-existence within the society, but extended to be an integral diplomatic alliance between the Meru and neighbouring people especially the Maasai. In this respect therefore, 'Gichiaro' is an important landmark in Meru political historiography.

Within Meru, 'Gichiaro' relationship transcended the mere relationship between two 'Miiriga' to embrace the sub-divisions. In Kimeru, 'Gichiaro' means 'Kugirana' i.e. entering into a bond which one could not sever without running into adverse risks (Maingi 01:23-4-1991). When a person
entered into a relationship of this kind, he was referred to as having been 'born into'. The very idea of striking new relationship is what was equated with the act of being 'born'.

The 'Gichiaro' had at least three notable purposes. First the 'Gichiaro' was established in order to bind members of the same 'Mwiriga', who because of expansion drifted from each other. Thus, there was need to draw them together, if not to remind them that they belonged in the same 'Mwiriga'.

Second, 'Gichiaro' was entered between two 'Mwiriga' which may not originally have been the same or members from different communities. This was done for specific reasons including where it was necessary to establish alliances for military combat or in a case where one 'Mwiriga' made an alliance with another in order to avoid future feuds. Third, 'Gichiaro' could be a form of restoring relationships initially established in the ancestral home 'Mbwa'. 
All these purposes created a mutual relationship which was accompanied by some prohibitions. Two common prohibitions were that members of 'Gichiaro' were not to marry amongst themselves and second, they were not to enter into any battles against each other. These prohibitions were made because 'Gichiaro' made people feel as if they were siblings who shared a womb, hence of common blood (M'Mwarania 01:12-5-1991).

Before a further examination of the role of 'Gichiaro' among the Meru, let us briefly attempt an analysis of the people who had 'Gichiaro' relationship with each other. As the 'Gichiaro' relationship had spread widely not all the 'Miiriga' could be examined. We shall concern ourselves with major sub-divisions. Lambert attempted comprehensive record of the general pattern of 'Gichiaro' alliances within Meru, but did not exhaust the situation. He made the following record.
## Gichiaro Relationship in Meru Pre-Colonial Period

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### Table 1.

**Source:** Lambert (1956) *Kikuyu social and political institutions.*

**Key:** In the table capital G denotes Gichiaro relationship.
There are obvious conclusions that can be drawn from this table. First, there is virtual absence of 'Gichiaro' alliances between the Chuka and any other part of Meru sub-divisions. Second, the Muthambi seem unusual with practically 'Gichiaro' relationship with all the other sub-divisions except the Chuka who were under siege for most of the pre-colonial period. They were under attack from all sides both from the Meru 'Gaaru' and military units of Mbeere and Embu (Mwaniki 1982). As such, they found their surrounding hostile and that is clearly shown by the lack of alliances with other Meru congeries.

The other Meru sub-divisions established relationship with Muthambi division because of two reasons. First, the Muthambi had a strong 'Gaaru' with powerful warriors and it was important that the other groups establish an alliance with it. Second, Muthambi was near Chuka, the arch-rival of other Meru groups. This meant that any attempt to attack the Chuka could not be possible because Muthambi were in their way. So Muthambi was considered as
an important strategic point. From there Meru sub-divisions could scheme for an impending battle with the Chuka and even replenish their foodstuff. Muthambi would spy on behalf of other.

The Chuka were a strong military group. The Muthambi military strength was less than that of the Chuka. So, the Muthambi people on their part felt the inherent insecurity and sought to befriend all other Meru groups so that they could come to her rescue whenever the Chuka attacked.

From 1870 to 1900 Chuka experienced its worst battles in remembered history (Orde-Brown 1935; Fadiman 1982; Mwaniki 1982). In these battles, the Chuka lost part of the land in the late 1880s which actually formed Muthambi sub-division. As a result, the Chuka attempted the 'gichiaro' alliance as a safety valve to the insecurity lurking about.

this is where Lambert's table fails to tell us about Chuka alliance with any group. It is
actually an anomaly to totally consider Chuka as having had no 'Gichiaro' alliance in the pre-colonial period. What can be advanced is that the Chuka sought this alliance purely for military convenience.

Recent research among the Chuka shows that Chuka had some 'Gichiaro' relationship with some Meru sub-divisions. According to Mburugu of Kaburu age-set (OI:11-4-1991), the Chuka had alliance with both Miitine and Tharaka. Miitine was a section of Imenti sub-division. His allegation however, that Chuka had the relationship with Muthambi is doubtful because in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Chuka was under serious threat and Muthambi was the springboard from which attacks were often organized. In the first decade of twentieth century, a colonial station was started at Chuka. This was the beginning of the colonial threat which had adverse effects on the people. For instance, such practice as 'Gichiaro' relationship was not recognized by the British
administrators. They failed to understand the political structure of the society.

The alliances between Chuka and other groups were rather fluid as they were basically built on the basis of military interests and not on a firm foundation of permanent friendship. This was because of the suspicion that had developed and hostility which isolated Chuka and veiled her from easy and mutual interactions with other 'Miiriga' of Meru.

One major purpose of 'Gichiaro' as illustrated was the need to establish friendly relationship. 'Gichiaro' put a stop to enmity and established peace. Additionally the alliance was able to establish the relationship of those 'Miiriga' that overtime drifted far from the original residence of the 'Miiriga'. Mixing freely was not just a privilege but a right to people bound by the alliance.

There were limitations of the 'Gichiaro'. One, the prohibition not to marry from 'Mu-
Gichiaro's (one to whom a relationship existed), was a limiting factor. The more groups of 'Miiriga' entered into 'Gichiaro' relationship, so did such 'Miiriga' limit chances of getting 'wives' or 'husbands' in those areas. This was essentially a social disadvantage. Sometimes such option, though socially disadvantageous was taken - it was considered as a necessary social sacrifice to create the 'Gichiaro' relationship because of the accruing political benefits. It helped reduce military hostilities within Meru. Also, there was a chance to establish strong military organizations which could combat external threat. The Chuka for instance found the 'Gichiaro' alliance most necessary especially in the late nineteenth century in order to diffuse the military hostilities from neighbouring 'Miiriga' groups.

'Gichiaro' relationship was also extended to the Meru neighbours. It was seen as applying effectively within Meru and therefore, was viable for adoption to establish peace within those people that were a threat and menace to the Meru. One of
the 'Gichiaro' alliances recollected in Meru, is that which was created with the Maasai.

The Maasai lived alongside Meru right from the period of Meru settlement at Mount Kenya to about 1908, when the British colonialist invaded the community. The Maasai often raided the Meru for cattle and the Meru fought them back. However, from about the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Maasai started going into 'Gichiaro' relationship.

The Momonyot section of the Laikipia Maasai settled in Katheri and established bloodbrotherhood relationship. Katheri section of Imenti subdivision was once a great enemy of the Maasai. However, because the Maasai passed through Katheri on their way to attack the Meru 'Miiriga' and its proximity to the forests which provided ideal places to hide, the Maasai sought the 'Gichiaro' relationship with them. The Maasai not only established the relationship but proceeded even to settle among the Katheri. From this place, they
combined with the warriors of Katheri 'Miiriga' to wage war against other Meru groups. Again this enabled the Maasai of Laikipia seek refugee status easily whenever they were attacked at home by their other Maasai groups, the Purko. The 'Gichiaro' relationship in this respect represented a diplomatic alliance system.

Muthamia (1973) has also shown that the 'Gichiaro' relationship extended among the Rendille community. Also, the Boran had this alliance with the Meru. With these communities, 'Gichiaro' was a contract based on mutual trust and understanding.

To be born into the 'Gichiaro' ritual, involved a ritual administered by ritual experts in the society. 'Gichiaro' was a binding relationship and it was considered a serious offense to mistreat 'Mu-Gichiaro'. The consequences of any such mistreatment were bad and could cause ill omen or other nasty experiences. This possibility gave the institution some parmanence.
On the whole, the 'Gichiaro' can be taken as an important landmark in the 'Mwiriga' and the entire political structure. It attempted to overcome the military and geographical disparities to forge out an amicable relationship within Meru and without. 'Gichiaro' shows the exemplary ingenuity of the community in their efforts to create an enabling political environment where Meru 'Mwiriga' groupings could live peacefully. It became an important political strategy as a form of dealing with external military challenges.

CONCLUSION

We have illustrated in this chapter that the 'Mwiriga' was a significant institution in Meru political organization. The 'Mwiriga' began as a small unit both in terms of population and geographical representation. The 'Mwiriga' institution however, expanded to produce large identifiable sub-divisions such as Imenti, Mwimbi, Chuka, Tharaka, Tigania and Igembe.
We have noted that an essential socio-political diplomatic alliance in the name 'Gichiaro' was evolved. This had to have far reaching implications in Meru in both diffusing fear and tension and forging peaceful co-existence. The diplomatic alliance took place among 'Mwiriga' within Meru territory and also with the Maasai, Rendille and Boran. 'Gichiaro' was most deeply entrenched with the Maasai among the external peoples with whom the Meru established relationship.

The emergence of councils like 'Njuri Ncheke' amongst others, gave the 'Mwiriga' the forum in which to discuss socio-political affairs. The councils will be the focus of the subsequent chapter. The 'Mwiriga' was a centre in which the Meru transacted socio-political affairs.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE MERU COUNCILS ('BIAMA')

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this Chapter is the various councils which operated in different lifecycles of the Meru. The councils ('Biama') are discussed as part of the institutions that constitute Meru political history.

The Chapter attempts a definition of the 'Biama' and looks at the beginnings of the institution. The functions of the 'Biama' both those of the youth and adult is discussed. The Chapter also looks at the nature of the major Meru crimes, disputes and their resolutions. The 'Mugwe' dignitary and his role in the political organization is analyzed.

THE 'KIAMA' (PL. 'BIAMA') COUNCILS: A DEFINITION

The period between 1750 and 1908 saw the establishment of an important institution among the Meru called 'Kiama' (Pl. 'Biama'). The pioneering students of Meru pre-colonial history recognize the
difficulties of finding equivalent terms in the English language with appropriate meaning to the Meru term 'Kiama'.

Writing in the middle of twentieth century, Lambert (1950:73) noted that, it is difficult to find an English word which can suitably define the 'Biama'. He suggested the term 'lodges' which was adopted by some scholars including Middleton and Kershaw (1953) and Fadiman (1982) respectively.

The danger however, of adopting words from the English language to describe the indigenous African vocabulary is never without its attendant pitfalls. One very conspicuous problem is that the English term or terms borrowed from other languages bear implications which can distort the meaning of an institution. The words of a particular language connote values and meanings of the people who use the language. In this Chapter nevertheless, we cannot depart from borrowing vocabularies like 'council' or 'lodge' but only for want of better terminologies. We hasten to point out that the
term ('Council') as opposed to the lodge will be used to refer to the Meru 'Kiama' institution.

The 'Kiama' was an institution in which socio-political functions were diffused. The term 'Kiama' may have two distinctions which should be clarified to avoid ambiguity. 'Kiama' as Miriti (01:4-1991) observes, 'was a council of elders in the villages'. This was the council which was the authority within the 'Mwiriga'. 'Kiarna' is also a general term referring to any one of the various ('Biama') councils of Meru which ran through the lifecycle of an individual from youth to adulthood and cut across gender lines in which men and women were participants in their respective categories. For example, there were specific 'Biama' for the men which ran from the boyhood into adulthood where the rules subscribed to respective 'Biama' in different ages and status. The women did not have many 'Biama'. The women's major 'Kiama' was called 'Kuugura Ukenye'. It was mainly for girls who would later graduate into adulthood status after initiation rite. After that, women who were aged
and could no longer give birth were 'elevated' to the status where they performed functions in men-dominated councils. These distinctions are shown in the Chapter.

The 'Biama' collectively formed an important institution which together with others established the political organization of the pre-colonial Meru. Contrary to a general assumption that the 'Biama' were a male preserve absolutely, this Chapter endeavours to show among other aspects that, 'Biama' incorporated women. The available information, however, shows clearly that men tended to overshadow the women's role in political arena. While one acknowledges that women were not given a leading role in decision-making, it does not mean they were never given a position at all in the political affairs of the Meru. Women as prescribed by traditional customs, played a role in the socio-political arena but on an unequal footing with men.

The investigation of Holding (1947:63), led to the conclusion that 'girls' and 'women' age-
groups' existed which were 'almost parallel to those of men. Holding however, argued that 'to some extent women councils were subservient to those of boys and men but nevertheless 'had' their definite place in Meru society'. At this juncture, we can posit that no society is singularly made of one particular gender. The role of either is determined and restricted to specific extents depending on the beliefs of each respective society.

Among the Meru, therefore we shall look at the different 'Biama' that evolved and show their significance. To achieve this, we shall discuss them in two broad characterisations, those of young people - boys and girls before initiation, and those of adults beginning at the initiation rite down to the grave. Before delving into this, we need to assess the founding of the institution.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE 'BIAMA'

Every institution in a society grows from a given background. The chain of the Meru 'Biama'
was definitely tied to given concerns of the society. At the moment of settlement, there was need for forms of organization to enable the tackling of the day to day matters of the society. This was a gradual process which was enhanced by the problem of the pressure from other groups other than the Meru themselves.

At about the time of settling which spanned the eighteenth century, the Meru encountered other people. Some were identified as 'Uru' a term used to refer to the Maasai and others 'Mwoko'. The name 'Mwoko' is still in dispute as to whom it referred to (either the 'Ndorobo', 'Rendille' or neither) but can be admitted as a people who settled in the territory as they are remembered in Meru tradition vividly.

Some sections of Tigania, Igembe and Imenti were occupied by the Maasai before and after the Meru settled (M'ngoci 01:4-5-1991). It was at the period of settlement that the 'Biama' emerged. These started in a simple way as a need to tackle
problems and decide on matters affecting the 'Mwiriga' both internally and externally. The organization of the 'Biama' at that initial period was mainly based with the scattered 'Miiriga'.

The external challenges came in the wake of settlement and extended over most of pre-colonial period. Internally, the discipline of the 'Mwiriga' which was the essence of law was inoperative without some form of councils. These factors put stress on the 'Mwiriga' and accelerated the need to develop a secular system of councils. This took the form of 'Biama' between 1750-1800.

Rules were evolved in the 'Kiama' which became the governing principles of the institution. Members of the 'Mwiriga' and the Meru at large were to respect and adhere to the established rules. There were punishments meted upon those people who refused to keep the laid down rules. Although the
An external factor is mentioned as a stimulant for the establishment of the institution, it must be recognized that, initially the motivation was internal. This came as a consequence of the adjustments made on settlement period and place which had both the favourable story of a people founding a favourable place to settle but had also the unfavourable circumstances of the stress put upon the fragmented bands.

Generally, as Fadiman (1982:3) argues, the internal dissensions, ease of migration, military dislocation were some of the factors that encouraged the founding of the 'Biama'. The only omission Fadiman made in his projection is that, 'it was the males of every age-set but the youngest' who had to regulate their lives through the systems of 'Biama', without telling us whether women too, were participants.

Whether externally motivated or internally stimulated, the founding of the 'Biama' was a landmark in the political development of the
society. It set forth the system of a government where decisions were discussed at length in appropriate councils. The institution of 'Kiama' was to become the central pillar in the social and the political affairs of the Meru from about 1800.

Within the Meru 'Mwiriga', councils emerged for uninitiated boys and girls and the initiated men and women. The names given to the councils did not concur amongst the various 'Miiriga.' For example one of the boys' councils, was variously called 'Kibichu' and 'Kabirigichu' among other names. This was because of geographical and dialectical differences. Equally, an adult council, operating amongst Meru elders called 'Kiama' gia Kamango' in Imenti was called 'Kiama' 'Otha' in Tigania and Igembe areas. The similarity in most Meru practices as seen in the 'Biama' was due to the interaction that was forged. This interaction allowed the 'Miiriga' even of those widely distanced geographically to learn from each other's way of life.
The councils generally were simple at the start, but as more challenge was brought to bear upon them, they kept changing their mode of operation to cope. As an individual grew from childhood to adulthood, he kept changing from one council to another usually from those of the youth to others of adulthood. Various factors were considered before a person was accepted as a leader in a given council. Such aspects like age, social and economic status of an individual were significant. Membership into a given council was only acceptable for those with necessary qualities. The question of qualities was taken seriously because respective councils carried given responsibilities. Having made these observations we will examine the various 'Biama' which existed in Meru pre-colonial period.

**THE 'BIAMA' FOR UNINITIATED AMERU.**

The councils of childhood excluded children below six years since they could not sufficiently appreciate the purpose of a council. At a later
age, the youth could appreciate the meaning of peer gathering, in preparation for participation into the society's roles. The boys' councils were many and the names varied from one part to another. The political role the boys played may not have clearly established itself at childhood stage. However, there were the preliminary councils in which the youth were molded for future fuller contributions. Across the whole package of 'Biama' there was training background to build the personality of the member while a social and political consciousness was inculcated into the minds of the individuals. Among the boys there were key councils in which the boys had to pass through before their initiation into adulthood. In each of these, instructions were given depending on the boys' ages and the 'Kiama' in question.

THE 'KABICHU' COUNCILS

'Kabichu' was the first of many boys' councils formed by boys of seven years old. 'Kabichu' was an Imenti term for this
council. Other names were used for the same council in other sub-divisions. Among the Chuka this council was called 'Kabaragachi' (M'Njau 01:24-4-1991) and in Tigania, the name used was 'Kathigiriti' (M'mauta 01:28-4-1991). Boys became members of this council at the age of seven. At least, at this age, a boy could sit with his peers and make decisions affecting their lives. The age at which one was expected to retire from this council has been suggested as eleven years by Fr. Nyaga (1986:85).

The members of 'Kabichu' were trained to keep secrets about the decisions made in the council. The initiates into 'Kabichu' were expected to be creative. Their powers of intellect were tested through a series of questions. The purpose of the questions was both to check the 'individuals' abilities, retention level and eloquence in answering questions. This training had a direct bearing on the later adult stage when more serious decisions were made.
There was also a training for skillful scouting in the bushes. This was important for the growing youth as they were destined as warriors. At a later stage in their lives they would hold defence responsibilities. Knowledge of the geographical areas within and beyond a 'Mwiriga' was also inculcated. To train the members into this was again giving them basic skills of what warriorhood would entail. This was done 'unconsciously' and as the boys grew into adulthood, they not only knew their surroundings but were also able to appreciate the society's secrets as these were slowly divulged during the period within which they were members of this council. Therefore, the boy in this group grew both in stature and wisdom. The council also introduced the boy in the way to relate with other members of the society beyond the family level.
Another of the Goys' council was called Kiigumi. The linguistic meaning of 'Kiigumi' is not established. However, some explanations can be given regarding its implication. The terms 'Kuuma Kiigumi' can be translated and interpreted into English Language to mean 'to be initiated into.' When one was initiated into this council he was consequently considered as having been born into the council. Sometimes the terms 'Kuugura Kiigumi' which meant, to buy one's initiation into the council was used. This underscores the seriousness attached to the process of entry into this group and was likened with the expense of 'buying' one's way into - which of course was at a dear cost of administered rituals and calculated beatings.

'Kiigumi' was arguably an important 'Kiama' through which the boys had to pass before they were accepted for circumcision. This council had demands that a new member had to meet, without which he could not be initiated into the
organization. One of the conditions was the payment of a piece of chain made with colourful beads. Chains were valuable articles used for odornment in the society. Both elderly women and men wore chains. The chains were usually purchased at a small cost. Some of them were locally manufactured by blacksmiths while others were brought from as far as Mombasa by long distant traders.

The Kamba acted as middlemen between the hinterland communities and the coastal societies usually for monetary benefits or exchanged the chain with other material including foodstuff. This implied that they had to devise a way of getting it. The efforts to get the chain by paying a price to traders or smiths who manufactured them locally was considered as an invaluable quality - the boys proved that at adult stage they would be using their abilities to look for possessions. Wealth was one of the qualities (though not a compulsory one) which was considered in selecting the society's leaders (M'Nandi 01:1 - 7 - 1991).
Another of the requirements was a physical test in which boys underwent a ritual beating, to prove their abilities to withstand pain. The physical pain inflicted by beatings should not be miscontrued for torture. Rather, it was intended as an acceptable norm through which the society instilled the quality of tolerance in an individual. There was strong belief and hope that a boy who successfully tolerated a ritual beating performed on him, could also tolerate problems of whatever magnitude. Problems abound in every society, and the Meru trained their youth to resolve them bravely; hence, this ritual beating which the boys underwent before qualifying to be members of 'Kiigumi' council.

A cautious method of performing the beating was observed. The boys who were to be initiated into 'Kiigumi' were supposed to be naked. In that form, the intended 'pain' was profoundly inflicted. Both the circumcised warriors and uncircumcised boys participated in performing the ritual. The uncircumcised boys who performed the ritual were
those who had graduated into another stage, 'Ndinguri'. Those administering the ritual stood in two lines leaving a gap in the middle. They held small canes in their hands which were used to beat the initiates. The naked initiates then passed between the two lines from one end to the other as many times as the elders and senior warriors deemed necessary and adequate. In the process the initiates were beaten. Those beating them were under instructions to avoid specific areas including the head, abdomen and genitals. The two lines of those administering the ritual were referred to as 'Riari' or 'Kiari' (M'Inoti 01:2 - 3 - 1991).

On the whole, the physical beating signified the Solemnity of the transition period from one council to another. This was not a mere walkover but a proven transformation of new responsibilities and a commitment to ones' new 'Kiama. Physical beating which was administered was followed by instructions.
The instructions given upon members of this group were such as to instil solidarity within 'Kiama' and respect for those people who were senior than they. There were dietary prohibitions. For instance, members of 'Kiigumi' were not allowed to drink 'Ruguru'—'Ruguru' was porridge prepared from the leaves of arrowroots. Playing with the younger boys who had not gone through the 'Kiigumi' requirements was discouraged. Those who were not initiated into 'Kiigumi' were referred to as 'Nchuna' (Sometimes 'Nchuna mwiko') a term derived from the act of licking food in containers in their mothers' kitchens. However 'Nchuna' on a more serious note, was used as a challenge to those boys who had not evolved into 'Kiigumi' council status in which boys left their mothers' huts to live in their independent 'Gaaru' barrack.

To live independently in their 'Gaaru' had a significance in the lives of the boys. This was a transition with clear political connotation. It should not be taken as the mere disengagement of boys from their mothers out of
malice. Rather, it should be seen in the light of their development whereby they had to live in a 'Gaaru' as a preliminary preparation to warriorhood. Holding (1942:62) observes that, at that state, 'the boy was considered old enough to leave his mothers' hut. She however, fails to qualify what 'old enough' implies.

Age for the boys was both considered in terms of years and also their ability to endure the ordeal of the 'Kiigumi'. One's age was immaterial if he could not withstand the physical and mental tests. In a case where a junior was advancing in age yet failed to pass the tests either out of cowardice or other disabilities, he could not be forced to remain in a junior council. He was simply passed into 'Kiigumi'. Such members were not regarded with high esteem. It was a life long ambition to be regarded with high esteem, and the boys feared and loathed anything which would portray them as weaklings.

The history of the society was taught and also the initiates were educated on the taboos of
the community. Respect for elders and one's peers was emphasized. Instructions were given through such medium as riddles, metaphors, euphemisms and other symbolism. The ability to master those easily differentiated the intelligent from the feeble in the group. 'Kiigumi' was a council which left an important impact on the individual. Even after circumcision, the council was remembered by warriors. When one would exclaim consciously or even involuntarily either in spite of anger or surprise words like 'aba' 'Kiigumi'! (O! 'Kiigumi') were evoked. Usually this was recalled when one was in great emotional state and engaged in an act of swearing.

The practice and functions of the equivalent councils were practically in all subdivisions. In Tigania, the term 'Uiji bukurù' ('youth which is mature') was the parallel of 'Kiiguumi'. After a period of intense physical and mental training, the boys graduated. Before graduation, they were supposed to have passed successfully the examination of the council that
produced in them disciplined persons who carried themselves in a responsible way. A feast was given before graduation. The graduands were now called 'ndinguri' which was not a council but a name given to those boys who had passed the boys councils and were awaiting circumcision. It was a name that gave them the status of thoroughly prepared boys who were proven both physically and mentally ready to be initiated into adulthood. 'Kiigumi' practice spread over all the entire Meru sub-divisions, although the names varied as in Tigania and Igembe where 'Uji bukuru' was used.

THE GATUUURI COUNCIL

Another of the boys council was 'Gatuuri'. The name 'Gatuuri' was probably derived from the iron smiths, 'aturi.' A young iron smith was called 'gaturi' or 'gatuuri' depending on the pronunciation in different sub-divisions. This name referred to a group of young people who had their specialized council. The boys of the group
were above ten years old. This was a council which was associated with iron smiths in the society.

Iron smelting was an art which may have been practised long before 'Mbwa' migrant penetrated Mount Kenya since the use of iron implements is retraced to the 'Mbwa' island. M'Mworia (01:15-5-1991) mentions in his recollection that, at 'Mbwa', spears, swords and arrow-heads were made from iron. 'Aturi' iron smith made those items. The knowledge gained at the islands residence was found useful at Mount Kenya, and there developed a specialized group from the moment of settlement which made iron-articles. It is this group of 'aturi' which formed the 'Gaaturi' Council.

There was a shelter in which the 'Gaaturi met to instruct the newcomer into the 'Kiama'. The seriousness of this council was such that the concerned boy looked for another boy who had gone through the complete process of the council so that he could act like his sponsor as he went through.
The occasion to initiate the boys into 'Gaaturi' was momentous. The host boy called all the boys of the 'Mwiriga' and those of other 'Miiriga' adjacent to his. A feast was prepared for the boy by women. It consisted of 'nchugu' (cowpeas) and was served in containers carved out from an indigenous gourd called 'Gikiri' (Pl.'Ikiri'). The feast took place at night and in the bush a fact that clearly underscored the secretive nature of the group. Not every boy joined the 'Gaturi' as this mainly was a council that was essentially for the 'aturi' smiths 'Miiriga'.

The important instructions given to the boys related to keeping secrets of the society and holding oneself in a respectable manner before womenfolk, elders and children. Each boy going through the 'Gaaturi' process was given a piece of stick. The stick remained a constant reminder of the need to keep all the secrets given.

Besides the above boys' 'Biama' others like 'Nchibi' are mentioned in Meru tradition. 'Nchibi'
can be defined as a distinct group of specialized spokesmen found in boys 'Biama' (Mwitari 01: 19-5-1991). Those were the 'spokesmen' who in adulthood formed a significant section of judges in the society, like in the adult 'Biama', where appropriate, a fee was asked as a condition of becoming a member of a 'Kiama'. The fee was however, regulated and dependent on the specific council and 'Mwiriga'. The fee asked for whatever cadre was called 'Njiga cia Kiama' (the reward for council).

So far we have looked at the councils that ran through a boys' life prior to initiation. We shall look at those of their counterparts, the girls.

THE GIRLS' COUNCILS

Like boys, girls were participants in their own councils. However, certain variations existed in terms of the requirements for recruitment and the responsibilities instilled. In general girls
'Biama' had a social bias as opposed to the political conception in boys' councils. Their test as Holding (1942:83) observed, 'rested in the proof of culinary ability, foreshadowing the time when it will be their responsibility to prepare food for important tribal (sic) ceremonies'. At least two councils for uninitiated girls are remembered. The first was called 'Gukuria'. This is usually a Tigania and Igembe council as the name even specifically derives from these sub-divisions. The equivalent of 'Gukuria' is not known by name in other sub-divisions, but similar instructions as those given in 'Gukuria' were common throughout Meru for the girls of similar age as that of 'Gukuria'. The other council, which was common throughout Meru was 'Kuugura Ukenye'. In Tigania and Igembe the parallel of 'Kuugura Ukenye' was a council called 'Nkuro' (tattoo), a name which is derived from the act of making the tattoos. We will turn to these councils.
As observed above, the term 'Gukuria' is of Tigania and Igembe origins. The girls eligible for this council were aged between eight and eleven years. The instructions given were projected towards a woman's life; the girls were introduced formally to the social roles of a woman especially their responsibilities as parent to be.

The instructions given emphasized respect for elderly men, obedience to parents, and respect for oneself. Specific instructions were given as regards their personalities. Rimita (1988:31) states that a girl 'was given lessons on menstruation, causes of pregnancy, child bearing and how to assist a woman in labour'. There was a general emphasis on the social participation as opposed to the political concerns which was a major feature in the boys' councils.

The council was not totally lacking in political instructions; such political concerns however, were relegated to subsidiary
treatment. The political element in the council involved training on decision-making. The girls were discouraged to resolve problems and make decisions within this group independent of other women or men’s groups. A sense of unity was also inculcated. Unity was seen as the firm foundation of stable society; unity within a 'mwiriga' and the meru at large was encouraged (Gakii OI: 21-5-91).

There was light beating which was meted out upon the members of the group. Like the beatings so far explained in the boys’ councils, the girls beating should not be seen as an act of ruthlessness or malice. The beating which the girls received was aimed at proving their ability to endure pain, a common test in the society to determine those ready to move from one stage to another. The pain reflected the possible pains in their lives which they were expected to endure, for instance in cases of death or other misfortunes. The girls graduated from this stage to another called, 'Kuugura Ukenye'.
The terms, 'Kuugura Ukenye' has two double meaning: 'Kuugura' means to buy and 'Ukenye' denotes 'girlhood', a reference to the uninitiated girls. As a whole, therefore 'Kuugura Ukenye' implies 'to buy girlhood.' To buy has an idea of a 'price. The 'price' referred to in this context does not refer to monetary value, but rather the 'expense' of going through the requirements of girlhood which involved mental instructions.

This group was composed of the girls who had gone through the clitoridectomy rite. Their status however, was elevated to that of the circumcised warriors, in which theoretically they were considered as members. In other words, they were taken as girls of 'buuru' (group) of warriors who were initiated.

In the stage, 'kuuguru Ukenye' girls served their domestic chores. They also performed duties designed by warriors or themselves which included helping with the construction of military barracks (Gaaru).
this involved them in an important aspect of the political dimension taking into account that, 'Gaaru' were meant for warriors who provided the society's defence. There were differences depending on the sub divisions and function of the age-group (Igoki 01:25-26-1991).

The girls in this stage were in preparation for initiation. Besides the mental instructions given to them relating to obedience, discipline and propriety were emphasized. Physically, they were 'tattooed' on the stomach. A tattoo ('nkuro') was performed only on people who resided in Imenti, Tigania and Igembe. Tattoos were both for beauty and a mark for the women of the society (M'ltania, 01:15-1991). The girls after being 'tattooed' were given special food called 'Giakira'/ 'Gakira'. The food was bitter since it was prepared with herbal concoctions. That food was served in large bowls. The old women who prepared and served the food warned the girls to keep the instructions given. The consequences of failing to keep the instructions were
unthinkable! For example, it was said to carry a misfortune of automatic disability to bear children. This is the 'bitterness' one would experience and is implied in the bitter food given. Slovenly behaviour was discouraged and the need to conduct oneself decently in the home and outside was further instilled from this stage; the girls were considered ready to undergo the clitoridectomy ritual.

The above boys and girls' councils throw light onto the training through which the youth underwent. At this level, they were not given the chance to make decisions that would influence the 'mwiriga' or larger sections of the society. Their groups were nevertheless recognized by adults and seen as the necessary preliminary preparation for adulthood. Indeed those who displayed exemplary leadership and organizational qualities, consequently assumed substantive positions when they became adults.
Then, they were able to apply themselves accordingly as men and women. The usefulness of the 'Biama' of the uninitiated members of the community can be summed up by the words of Middleton and Kershaw (1953) who observed that, they ('Biama') inculcate a spirit of group solidarity, mutual obedience and discipline and provide an early opportunity for the youth with innate gifts of leadership to increase and develop it.

The councils for the youth discussed above were evolved on Mount Kenya. There is no indication that they were established at an earlier date. The councils operated within the 'Mwiriga' level and none of the councils had influence beyond the 'mwiriga' level unlike the adults councils which had an impact on the larger section of the society. The councils on the whole were under the influence of elders, both women and men. In Meru, instructing the young people was a responsibility of the elders who were senior in age and wisdom. The knowledge of the young was
however, recognized and the most outstanding youth were easily initiated as leaders once they became adults. The reputation developed at youth was therefore built upon gradually as a person grew. It was never thought otherwise, that at adult age, the reputation would subside or be reversed.

The boys who displayed courage when pushing through the youth councils, consequently became some of the brave warriors of the society. Those who showed abilities in handling simple problems within the youth groups, for instance resolving differences between the people, were some of those who would later become mediators when resolving societal problems. Equally so, the girls who proved most able in executing the roles within their councils gained much respect. Earlier we pointed out that, girls were largely trained for their roles as 'future mothers'. This was because men generally tended to associate them with social roles without taking into account that they also had the abilities to participate in the political issues. While their social participation was fully
acceptable, their political contributions were sometimes limited by rigid tradition which recognized men's full participation, giving women subsidiary attention.

Women were not readily trained as 'public speakers' in political education which was given to men. No wonder that such titles like 'agambi' given to men with charismatic qualities as exemplified elsewhere in the chapter, cannot find its exact equivalent in the women circles. This does not imply that, women with equivalent characteristic as that required of 'agambi' were lacking. Rather, little effort was made to support women in their political endeavours. Therefore, girls received different forms of training geared towards their specific roles in their future lives. In spite of little encouragement, and traditional prohibition, women still distinguished their abilities in dealing with the socio-political affairs of the family unit. This happened when in
the absence of or as a result of any form of incapacitation that made men unable to carry out their roles effectively, women fully assumed their husband's duties in liaison with other family men. We will look at the roles of the youth in the councils and their instructors.

THE ROLES OF THE YOUTH AND THEIR INSTRUCTORS

Before boys and girls underwent the rite of circumcision and clitoridectomy respectively, they were considered as 'children'. Children in the society were guided by the senior people usually those who were initiated. All the boys and girls councils discussed already therefore, fall under the heading 'children's councils'. Thus, even the youth who were about to be initiated were referred to as children ('Twana') by the elders. It was the responsibility of the elders in the society to take care of the children. This made the councils for both girls and boys to come under the senior people in the society. The elders however, played a role of both 'overseeing' what the young people
were doing in their councils and also got involved directly in instructing them.

The life of an individual before initiation was a training session. First, this was a time when the young people were preparing for the initiation which was greatly valued as it made it possible for an individual to become an adult. Second, it was during this time that the obligations expected of a person in the society were imparted. The boys' instruction was the responsibility of men and the girls were trained on their responsibilities by women. The parents, however, had an undeniable duty to guide their children and indeed the 'home' was the first place where instructions were initially given.

The roles of the boys included running simple errands for the adults which were not entirely of political orientation. Either in their groups or as individuals, the elders trained boys to make bows, arrows, clubs and other implements. These were to be important apparatus for their
later lives as warriors. They were also instructed on various aspects such as the secrets of the society and the Meru relationship with neighbouring communities. They were also taught about the general affairs of the society. They were free to attend the elders' meetings within the 'miiriga' but not speak. In other words, they were 'silent observers' in the elders deliberations. This gave them a general idea about the operations of their community. While in their respective groups, those boys who could use proverbs adequately while discussing their groups' affairs were seen as the 'spokesmen' for the others. This is because proverbs were important media for communication and a rich acquisition and adroit use of these distinguished a person as 'spokesman' (Mwireria 01:27 - 1 - 1991).

The boys also organized their own dances. Dances were forms of entertainment in the society, but they contributed in the political socialization. The songs and dances brought the young together especially in the evenings. The
songs embodied the history of the society. They also expressed the ambitions and hopes of the youth. The songs carried various messages - they told of the history of the Meru, they praised the heroes of Meru, and also scorned those who made mistakes which did not augur well with established social and political order.

On the other hand, the girls were trained by the women who had undergone the clitoridectomy rite. The girls were trained on aspects of modesty - how to behave before their parents, the men and how to relate with boys. It was greatly emphasized that, the good conduct of a girl was necessary and therefore, the instructors went in great detail to train them on behaviour.

The role of the girls before initiation was essentially social and unlike that of the boys, there was little emphasis for political concerns. For instance, the girls were not trained to make defensive military equipments as bows, arrows or clubs as the boys. However, unity within the
The councils for the boys and girls did not influence the society's affairs. This is because, so long as those youngsters were not initiated, then their decisions were not considered as of any effect to the society's affairs. What was important at this level is appreciation that the youth were undergoing into a training process which would enable them fit into adulthood from childhood. Their functions therefore whether social or political - were functions of people preparing for later adult duties (Marete: 01:14 - 3 - 1991).

The youth 'Biama' were evolved at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Through the settlement period up to the start of the nineteenth century, very little is known about the youth organizations. It was the adults' councils that were pronounced more than the boys and girls' councils in the nineteenth century. In fact, the
names that the boys and girls' 'Biama' were known by are traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The settlement and adjustment of the 'mbwa' migrant seems to have given more concern to the adults organizations such that these emerged earlier than those of the youth.

The youth organizations did not rise to any levels beyond the 'Mwiriga' composition. In the nineteenth century, there was notable solidarity within the youths' councils, but their operations were minimal geographically. A group of a particular ridge operated independently of another in a different and even of that of an adjacent ridge. On the other hand, adults' councils, for instance the 'Njuri Ncheke' had authority over most Meru sub-divisions by the end of the nineteenth century. None of the youth groupings could boast of similar impact in Meru society. In fact, the impact of a Meru youth group was felt within its own council and none had any effect over other youth councils in other parts of the land. It is possible that this led to the general diversity of
the names of these groups. The practices were essentially similar and all over the land, the elders wielded authority over the youngsters 'Biama'.

In a nutshell, some observations regarding youth councils can be made. First, the youth councils did not matter much in the decision-making in Meru. Second, the councils for the young people were intended as a preparation for participation in adulthood duties. Third, it was in the nineteenth century that those groups appeared in the historical scene, at least by their names. Before then, their activities and existence are not mentioned.

As noted, the rigid tradition structure, tended to give men more
attention in the preparations for political roles than the girls. It is this that made the Meru political structure seem as the concern of men. This is probably what overshadowed the political roles that women played. It is interesting that information about men's contributions is readily given by informants while what women did is reluctantly given. The tendency is that men informants emphasize that women had very little to do in Meru political scene. On the other hand, women informants argue, and sometimes vehemently, that they were participants in the political organization. However, we accept that, women were given subsidiary attention which was not commensurate with their contributions. We shall now turn to analyze the councils for adults.

THE BIAMA FOR THE INITIATED PEOPLE

Within Meru, the rite of circumcision and clitoridectomy both for men and women respectively, was a compulsory rite of passage from childhood to
adulthood. The rite ushered in a new period in which the initiates entered into completely new 'Biama', but the experiences gained in the youth's 'Biama' was significant.

Of all the 'Biama' of the adults, 'Njuri Ncheke' was the highest authority in Meru. Also, it was the only council which extended its authority over most of the sub-divisions. However, any treatise on Meru political history, must be careful not to confuse the 'Njuri Ncheke' as the only authority in the land. The prominence of 'Njuri Ncheke' hinged on the immense powers including that of imposing death penalties against criminals.

For most of the pre-colonial period, this authority asserted itself more concretely in Imenti, Tigania, and Igembe while almost virtually asserting no authority upon the Chuka (Keega 01:40-1991, M’Nandi; 01: 1 - 17-1992) Indeed among the
Chuka, it is within the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century that 'Njuri Ncheke' came to symbolise much.

The geographical isolation and the belief that chuka was not part of other Meru sub-divisions together with the sporadic skirmishes against the Chuka by several of her neighbours (including some Meru barracks ('Gaaru') and others like Mbeere and Embu) no doubt show Chuka as separate from the rest of Meru. No wonder the 'Njuri Ncheke' did not have a major impact in the sub-division.

'Njuri Ncheke' had profound impact upon Tigania Sub-division because it was the exclusive meeting point for the 'Njuri Ncheke' elders. The elders used to meet at a place called Nchiru. The shelter where 'Njuri Ncheke' met in the pre-colonial period still exists. However, it has been renovated to replace the grass-thatched 'hut' with corrugated iron sheets on the roof. The walls which were originally built with poles and plastered with mud have been pulled down and replaced with stones. This has given the
indigenous hut a new image. It no longer appears as a solemn venue where important Meru decisions were passed but looks like any other modern meeting building. Because of the presence of the building whose history dates back to the eighteenth century, there is a tendency in Meru to orchestrate the idea that 'Njuri Ncheke' was a preserve of Tigania and Igembe without appreciating the fact that Tigania was (as it still is) only the venue of an 'organization' or 'body' which concerned itself with all Meru affairs.

Other than the 'Njuri Ncheke' there were other 'Biama' which evolved, all of them closely related. Their names may have differed and their operations might show variations, consequently, their powers did not impress on the Meru equally. But, these 'Biama' on the whole, were vital pillars in the organization of the people and their significance rested in their practices.

The 'Biama' operated within the 'Mwiriga'. By being a member of a 'Mwiriga, one was
consequently under the jurisdiction of the 'Blama' therein. An individual's life was answerable to these authorities. At the basic unit, the head of the family represented his family in the 'Mwiriga'. At the 'Mwiriga' level, there was the council that governed the 'Mwiriga' affairs. All elders qualified to meet and discuss the matters affecting a 'Mwiriga'. Within the elders ranks a specialized group of 'spokesmen' ('agambi') emerged. They were choosen as the key spokesmen of the 'Mwiriga'. This group of 'agambi' which was distinguished as the most charismatic segment of elders was referred to as 'Njuri ya Mwiriga'.

In Tigania and Igembe, the elders were referred to as 'Areki' (Sig. Mwariki'). This was a group composed of both women and men. Research by Boggio posits that, 'it was the honour for a man and woman to be counted into this rank'. The elders of this group wore a shell 'ring' in their heads called 'Nchea'. This was like a badge for the 'Areki' membership. The elders, both men and women decorated their heads with white paste.
Although the women did not get the titles of 'agambi', they were participants in this elders' group. 'Agambi' was a title exclusively given to men. Sometimes 'Agambi's names had a prefix - 'M' for examples as in the name 'M'matiri'. The prefix 'M' is the equivalent of the English 'Mr.' but the name 'Mugambi' represents one who was an able spokesman.

'Mugambi' were respected for the pleasant qualities which Fadiman (1981:15) argues included; a pleasant physical appearance, quickness of mind, retentive memory, oratorical ability, physical prowess and skill in settling conflicts. The physical appearance was not an emphasized aspect and can only be considered as of subsidiary significance. The major quality that made a 'Mugambi' acceptable and respected was his impartiality in decision making. Wealth was important but not necessary prerequisite to being a 'Mugambi' (or 'Muchiri', the equivalent of 'Mugambi' in Mwimbi Section of Meru. To be a 'Mugambi' in
Merus was not synonymous with being aged. Although the 'agambi' drew from the elders stock, it was not every elder who was considered as a 'spokesman.'

In general one had to be eloquent and an acquisition of the Kimeru proverbs greatly enriched a 'Mugambi's language. Above all, social reputation was important because people who image was dented by any un-becoming conduct would not be acceptable spokesmen for the society. According to Kinot (01:15-5-1991), a 'Mugambi' was a guide in Meru - his name was a name of honour. When Lambert (1965) recorded his findings about the Meru 'Mugambi', he recognized the impeccable personality of 'Mugambi'. He argues that, to be a 'Mugambi' was a complex of intelligence, personality, good reputation, social and economic success and a sound hereditary. This condensed summary set out the qualities that determined a 'Mugambi' in Meru political circles.
The councils that operated in Meru existed within women and men ranks. These councils can now be discussed to verify their establishment and role in the land.

In our analysis of the 'Miiriga' we noted that authority and power were rooted in the family unit. This extended further to the 'Mwiriga' where the elders in the village or 'Mwiriga' formed a council usually called 'Kiama'. This was the sole authority within a 'Mwiriga'. The membership drew from practically all village elders, but, decision-making was specially a duty for the charismatic elders called 'Agambi' (Singular 'Mugambi') whose qualities are outlined elsewhere in the thesis (Mburugo 01: 14 - 4 - 1991).

This 'Kiama' was referred to by different names depending on the various subdivisions. Among the Imenti this council operating within a 'Mwiriga' was called 'Kiama' Kia/gia Nkomango'. In Tigania and Igembe the name 'otha', was used to refer to the same. The Tharaka referred to it as
'Mwiru' or 'Kiuru' while the Chuka used the terms 'Kabogo' and 'Kirindi.' The 'Mwiriga' elders participated in the affairs of their respective 'Mwiriga' through this 'Kiama'.

Within the 'Kiama', there was a specialized group of people called 'Njuri'. 'Njuri' was selected from the most intelligent and able persons within the 'Kiama'. Not everybody could become a member of 'Njuri' usually referred to as 'Njuri ya Kiama' or 'Njuri ya Mwiriga' (Muchai 01:13 -4 - 1991); one had to prove himself in time and space as having the necessary requirements, the most focal being having substantive wisdom. The members of 'Njuri' ya 'Kiama' were the 'spokesmen' of the 'spokesmen' within the council. In Meru 'Miiriga', the council called 'Kiama gia 'Nkomango' or its equivalent was very respected. The terms 'Nkomango' means 'stone' and it is not clearly known what the reference to the word stone implies. A stone has its own nature and is of course known for being 'hard'. 'Hardness' for the members in the 'Kiama' would be the symbol of
authority, an aspect for which the members of this 'Kiama' were known.

Entry into this 'Kiama gia Nkomango' was not difficult. The elders in a 'Mwiriga' became automatic members into the Council. Men were considered as elders after retiring at home from active warrior-service. Their wives were also considered elders at this stage. The only group that did not accept any elder just because he was an elder was the 'Njuri' the inner group of the council which according to the establishment, was formed by the sages within the council.

The 'Nkomango' council had important functions in the society. 'Nkomango' was responsible for the formation of the rules and also execution of such rules in the society. Decisions such as those relating to warfare, in which a 'mwiriga' had to wage war against another, were the prerogative of this 'council'. The decisions made had to be agreed upon by another important council, the 'Ramare' which was the preserve of warriors. The
'Nkomango' also executed punishment that was sometimes passed against offenders (M'maingi OI: 28 - 5 1991).

Problems affecting 'Mwiriga' were brought before this council. These would comprise problems that were beyond the family level which constituted the basic social and political unit. The elders deliberated on the problems before them. When satisfied that they had examined all aspects of the problem, they would pass judgement accordingly.

The establishment of the council arose from problems that characterised the period of settlement. As the life of the Meru was changing from that of a 'compact nation' to that of people scattered within the territory in 'Mwiriga' which eventually amalgamated into clearly 'identifiable' sub-divisions, so did the political organization assume similar characteristics. By the middle of eighteenth century, the Meru authority was no longer vested in the individuals like the exclusively reputed legendary 'Koome Njue'. The authority was
based on various institutions and representative individuals.

At the 'Mwiriga' level therefore, the 'Kiama gia Nkomago' and its inner organ, the 'Njuri ya Kiama' shouldered the responsibilities of the 'Mwiriga'. By 1750 the councils were limited to a simple assembly (an informal elders' gathering) to resolve arising matters. By the end of the eighteenth century, the population was growing and the 'Biama' translated into formal formations. Some of the prominent features that gave them the formal image include; first, the specific names given the councils; second, the establishment of meeting venues and specific norms to be adhered to. The councils operated as parmanent groups in the last half of the eighteenth century and were so in the nineteenth century.

Within the 'Mwiriga' also, there were other elders usually called 'Aruau' these were usually the most aged in the society. The 'arauau' formed a group which was called 'mbiti cia Kiama'
(M'Magiri 01: 26-5-1991). The word 'mbiti' is a Kimeru term for the word hyena. In folk tales, the hyena is portrayed as having many traits such as that of greed. In reality, the hyena was feared because it could kill easily. When a specialized elder group were called 'mbiti' (hyena) it meant two things. first, just as the hyena is feared, symbolically this group was feared. Second, the idea of killing may not mean the actual killing although that was also possible; it meant that the group could take a most stern action against an offender. It was common thus, for an offender to be threatened that, you will be 'eaten' by 'Mbiticia' (of) 'Kiarna'. This group was entrusted with rituals, especially in terms of sacrifices and offerings that could be given to the people's God called 'Murungu'. they were also called upon to execute justice. This group was expected also to deliberate on cases like murder, theft and also offenses against the established norms of the society.
The council, 'Kiama gia Nkomago' comprised only men. This gives the image of one form of authority. It tends to deny the fact that women were also participants. However, women also participated in the political functions, though the tendency was to give men a leading role. For instance, during the sacrifices and offerings organized by the 'Mwiriga', the most elderly women were also supposed to attend. The only difference is that, it was the men who conducted the sacrificial function while women participated as 'observers'. In Tigania and Igembe, both women elders and men were as a honour given the status 'Areki'. The title did not divide them according to feminine or masculine status but elders generally assumed the names.

Although the women shared the title 'Areki' in Tigania and Igembe, it was the women who were supposed to do certain aspects when a meeting was being prepared. For instance, they smeared the men with 'white paste' in their heads, an aesthetical aspect of the elders.
women were unfavourably compared to men. But men again would never do without them! In the battles within or without, they encouraged the warriors by songs calculated to inspire the warriors. No wonder, the thought that men would be laughed at by women, for failure to execute their roles in their respective fields as warriors 'Agambi' or otherwise, gave them great impetus to play their roles effectively. Their function in this respect was more of psychological than actual physical participation. The preparation the women did during the initiation of both girls and boys in terms of giving challenging and provocative choruses, was a constant reminder to the initiates to know and respect their society's regulations. This not only remind them to respect social and political codes, but reinforced the need to keep unity.

In conclusion, we can state that although women roles seem oriented towards social participation, to argue that they played no role in the political life of Meru would be a negation of their contribution.
across. Although songs served as important ways of communicating, women participated in the society's socio-political affairs in a fuller way through a specialized council; 'Kiama gia Ntonye'.

**WOMEN COUNCIL: 'KIAMA GIA NTONYE'

This council was formed by elderly women in the society. It was mainly composed of women who had undergone clitoridectomy rite and usually those who had reached menopause (mkwanjeru: 01:19 - 3 - 1991; M'Mathiru 01:12 15 - 1991). The council was to some extent secretive. Some of their discussions were not divulged to men. Women in the council gave instructions to the younger women and also the un-initiated girls about the acceptable conduct in the land. They also advised uncircumcised boys but not in formal gathering. Usually, this happened at their respective family units. It was because, boys were largely instructed by men. So, this council mainly instructed girls in formal meetings usually
conducted at a compromise venue within the 'Mwiriga'.

We have argued that, in those councils that were headed by men, women were subjected to subsidiary treatment. However, in the 'Kiama gia Ntonye' the women were neither under, nor overshadowed by the men's councils whatsoever. The women stood as the sole authority in this council. The council was essentially a socio-political entity. It attempted to see to the social and domestic affairs of the women. More importantly, this group acted as a socio-political 'pressure group' to safeguard women interests against men's exesses in any respect.

The emergence of a council like 'Ntonye' can be understood to mean a concerted effort by women to contest greater representation in socio- and political affairs of the society. On the other hand, the council can be interpreted as an organ within which women could discuss matters specific to their lives and interests - hence the secretive
nature that characterised it. Through the council, for instance, women imposed sanctions on men. In the wider context of the political deliberations, this can be interpreted as an attempt not only to assert their position in the political arena, but was also intended to guarantee women security against any unfavourable 'legislations' in the society.

Sanctions were also meted out to individual men when they failed to live up to marital commitments. Marriage was a social union which gave rise to family unit, the basic social-political unit in Meru. When a man failed to meet his marriage responsibilities including providing shelter, protection, or even participating in the procreational aspect which sustained society, his failure was not only exclusively social, but had adverse political implications. The family was the simplest unit for political socialization, and any adverse effect on it was a defect in the political unit, and consequently a wave of defects across 'Mwiriga' and the society at large. It was the stability of all the families within a 'Mwiriga',
that easily gave an image of a stable 'Mwiriga', and that is why this basic unit had to be protected. A man who therefore failed to respect the unit, essentially as the head of the family was considered a failure. Women never hesitated to expose him once his case reached the 'Kiama gia Ntonye'.

Through mechanism like singing scornful songs about the male offenders, usually men were tamed. The pressure brought to bear upon those who offended women was greatly reckoned with. One sure way the women capitalised on, as a weapon was embarrassing offenders. Men feared for their reputation to be dented when women mounted force to avenge for any mistake done against their womenfolk. This is probably why Holding (1942) observed that 'Meru menfork' minimized the importance of 'women's institutions' either because of ignorance of their functions or for fear of incurring the wrath of women's councils'.

The wrath of women and the consequent actions they took against men can be understood as
a form of their political participation in the political process. It represents what contemporary scholarship would perceive as unorthodox political participation. It is political participation!

'Kiama gia Ntonye' emerged relatively later after the men councils were already entrenched. It is said to have surfaced in the last half of the eighteenth century. The earlier age-sets that go beyond that period do not mention the council. Again, it was during the nineteenth century that the significance of the women institutions was acknowledged. No mention of women leaders or any of their significant institution is known before the close of eighteenth century. Interestingly, even the 'Mbwa' legend conspicuously make no mention of women.

The period when 'Kiama gia Ntonye' evolved is significant. First, it was after the society was fully settled and men's organizations had taken off. As the council was vocal on the treatment of women, it is probable that men's councils were
relegating women's social and political participation to a low ebb. Women therefore, were rising to the challenge! Again, the society was adjusting to a completely new way of life quite different from that of the past—of the 'Mbwa' memory. A formal organization to concern itself with women's life and initiate a code of conduct was long overdue! The council was the one which presided over female initiation.

The life of a woman therefore, in the nineteenth century was changing from the hitherto little-participatory, informal participation and subservience to men's whims, to a formal participation in the social and political life of Meru. Women were turning out as firmer advocates of their interests. The council also recognized the most disciplined women as 'Nkatha' or 'Nkirote' (Muthoni 01: 10-15-1991). Although these names were used to refer to beautiful women, figuratively they symbolised women with modest behaviour and wisdom irrespective of their physical looks. The 'Nkatha' or Nkirote' were the 'spokeswomen' in the
womens' council. The feminine 'Nkatha' is not the synonym of the male 'Agambi'. However, certain aspects as the powers of intellect were, qualities in both 'Nkatha' and a 'Mugambi'. 'Nkatha', can be understood as largely concerned with women's moral conduct. When 'Nkatha' is applied in contemporary discussions, it's usually more superficial than in the olden days as it simply refers to 'beautiful ladies'.

The above discussion regarding women engaging sanctions against men, should not narrowly be interpreted to mean men and women lived at loggerheads. The fact that women established a council which was to demand greater concessions and fuller representation is by itself an indication that in the nineteenth century women were sensitized about the political process. The council was an attempt to formerly initiate women to contribute to the political process. Men and women were in fact partners in the social and political processes but on uneven footing, either
party playing roles within the traditional prescription.

At the family level, the basic social-political component of Meru, the man (usually the 'father' of the family) held the highest authority. The authority within the family unit was based on what Bernardi (1989:15) calls - the 'father mother-child' formula. Women would sort out issues within this simple level with their husbands. Further, when matters went to the 'mwiriga' level the man's authority was stretched because the father was the only person entitled to speak for the family while at the household level, women had greater concession in political decisions ranging from advisory rites, to finding resolutions to problems at the unit. At the 'Mwiriga' level, a different picture appeared. Men assumed much authority in 'Mwiriga' deliberations as the heads of their families.
Although a 'father' had authority, as the head of a family, this authority was not absolute. Women shaped their children by giving them basic instructions on the society, relationship with the neighbouring groups, expectations of a boy and a girl in society and their behaviour before elders. This was necessary socialization that intensified the unity of the family, the basic authority in the society. It is from this level that children were socially and politically socialized and the story about their history was initially told. The family can therefore be seen as comprising both formal and informal political instructions. As one grew to realise his role in the 'Mwiriga' and the wider Meru society, political education began at home and it was there that the individual began to realise himself.

At the 'Mwiriga' level and higher levels, the women participated in political processes within a defined extent. We have noted earlier how sometimes
women were unfavourably compared to men. But men again would never do without them! In the battles within or without, they encouraged the warriors by songs calculated to inspire the warriors. No wonder, the thought that men would be laughed at by women, for failure to execute their roles in their respective fields as warriors 'Agambi' or otherwise, gave them great impetus to play their roles effectively. Their function in this respect was more of psychological than actual physical participation. The preparation the women did during the initiation of both girls and boys in terms of giving challenging and provocative choruses, was a constant reminder to the initiates to know and respect their society's regulations. This not only remind them to respect social and political codes, but reinforced the need to keep unity.

In conclusion, we can state that although women roles seem oriented towards social participation, to argue that they played no role in the political life of Meru would be a negation of the fact about their contribution.
Beyond the authorities within the 'Mwiriga', there was the most important authority - the 'Njuri Ncheke'.

The term 'Njuri' is already explained as meaning the selected few charismatic members of 'Kiama'. 'Ncheke' means 'thin'. The most appropriate vocabulary to 'thin' is winnowed. The whole meaning of 'Njuri Ncheke' is diffused in symbolism. 'Njuri Ncheke' means a council of a selected few. The selection denotes the act of distinguishing the most able 'agambi' (spokesmen).

The members of 'Njuri Ncheke' drew from all the Meru 'Miiriga'. The 'agambi' who handled issues at various 'Miiriga', became the representatives of their 'Miiriga' to the 'Njuri Ncheke' meetings which took place at Nchiru in Tigania. At the 'Mwiriga' level, the 'Njuri' has been shown to comprise the most able 'agambi'. Those who formed 'Njuri Ncheke' can be called 'agambi ba agambi' - 'spokesmen of spokesmen' - to put it differently, we would say they were the most
intelligent 'agambi' of all the 'agambi' who lived on the land. The number was immaterial as the quality of the selected people was the distinctive feature that determined who became a member of 'Njuri Ncheke'. Therefore, there was no attempt to establish a specific figure that was to come from each of the 'Miiriga'. Each respective 'Njuri' within a given 'Mwiriga' decided on whom among the 'agambi' were to represent the 'Mwiriga' at the 'Nchiru' meetings. 'Njuri Ncheke' was the highest authority in the society and the most honourable of the councils as it comprised the best brains in the land.

The reasons that made 'Njuri Ncheke' be recognized widely among the Meru included its universal characteristic. This council had a common meeting venue at 'Nchiru' which made the place a major centre for political, social and even economic debates. The council curved a universal image because it was made up of different sages from various parts of Meru. The 'Njuri Ncheke' therefore, was forging a new character in
the society as it brought together the whole Meru country ('Mugongo') to discuss their affairs. This created cohesion.

In an earlier chapter, we argued that the Meru were formed into 'Miiriga' which tended to overshadow the idea of Meru operating as a single community. This was clearly shown as having been mainly a product of geographical factors amongst other reasons. With the establishment of the 'Njuri Ncheke' a new pattern was slowly built up.

The founding of 'Njuri Ncheke' dates to the nineteenth century. At the beginning of 1900, the Meru 'Miiriga' were entrenched, but problems that affected the people beyond a given 'Mwiriga' could not be dealt with effectively within a 'Mwiriga'. The Inter-'Miiriga' relationships required a council which had higher authority than those existing 'Miiriga' authorities. M'Manene (01: 20-3-1991), Muthamia (1973:8) argue that 'effort to deal with stress imposed upon Meru by their extra societal environment' necessitated the formation of a
council like 'Njuri Ncheke' which brought greater solidarity in the society.

In Tigania and Igembe, a certain 'Kaura Bechau' is said to have been the brainchild of 'Njuri Ncheke' (Rimita 1988:47). In fact, Kaura is said to have given to his successors warning that 'Njuri Ncheke' council should 'live forever'. Interestingly the council has survived to date although its ideals were compromised greatly by the colonial government and remains vulnerable to state manipulation in the present time. Kaura Bechau is believed to have been a wise elder, who thought for, and proceeded to form a council that would bring Meru together. In the pre-colonial period, 'Kaura Bechau' therefore was a centre of awesome respect especially in Tigania and Igembe subdivisions.

The existence of Kaura Bechau cannot be doubted but the suggestion that he was the 'father' of 'Njuri Ncheke' could be disputed. Whether he was the founder of 'Njuri Ncheke' or not, Kaura was
a prominent figure in the affairs of the council. Like the legendary 'Koome Njue’, Kaura must have had some influence in the establishment or formulation of 'Njuri Ncheke' and its rules. This would explain why he left important memories in the minds of his successors. It is likely that his suggestions contributed to the formation of the council but he should not be portrayed as the 'Njuri Leader' or 'King' because authority in the council was vested in the most able sages. He could have been one of those early sages whose wisdom was more than a match for his fellow sages but not the only one!

Rather than view the 'Njuri' as a result of one man's effort to foster unity, we must appreciate that by 1900, the 'Miiriga' were in existence although incapable of effectively managing inter-miiriga' problems and external problems. Within the society, many developments were taking place. The population was growing and in the interactions the behaviour of the people had
to be regulated. While at the 'Mwiriga' level respective councils were taking in control, at the higher level of Meru interaction, effective control of social and political order needed a more authoritative council. This therefore was a problem resolved by elevating select 'Miiriga njuri' to a higher status where they could represent their 'Miiriga' and then deal with problems from other communities. 'Njuri Ncheke' became the effective council that cut across the 'Miiriga'. From 1880 the Meru 'Miiriga' were also amalgamating into subdivisions. Thus, identifiable subdivisions were becoming more and more distinct making the 'Miiriga' more indistinct. This therefore made the establishment of 'Njuri Ncheke' even more necessary.

The code of regulations that were formulated at the 'Miiriga' level were reinforced by the powers of 'Njuri Ncheke'. There were prohibitions and punishments imposed by the 'Njuri Ncheke'. Various penalties were imposed against people who committed different crimes ranging from
stealing, murder, and other forms of offense. Land disputes, inter-'Miiriga' quarrels or feuds, were some of the issues the 'Njuri Ncheke' intervened. The strict adherence to religious matters was an aspect also looked into by the 'Njuri Ncheke'.

The offenders were brought before the 'Njuri Ncheke'. Each party gave their side of the story upon which the council passed judgement. In intricate cases where the 'Njuri Ncheke' members failed to ascertain the truth about a problem between two people, an oath was administered. One of the common ways of performing oathing evolved by Meru, was referred to as 'Kuringa Nthenge' (Beating a goat). This was a process whereby two people were asked to swear their innocence while beating a goat with a stick. The goat was beaten to death. The warning in the oath is that, whoever could beat such a goat and yet proceed to give false evidence would die. The 'Njuri Ncheke' went through such efforts to establish justice in the Meru. 'Njuri
Ncheke was the final authority in Meru. Njuri Ncheke had powers to impose punishments to offenders including death penalty.

In the nineteenth century, the council participated in decision-making to guard the country. The decisions made were influenced both by internal and external needs. There were neighbouring pressures which the Meru had to put up with from time to time. In our subsequent chapter, we shall discuss in detail some of the major external offenses that the 'Njuri Ncheke' in consultation with 'Ramare ('warriors' council) had to deal with. We will however, quote a case involving external threat where the 'Njuri Ncheke' played a major role.

In the 'Thamburu ('Tamburu') age-set of about 1844 and Nturutimi in 1856, the Maasai were proving a menace (M'Mwongera 01: 16 - 2 1991; Meme 01: 24 - 3 - 1991; M'itania 01: 4 - 3 - 1991).

To fight the Maasai, the Njuri Ncheke asked various 'Miiriga' to combine their warriors to create
greater military might that could overcome the Maasai. This was done by 'Ramare', the warriors council which managed Meru warrior groups. This decision was important as it enabled the Meru to deter the Maasai in the battles that ensued. We note here that, by the mid nineteenth century, the 'Njuri Ncheke' was becoming the supreme authority recognized by the 'Miiriga' as the absolute authority in the land. Earlier at the introduction of the Chapter we depicted that the Chuka unlike other sub-division did not experience the impact of 'Njuri Ncheke' much. We gave the reasons as the product of Chuka's geographical isolation, that made them a distinct group with independent interests. The period from 1850, however, the Chuka was getting initiated into the 'Njuri Ncheke' affairs.

The Chuka involvement in 'Njuri Ncheke' matters was a consequence of the problems they faced. From that period, they faced attacks from other Meru sub-divisions as well neighbouring societies attacked the sub-division.
The threat therefore necessitated the Chuka to seek relationship with other peoples through media like 'Gichiaro' (blood brotherhood), and also the 'Njuri Ncheke' to help arbitrate problems between Chuka and other groups.

Entry into the 'Njuri Ncheke' was becoming very competitive by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Candidates interested in the council had to meet various forms of requirement. A fee was paid to the council by people contesting entry into the council. The fee was usually paid in kind. Domestic animals including goats, cows, and sheep were part of the fee paid. Membership of Njuri, however, constituted elders with much wisdom. So, payment of fees was not enough, but a distinctive charismatic quality was considered very important in the selection of the 'Njuri Ncheke' members.
By 1900, the 'Njuri Ncheke' wielded much authority in Meru. Throughout Meru sub-divisions this council stood as the highest decision-making body. No wonder, when colonial administration penetrated Meru in the first decade of the twentieth century, they thought falsely that the 'Njuri Ncheke' was the only council in the land. Arguably, the council was not the only one but was the most reputed, the members by 1900 were carrying such ornaments as walking sticks, flying whisks and stools as significant symbols of office. Another important council was the Ramare (Lamalle).

**RAMARE**

'Ramare' was a council which specifically operated within the Meru military setup. This was the council which discussed the military aspects of the society. The council was in charge of internal and external security and also the training and deployment of warriors in times of attack.
The members of this council were drawn from warriors with good character. They were further expected to be brave warriors of recognized abilities. The 'Ramare' was found in all barracks (Gaaru) built in Meru. The 'Ramare' made decisions in consultation with other councils notably the 'Njuri' within the 'Mwiriga' and the major Meru council 'Njuri Ncheke'. 'Njuri Ncheke' was considered the nation's ('Nogongo') council, and could only be contacted by 'Ramare' when there were military problems and security matters of substantive measure.

The 'Njuri' of the 'Mwiriga' and the 'Ramare' worked together where there was a serious matter to be discussed. Sometimes, the 'Njuri ya Mwiriga' limited the powers of the 'Ramare'. For instance, Ramare could not decide to go to war without the permission of the 'Njuri ya Mwiriga'. In other areas such as the circumcision of boys and subsequent training, the 'Ramare' played a central role.
Within the barracks 'Ramare' advised or disciplined warriors accordingly (1 King: 01: 7-5-1991). The council was an authority on its own but had to take advice of those other authorities.

The elders sanctioned war when need arose but had to have the approval of 'Mugwe'. Basically, the role of the 'Mugwe' was to bless people. The 'Mugwe' blessed and warned the Meru about any impending danger. The 'Mugwe' blessed the military forces when they were preparing to go to battle. If he felt that the warriors would not win or would find themselves in serious misfortunes should they proceed with such a planned battle, he warned them accordingly. The functions of the members of 'Ramare' were thus checked by other authorities.

On the whole, the Meru legal system has been shown to be diffused in various councils.
were crimes for instance which made the 'Njuri' of the 'Mwiriga' or 'Njuri Ncheke' to meet and also other problems of an impact to the whole Meru. For example, Kangoi (1972:11) argues that the 'Njuri Ncheke' could convene an emergency meeting incase an alien group had 'overstepped the boundary'. One interesting area which need to be discussed is the way the Meru resolved crimes in the society. There evolved a system of dealing with crimes and some of the major ones can be analyzed.

CRIMES, DISPUTES AND THEIR RESOLUTION

Any society must have law and order. This is necessary as a way of ensuring the stability of the community. As the Meru population expanded, conflicts could not be avoided. The councils took a leading role in the resolutions of disputes in the land.

Crimes included actions such as disrespect to those in one's company, one's seniors, age-mates, family elders and others (Wadibba 1986:119). Further, a crime can be interpreted in the Meru conception as the failure to conform to acceptable
norms in the society. The norms extended beyond disrespect for the members of the society to include disrespect for religious areas such as venues for sacrifice. For most of the mistakes done by the members of the society, a clear legal action was taken. 'Njuri Ncheke' usually dealt with the major crimes while minor ones were left in the hands of the 'Mwiriga' councils.

Some of the most serious crimes in Meru were murder and manslaughter. Murder case constituted an unpardonable offense in Meru. The convict was usually killed. If the 'Njuri' Ncheke was convinced the offense was committed inadvertently or in genuine self defence, compensation would be asked, as this was a lesser crime, a manslaughter. Murder was therefore treated more harshly than manslaughter. The Murderer's family was supposed to compensate the bereaved family. According to Zakayo (01: 4-41 - 1991), the 'Mwiriga' was also charged with the responsibility of compensating the family whose kin had been killed. An individual was taken as a
child of the 'Mwiriga' making the payment of the compensation a collective duty. As payment for such a crime, the 'Njuri' asked for a bull, a sheep and honey from the murderer's family and 'Mwiriga' to compensate the deceased home. That form of compensation however, was not common to the whole of Meru; there were variations as to what was required in the different sub-divisions. For example, the in Tharaka sub-division, goats instead of a bull were asked as compensation for murder. The elders of 'Njuri Ncheke' which dealt with murder cases or manslaughter, asked for a fee which was in form of goats sheep or bulls, from either of the groups, the offender and the offended. The payment, which constituted legal fee also legalized the judicial action and bound the elders to execute what was required of them without favour or fear (Wandibba 1986:126).

In the execution of justice, a major variation was evident in the way men and women were perceived. If a person murdered a woman, he was supposed to pay more in form of compensation as
opposed to one who killed a man. This was because women fetched 'bride-price' and therefore her loss was unthinkable! Second, and most importantly, women in society were symbols of procreation, hence their death was a great loss to the 'Mwiriga' and the entire Meru to have women killed. In fact, even in battles women were usually spared.

Murder was not only punishable but one that created ritual impurity (Mugiro) on the part of the murderer (M'Mutwa Mwari) 01:-8-4-1991). It was one of the most loathsome crimes and resulted to heavy penalty for the individual and the 'Mwiriga'.

Theft (Kwia) was another of the serious crimes in the society. The crime was recognized as evil particularly because it destroyed property and caused concern and much psychological impact on the owner of the stolen property. Thus those found guilty of stealing faced the ruthless arm of Meru law.

Thieves might be asked to return stolen property and compensate clearly those from whom they stole. The crime
could lead to the execution of offenders (M'Ruiga 01: 2 - 1991). The method of killing was grisly. It ranged from the burning of victims, rolling thieves on dangerously hanging cliffs inserted into hollow beehive to tossing them into deep waterfalls. In miitine, one of the waterfalls into which thieves were thrown was the 'Nduruma ya M'Nkaranya' in the 'Nthinkwi' river. The method and the duty to execute the offender rested with the 'Njuri Ncheke'.

With regard to social modesty, women who became pregnant before marriage were punished. One form of punishment was to 'force' marriage between the 'father' and 'Mother' of the child of such pregnancies. Goats or cows might also be given to enable elders conduct ritual cleansing considered necessary for the offenders. Where an uncircumcised boy impregnated a woman - the two culprits were killed. Similarly, if a girl who had not passed through the clitoridectomy rite became pregnant, she was killed together with her partner
who impregnated her. The continued survival of such people was considered curse to the society and therefore the council did not hesitate to execute them. The method of killing such victims is worth describing.

The method applied constituted elements of both embarrassment and pain. The two accused people were pinned down at a road crosssection, were fasted together and a wedge pierced through their bodies into the ground. It was expected that the punishment constituted adequate warning to other people who might fall into similar circumstances (Thuranira 01: 24-4-1991).

The sorcerers were also 'hunted' down and punished accordingly by the 'Njuri Ncheke'. They were seen to create fear in the society. The sorcerers were killed after confiscation and subsequently burning their sorcerous paraphernalia.

The cause of crimes was interpreted as the result of evil and anti-social minds. The crimes mentioned above were but the major one and not the
only ones. For each crime, the appropriate legal action was instituted. Thus, the general awareness that crimes were seriously punishable acted as a deterrent especially for the more serious crimes which might warrant a death sentence.

THE MUGWE DIGNITARY: HIS ROLE IN THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Although the elders of the 'Njuri' of a 'Mwiriga' and the 'Njuri Ncheke' had extensive powers, they respected the presence of 'Mugwe' in society. His word was taken seriously in political affairs. We need to look at the 'Mugwe' office with regard to his contributions in Meru political circles.

There existed an intimate relationship between the political and religious affairs among the Meru. This relationship was best demonstrated by 'Mugwe', a Meru religious dignitary who participated in political matters. Essentially, the 'Mugwe' (Pl. Agwe') presided over the religious world of the Meru. The Meru 'Mugwe' was the
equivalent of the 'Laibon' of the Maasai, the 'abba Gada' and 'Kallu' of the oromo Boran. The origin of the 'Mugwe' is linked to the Meru tradition of 'Mbwa'. At 'Mbwa' the Meru began appreciating the presence of the 'Mugwe' who is said to have played a central part in the rescue operation of the Meru from their captors.

On their way to their present Meru territory, the 'Mugwe' was the focus of the 'Migrant's unity. During the settlement period, the Meru speak of many 'Agwe' and not just one 'Mugwe'. The Meru 'Mugwe' was not known by his names but was referred to by the office title 'Mugwe' (M'Mauta O1 - 16 -3-1991). Bernadi (1989) argues that there was only one 'Mugwe' originally who is recalled to have lived with the Meru at 'Mbwa'. The other 'Agwe' mentioned, he argues, were the children of the first 'Mugwe' who became office bearers in their own right. Their offsprings produced the subsequent 'Agwe' in Meru.
Meru people believed that the child born to be future 'Mugwe' was endowed with the gift at birth and understood his role as he grew. The special office of the 'Mugwe' was a male preserve as no woman in Meru history is known to have ever become a 'Mugwe'.

The 'Mugwe' was consulted constantly by individuals or councils. His advice was particularly in demand during the period of settlement. Otherwise he was not the sole determining factor with regard to places where different families wanted to settle, although his suggestions regarding the suitability of a place to settle was important and taken seriously. In Meru, when the councils convened meetings and the 'Mugwe' attended, his presence was considered indisputable. Bernadi (1989) argues that, whenever a 'Mugwe' was present in a meeting his presence was felt. The elders were the governing body and the 'Mugwe' was the absolute authority and the key symbol of the society's unity. He represented the people beyond and above any limit of time.
To talk about the Meru 'Mugwe' in political affairs is to talk of the symbol that constituted religious and political authority. The 'Mugwe' did not always attend the elders meetings yet when elders were unable to sort out a problem, he was the final consultant. In other words, he was the ultimate authority in political mediations. The office of the 'Mugwe' evolved as one which was beyond reproach. When warriors were due to go raiding the 'Mugwe's blessings and assistance was of great significance. Warriors took his advice because they believed he could accurately gauge unforeseen events ahead.

The 'mugwe' did not belong to any specific age-group. The converse would split his people! His position had a universal characteristic so that he was not seen as being the representative of any one segment of the society. The 'Mugwe' considered all Meru people as equal and consequently treated them with equal fairness. This was necessary for social and political cohesion. The Mugwe's authority as
understood in Meru was principally religious - 'but the control he could exert on the government machinery put into his hands a potential source of political power' (Bernadi 1989:169).

The 'Mugwe' wielded authority because he was considered paramount in all religious matters. The functions of religion and politics intertwined. The 'Mugwe' office was awesome as it combined both the power to bless or curse accordingly. As in contemporary society where faithfuls turn to their 'Bishops' or 'Reverends' to consult them on religious affairs so did the Meru go to their 'Mugwe'. His presence was therefore felt across the religious spectrum and he was respected in political circles.

**CONCLUSION**

This Chapter has shown that the 'Kiama' was a central component of the political process. The institution had intimate linkages with other institutions. In discussing the 'Kiama' it has
been established that other institutions like the 'Njuri Ncheke' constitute a part but not the sole authority in the society's social and political negotiations.

There were various councils which effected an individual's life. The process began from one's childhood into their adulthood. Both Men and Women were partners in the political organization but either sex's level of participation was commensurate with Meru tradition prescription.

The management of 'Biama' has been shown to be essentially the preserve of the charismatic personalities in the society. Age and wealth were important variables but were considered subsidiary to wisdom in gauging an individual's eligibility to such status of 'Agambi'. The development of these councils was an important watershed in Meru political organization.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE MILITARY SET UP AND AGE - SETS SYSTEM.

INTRODUCTION

Military units and age - sets system were part of the institutions that constituted Meru pre-colonial political evolution. This chapter attempts an analysis of the establishment of warrior units with emphasis to recruitment of warriors and initiation into military units. The chapter will also examine the creation of the age - sets system and the impact of military exploits on the political organization. It is argued in the chapter that, military units and the age - sets system did not exist in isolation. Rather they were intimately intertwined with other institutions and their relationship is analysed in the chapter. Ultimately, we show in the chapter how military units and age - sets system fitted into the Meru political process.
The security of a community is embedded in its political establishment. Military units can be seen as part of the security provisions of the political machinery. The Meru recognized the need for, and proceeded to set up military units targeted for both internal and external security.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WARRIOR UNITS

The indigenous military formations trace their origin to the early period of settlement. At their period, the military units established were small in population. In addition, their organization was simple. The warriors lived in barracks (Gaaru), the equivalent of the military barracks in the present time.

Depending on the needs and as a result of consultations between 'Ramare' (Warriors Council) and the 'Njuri', of the 'Mwiriga' or the 'Njuri' Ncheke' military units could come together into a 'pool'. From about 1750, military units maintained internal and external security. Wars between the 'miiriga' or against outside foe occurred
and this chapter will illustrate the fact that the inception and building up of the military units largely hinged upon the security lurking in the Meru environment.

The existence of inter-'miiriga' feuds questions the efficacy of the argument that military units were intended for internal security. Would not the 'inter-miiriga' battles entail internal dissensions? Reasons abound as to why internally there were feuds. War was a challenge that was inculcated in the warriors' psychology during their training which emphasized bravery and adroitness in military engagements. Of interest to note is the fact that, the test for the newly - trained warriors after circumcision was to raid within or without soon after graduation from a period of seclusion. This in itself was already a recipe for internal conflict.

The Meru had clearly organized age - sets system. The warrior were grouped into age -
categories and given names to identify them. Each age group remained in power for a given period before transferring power to another warrior age set.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WARRIOR UNITS 1730-1770s

The military component of the Meru played an integral role in the community. Any political discussion that fails to include the military aspect is incomplete. Meru engaged in battles from time to time. Military engagements between Meru and Maasai were more frequent than with any other external people (Ngoci 01:20-3-1991).

The genesis of this force probably had historical linkages in the sojourn of the Meru from 'Mbwa' to Mount Kenya. However, there is no indication in Meru oral traditions that any major military organization existed in the period when Meru were migrating to their present land. In their historical reminiscences, the Meru recall their vulnerability under the disreputable and
discourteous 'Nguo Ntune' captors. If any military formation took place before the Meru settled in their present lands, it did not have much impact.

Military organization among the Meru is traced to the Mount Kenya area. The period spanning 1730 to 1770 was the formative period. Within this period, settlement took place although expansion continued throughout the eighteenth century. While settling, the Meru encountered other people. Battles ensued occasionally between the Meru and other people already inhabiting the land. This insecurity created the need for military organization amongst the Meru.

When occupying the territory, the Meru encountered nilotic and Cushitic people who were identified by various names. In his research findings, Fadiman argues that, during the 1730s and early 1740s the Meru had contacts with the eastern Cushitic groups. These were variously called 'Ukara', 'Mwoko' and 'Njuwe', the latter name being
specifically common among the Tharaka. These people were black complexioned and lived in 'Michimikuru'.

The word 'Michimikuru' has a literal connotation. It means 'old homes' - 'Michii' - meaning 'home' and 'Mikuru' 'old'. The place is referred to because it is the oldest place to be settled in Meru. 'Michimikuru' is to be located in Tigania and Igembe which was settled by both Meru congeries and other communities.

Muriuki (1974:44) argues that, 'the Kikuyu migrated from as far back as Tigania and Igembe' whilst Mwaniki (1985) argues that both Embu and Mbeere drew from Meru direction. The migration of these people is not our immediate interest. However, it helps us confirm that in Meru and in particular 'Michiimikuru' lived other people. Those had an impact on the Meru security. Suggestions by Fadiman (1983:56) that these people were sometimes called 'Boran-Ukara' implies the possibility that they were Boran. In spite of the difficulty of identifying them, the existence of the word in
Meru currency underscores their presence. Although they were numerically weaker than Meru, 'Mwoko' waged protracted battles against Meru, lasting up to the 1870s (Hopkins 1928).

The Boran (if the name 'Mwoko refers to them) waged constant raids upon Meru. They were such a 'Menace' that a form of resolution in terms of bloodbrotherhood relationship was deemed necessary and was established. The relationship enabled mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence between Meru and Boran.

Other than 'Mwoko', the mention of 'Gumba' people has been documented by among others, Orde-Brown (1950:4) Routledge (1910:4), Fadiman(1983) and Lambert (1950:60-63). The 'Gumba' occupied the Mount Kenya forests. Their economic speciality was hunting gathering and herding. The 'Gumba' who no longer constitute an identifiable group were either 'expelled' 'absorbed' or 'exterminated'. At the initial period they represented another of the inhabitants that posed a challenge before the Meru.
Looming large in Meru traditions were the Maasai who were given various names like 'Ukavi' (probably Kwavi) 'Uru', 'Mathai' (Maasai). Meru informants assert that the Maasai occupied some sections of present day Meru land. M'imenti (Of: 20-4-1991) contend that 'Mathai' (Maasai) grazed their herds in Meru. "... We (migrants) found them grazing in Tigania". This elder's recollection of the story handed down, indicates that the Maasai occupied parts of the Tigania before the Meru reached the area. The Maasai impact on the Tigania has been noted by other researchers on the Meru. For example, Boggia and Schiavinato argue that the Tigania people were part of the Maasai. This conclusion is reached due to the wide similarity between the Maasai and Tigania physical appearance and cultural traits.

Such Meru material culture as spears, shields, women ornaments and dresses resembled those of the Maasai. Although these indicators show much similarity between the Tigania and the Maasai as Boggio and Schiavinato argue, there is no
sufficient evidence to conclude that the Tigania descended from the 'nilotic - hamitic' root. Rather, Tigania is indeed one of the Meru subdivisions as explained in an earlier chapter. Similarities between the Maasai and the Tigania whether physically or culturally, symbolise the profound cultural interaction and intermarriages between the two groups.

In view of the newcomers invading an already occupied territory, and the insecurities that the inhabitants felt when 'Mbwa' waves got into the mount Kenya area, it is possible to assume that skirmishes were inevitable. The Maasai, for instance, raided Meru often in an attempt to replenish their (Maasai) cattle. Despite sporadic skirmishes, there was a gradual process of symbiotic co-existence. This however, did not occur overnight. Hence, as late as the last decade of the nineteenth century, mutual understanding was still being negotiated and diplomatic alliances established between the Meru and the Maasai.
Insecurity necessitated the establishment of warrior units in Meru. There was need for a defensive 'force' to face any possible attacks. In each of the 'Miiriga' that the Meru established, warrior units were also forged and barracks (Gaaru) built to accommodate warriors. One of the most common practice that different 'Miiriga' groups instituted was the Military units. Warrior units were established with rudimentary formations but slowly assuming the autonomy characteristic of the 'Miiriga'.

By mid 1750 - the units were actually small in number and poor in organization. Each 'Mwiriga' evolved warriors' groups depending on its potential to produce young and eligible people who were circumcised, trained and conscripted into active service. By that early period, the military units were not strong enough and were easily attacked and disorganized by the stronger and more 'crafty' Maasai. This weakness on the part of Meru was realised and was gradually arrested by various 'Miiriga' joining their warrior forces against an
external enemy. This was a readjustment from small, sometimes isolated warrior units to larger and more effective military units.

The creation of the military groups was a difficult undertaking which was taken very seriously as it played a significant role in the political machinery.

Later in the chapter, we shall examine the impact of military exploits on the political organization. For now, we will turn to the analysis of the process of recruiting warriors into military service. This had become necessary after arrival because of the insecurity already mentioned.

INITIATION INTO MILITARY UNITS AND CREATION OF AGE-SETS SYSTEM.

Warriorhood in Meru was a post-circumcision factor. Before circumcision, boys were anxious to undergo the rite and consequently became warriors. The make-believe warriors' practices in peer groups loomed large in boys sporting activities. It
was for a growing boy the lifelong ambition to become a warrior one day. Being a warrior was not only to serve in the society's defense machinery, but also because the society regarded the warriors as dignified people. This is because, they were the defenders of the land. To become a warrior was coveted and involved a transitory period in which a boy was circumcised and underwent significant changes; changing from childhood to adulthood; changing the names from the loathsome 'bwiji' (un-circumcised boy) to reputable, 'Nthaka' (circumcised warrior). Except for physical or mental disabilities it was not possible for one to skip warriorhood.

Women who underwent through the clitoridectomy rite, the equivalent of the boys circumcision, were not trained for defence. The initiated girls associated themselves with circumcised warriors at the same time as them. They felt part and parcel of the warriors.

Circumcision was considered vital as it ushered in a new period in a boy's life. A
circumcised boy was not only required to avoid association with boys who were not initiated but was also expected to hold tenaciously to his new role as a warrior. Both the family and the 'mwiriga' in which one was born into took the rite seriously. To the father, the circumcision of the elder son, for instance, meant that in the social fibre of the society he was regarded highly as an elder. Circumcision however, was not the essential factor that ushered a man to elderhood as already shown in an earlier discussion. However, when a boy was circumcised, his father was honoured as his age was considered advanced. He was respected as one who had managed to bring up his child, an invaluable addition to Meru warriors. The 'mwiriga' needed the boy to join the warrior ranks and strengthen the defence of the land (M’Njau, 01: 26-2-1991; Mburugu 01: 18-5-1991). Each 'Mwiriga' was building itself militarily and it was only after the boys were
initiated that the 'mwiriga's defence was strengthened further.

The Meru 'Mugwe' had a role to play in the young warriors rite. The 'Mugwe' was the bridge between the secular and the religious world and therefore he was to bless the initiates. The warriors found the 'Mugwe' office indispensable - in their lives.

Before circumcision, many preliminary activities took place. For example, there was singing which was in vulgar language. The use of vulgar language had certain social and political implications. On a most superficial level, it was simply an expression of the singers' happiness. It was simply enthusiasm! In a deeper sense, the singing was intended to provoke the warriors so that they could hasten the rite. Second, it was a way of shedding their past ways which gave way to adulthood. Singing was an important medium to express the youngsters' ambitions and hopes.
Circumcision had certain implications. The circumcised boys were to remove the immediate warriors in power. This is because, the new initiates were supposed to take over the 'Gaaru' and the immediate warriors in power had to retire at home. The other factor is that when an older son of a man is circumcised then his father was supposed to stop 'fathering' further children. Because of those two factors, the warriors and elders were sometimes hesitant to permit boy's initiation as they wished to remain longer in their present status. Hence, the boys employed various provocative methods in an effort to hasten the rite.

It must be noted that, provocation and pleading were not the only means by which permission to circumcision was granted. The ability of the parents in liaison with the 'mwiriga' to cater for the initiation was important.

In times of poverty the circumcision of the boys could be delayed. Again, because of the military needs,
intervals between circumcision periods were shortened in order to provide warriors. All the same, the Meru established requirements for circumcision and the physically feeble and lethargic boys were suspended from the rite till they were fit — because entry into military service was a serious responsibility that required strong youth.

There was no universal age at which boys were to be circumcised throughout Meru. Mwaniki (1985:10) states that 'the initiation period... differed from place to place and historical times'. One reason that he gives of significance in our assessment is that, fluctuations of the biological age was necessitated by among other factors 'warfare' which created need for warriors and so circumcision might be done to younger boys in order to raise warriors.

Acceptance of initiation was accompanied by songs and dances, the most common being 'Nkibata' and 'Kirarire'. The former was composed of boys aspiring for circumcision and warriors. The songs
encouraged the boys to be brave on the impending rite. Circumcision was a challenge which Mwaniki calls 'nasty' in view of actual pain of the act of surgery and the accompanying beatings. However, the rite had a purpose; beyond the associated pains, a courageous warrior who was ready for community service was produced.

The 'Kirarire' song, still popular in few pockets of Meru, was a song guided by experts called 'Itharia' (sing 'Kitharia'). This was a dramatic song in which social and political duties were expressed. The occasion was an all night affair on the eve of circumcision, and at dawn the boys underwent the rite.

The boys conduct in the process was communicated by the immediate warriors who cordoned off the venue. Shouts of victory or disdain expressed reaction of the candidate to the operation. The picture given was carried further by the women in songs. Fadiman, (1982:70) writes that women's ululations and shouts of derision or praise
represented the ultimate judgment of male behavior...'. Men who were immediately next to the candidate conveyed the message of the character shown. The presence of both men and women was largely psychological. In a society where courage was taken as 'virtue' and fear 'vice', then the presence of women 'observers' and men who had undergone similar initiation was considered an indispensable measure of the initiates' personalities in the occasion.

After the circumcision, the initiates got into military barracks or 'dormitories' (Gaaru). The 'Gaaru' were established all over Meru. This is where the warriors were politically socialized; they were taught both about the conduct of warriors and the society which they were to defend. The feeling of solidarity, obedience and need to be responsible warriors was cultivated in the training after initiation. Although the initiates were geared towards military expertise in their training, adherence to acceptable societal norms as well as distinctions in military exploits was
emphasized. The purpose of this was twofold, first, military skills would enable an individual to participate sufficiently in battle while obedience entrenched the importance of subservience to higher authorities especially on occasions of resolving conflicts.

When the boys were circumcised, they were initiated into specific age - sets ('Nthuki'). There are variations existing in respect to the meaning of 'Nthuki'. Lowethal (1970), Lambert (1956) argue that 'Nthuki' means age - set system while Mahner (1970), refers to it as 'generation set'. Our understanding of 'Nthuke' is that it implies an age - set system. A complete age - set in Meru had sub - sets which together accomplished a full 'Nthuki'. The sub - set arose from different circumcision periods of the age - set (M'inoiti 01: 03-3-1991; (Manene 01: 16-2-1991).

A full Meru age - set was made up of two or three sub - sets. In some Meru section, the sub - sets would make up an age - set while in some
others three were required. When a group of boys was initiated they made up an 'Itana' (Pl. 'Matana' - circumcision sets. It was when two or three 'Matana' were conducted that a full age-set was realised. The sub-sets were given different names which designated when and where they ranked within the age-set. The age-set as a whole was recognized by other common title which clearly distinguished it from other age-sets in different eras.

In an age-set among Imenti, the first composition of the boys to be circumcised was called 'nchang'anabiri'. The second group of initiates was called 'ntimirigwi'. In that sub-division only two sub-sets; 'nchang'anabiri' the first batch of initiates and 'ntimirigwi'; the second group of initiates formed an age-set. Other areas showed different trends.

In Tigania for example, three sub-sets made up full age-set system. In the order of circumcision from the first to the last
respectively, the sub-sets were; 'ndinguri', 'Kobia' and 'Kaberia'. Let us observe that 'ndinguri' as seen in an earlier chapter was a name also used to refer to boys who were awaiting circumcision. Other than the names having similar spellings, in context, the meaning differed and therefore cannot be taken as synonyms.

The two sub-sets found within the Imenti age-set were a replica for the Mwimbi sub-division except that an additional sub-set called 'Mwongera' existed (Mwirichia OT: 22-4-1991). The duration necessary for the formation of an age-set was not similar in different areas. Hence, we can only give a range of time other than a specific number of years or seasons.

The period an age-set took to be established generally ranged between ten to fifteen years. In Meru, such problems as famine could disturb the period of circumcision because under normal circumstances, the ceremonies were organized at times when there was plenty of foodstuff to feed
initiates. The initiates were forced to eat a lot of food. This was to make them strong enough to defend their society. Sometimes war might accelerate initiations before the scheduled time. This was done as a measure to provide adequate warriors in a case where available warriors were numerically weak with regard to external pressures. So boys could be initiated before the period usually prescribed by tradition to meet this demand.

To compute the period an age-set took to form, one must understand the Meru conception of time. The Meru had a formal interpretation of time that enabled them to order events. There were 'twelve units' of time equivalent to twelve calendar months of the present day. So the western calendar year is equivalent to the Meru full year except when the year starts and ends.

In their cyclical seasons, the Meru knew of two seasons each of six months. The two season were 'Urugura' and 'Uthima' (Mwongera 01: 14-3-1991 ;
Source: Laughton, W.H. (1965) Teaching about our people
Kinyamu 01: 15-5-1991; Mpindi 01: 9-1-1991). The Meru month started in March and ended in February. Table 2 clearly demonstrates meru perception of time.

There were about 24 seasons in a complete 'Nthuki' (Lambert 1967-27). This figure is also confirmed by other people (Mwireria 01: 10-4-1991; M'Ringera 01: 4-3-1991) Computing from the figure of the seasons, 24, we can find the equivalent number of years as according to our present day calendar year. In this respect, we realise that, one season has six months. Therefore, twenty four seasons gives a total of 144 months and this means twelve years. Twelve years essentially was the average period of the formation of an age-set of between 1-15 years. This is because as noted already, fluctuation of circumcision periods for any reasons led to changes in the years taken to form an age-set (Mati 01: 20-4-1991).

When the warrior units were formed, they lived in the 'Gaaru' receiving instructions about.
their conduct with the vocabulary 'defence' assuming the core of the instructions. This was emphasized because the warriors were supposed to be the defenders of the society. Those who were in 'Gaaru' were recruited into the 'kiama' called 'Ramare'. 'Ramare' as already shown, discussed the Warrior affairs. It disciplined warriors and also arranged for impending battles. The 'Ramare' conducted its affairs in liaison with the 'Mwiriga' council or the supreme 'Njuri Ncheke' depending on the magnitude of the issues at hand.

Inside the 'Gaaru', the warriors were given the names which were a form of 'baptism' from 'Uiji' (of un-circumcised) to 'Uthaka' (of circumcised). Names were given amidst a process of beatings where one was not supposed to flinch. Each boy had a mentor to take care of his welfare especially to guide him into adulthood. Such a mentor was a person selected by the boy's father and he was to act like the boy's father.

The name given had a distinction signifying 'Muntu' a person, denoted by the letter 'M' with an
apostrophe before the name e.g. 'M'Matiri, or M'Muraa. The arrogation of the term 'Muntu', symbolically entailed the recognition of the individual as an adult within the traditional prescription and description. On another level, the prefix 'M' was the equivalent of the letter 'Mr.' in English language. The culmination of the process of seclusion was marked by a popular dance called 'Authi' in which the 'Ntaane' (newly initiated boys) danced in public. This was followed by an oath to remind the initiates to keep secrets divulged to them while in training. The oath also re-emphasized the centrality of courage in the warriors' new life. From this stage, their work was tested by being commissioned to go and raid selected places which were clearly weighed both by the 'Ramare' 'njuri Ncheke' and 'Mugwe' in order to determine the areas appropriate for the test at hand.

The words of 'Mugwe' were very necessary. In such a war, 'senior warriors... (and) elders would appear before the 'Mugwe' to receive his
blessings and prophecy' (Fadiman 1981:99). The centrality of the Meru 'Mugwe' in military exploits was taken as supreme to military councils. As Bernadi (1989:63) succinctly states, 'even after the inner council of war had decided on raids'. The words of the 'Mugwe' were final. War could not take place unless the 'Mugwe' gave his words. The Meru 'Mugwe' was thus a central personality in military decisions and the young initiates were clearly briefed about this matter of prime concern in their lives.

When the members of the Meru age-sets were ready to assume full authority as warriors in office, they succeeded the warriors before them in an organized physical and psychological transition. This succession or transfer of power was highly sensitive and dramatic event called 'Ntuiko'. 'Ntuiko' like the process of creating warriors was part and parcel of the Meru political organization.
The ceremony in which the warriors who were in power were removed from the 'Gaaru' by a new contingent was referred to as 'Ntuiko'. 'Ntuiko' was an important aspect of the warriorhood which involved the transfer of power and the consequent change of leadership. The warriors who took over after 'Ntuiko' ceremony assumed power in the land. Those who were removed retired to their huts and were given the title 'Aruau' sig. 'Muruau', which simply meant an elder.

The term 'Ntuiko' means 'removal' or 'cutting'. It implied the severing of authority of the incumbent warriors who were replaced by younger and stronger warriors. This rite symbolised a transition in which the senior warriors relinquished power to junior warriors. This style of transferring power was also evident in some neighbouring communities though the names given were varied. Among the Mbeere and Embu, the
ceremony was called 'Nduiko' (Mwaniki, 1985:56) and 'Ituika' in Kikuyu (Muriuki 1974:17).

The 'Ntuiko' can be understood better when two political distinctions are explained. The distinctions are the existence of two moieties namely, 'Kiruka' and 'Ntiba' which alternated political offices. At no time did the two moieties assumed power concurrently. In the arrangements of age-set system, those two moieties belonged each to its own age-set.

An age-set in power reigned for about 12 years. In this period, it was either 'Kiruka' or 'Ntiba' which was in office in charge of the country's administration and defence. In discussing political leadership and defence, it is imperative that when a moiety was in office the responsibilities of running the society's affairs were squarely on its shoulders. The elders in a society took over the country's administration. The warriors of the same society were in charge of defence. Holding (194:31) argues that, if the
officiating elders are 'Ntiba' the warriors would be 'Kiruka'.

This format was adhered to in the time of transfer of power from one age-set to another. The Meru moieties 'Kiruka' and 'Ntiba' were the parallel of the Kikuyu 'Mwangi' and 'Maina' (Irungu) moieties (Muriuki 1974:117). Among the Meru, children belonged in the fathers' moiety. This specifically referred to male children as the femalefolk lost identity after marriage, a rite which also stripped them off their age-set affiliations to their villages military units. They subsequently assumed new identities in their homes becoming part of their husbands moieties and status quo. There was no chance that a married woman might remain in the same moiety.

The period of remaining in office and retirement was therefore marked by the ceremony - 'Ntuiko' - which meant either 'Kiruka' or 'Ntiba' assumed power or relinquished it accordingly. It was 'Ntuiko' which regulated this transfer of power
and the occasion was officiated by the 'Mugwe' who blessed the age-sets wishing well those who would take over. Murianki (O1: 11-4-1991) points out that, 'Unene bwa tharimagwa ni mugwe' meaning the 'mugwe' blessed leadership. The 'Mugwe' was the ultimate consultant in social-political and religious matters.

In this momentous occasion, the warriors physically chased away those retiring. The physical expulsion was cautiously carried out within the traditional setup which prohibited the spilling of blood. The elders would give mock resistance, but eventually they would be driven away from 'Gaaru'. The younger warriors who assumed office after 'Ntuiko' became the defenders of the society.

The younger warriors would also take the war horn. This symbolised the complete removal of the older warriors from office and active warriorhood. Feasting and dancing followed those events. Warriors removed from power retired into their homesteads and joined appropriate 'Miiriga'
councils. To crown the take-over, the 'Mugwe' was contacted for further blessings (M'Ritaugu 01: I-2-3-1991).

This method of transfer of power enabled a smooth transition from one moiety to the next without bloodshed. The fact that leadership was not vested in any individual, but a composition of representatives in the society greatly diffused any leadership wrangles and succession disputes of any form. More significantly, the presence of the 'Mugwe' made it possible for the smooth transfer of power.

Up to this level, we have attempted showing how warrior units were organized through the formation of age-set system and transfer of power. We will briefly analyze the nature of political deliberations of an age-set in power and show its linkage with the warrior group in power together with the councils particularly the 'Njuri Ncheke'.
We have shown that the Meru had two distinct moieties, 'Ntiba' and 'Kiruka' which alternated leadership. Consequently the age-set in power had its warriors in power. The role of the age group in power was to run the society's affairs. The elders who assumed leadership, were the decision-makers, both on the long-term political objectives and immediate problems facing the country. The development of the society at large was therefore within the jurisdiction of the group.
At the family level, those usually with the designation of 'father' who belonged to the ruling age-set, were the ultimate authority within the 'Mwiriga' for the period that the group was in power until the official transfer to a recipient moiety in the dramatic 'Ntuiko' ceremony. The membership into the 'Mwiriga' council depended on charisma. This still remained the criterion for entry into Meru councils. However, it was only the sages within a moiety who had the final word in a matter. A given moiety might of-course not have had the best brains pitted against its counterpart moiety. The elders of other moieties were permitted to attend the deliberations of the moiety in power, but essentially on a 'consultancy status' where they could not assume precedence over the age-set in power.

The warrior group in power was answerable to the elders within their moiety. Issues relating to the warriorhood including the training of initiates, internal and external security were run by a specialized warrior's council, the 'Ramare'.
The group was consequently checked by the 'Miiriga' authorities and ultimately by the 'Njuri Ncheke', for example, the warriors could organize the circumcision of the boys but had to consult the 'Kiama' in the 'Mwiriga' which worked in consultation with the 'Njuri Ncheke'. In other words, the warriors may have operated within the barracks with much independence, but all major decisions such as waging war had to be regulated by the other organs - the councils within the 'Mwiriga' and without. The warriors had a duty to serve the interests of the 'Mwiriga'. However, their tasks extended beyond the 'Mwiriga'. For instance, the 'Njuri Ncheke' would assign warriors duties to defend the society at large when need be.

The emphasis that should be given is that the age-set in power deliberated on judicial matters within the 'Mwiriga' or on the larger sections of the society. The group maintained peace and order in the society. In all their deliberations, the moiety in power consulted those who were not in power. This shows that ideas were
shared by both the group that was ruling and the other moiety not in power on the understanding that the final word rested in the group in power.

THE MILITARY EXPLOITS AND THE IMPACT ON MERU

POLITICAL CHARACTER: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Elaborate military organization was established on the basis of the general insecurities that the Meru experienced at Mount Kenya. Although during the early period of their settlement, the military organization constituted a mere handful of warriors, over time, this developed in such a manner as to make the society appear more or less like a 'military state'.

Aspects such as 'Ntuiko' organized age-set system and circumcision sessions, underscore the very essence of political development that took place in Meru region. The change that brought about this was an attempt to cope with a new environment which was beset with incessant internal and external treats. We shall proceed to show the major military exploits and their impact on Meru political character.
The period between 1750 and 1908 saw the creation of strong military units. One of the major military responsibilities as shown in the introductory section of this chapter, was to protect the society. The insecurity that the Meru felt while settling where they had to put up with the inhabitants necessitated the establishment of military units. The military setup began feebly with poor organization pattern and training to become most elaborate in subsequent years.

The evolution of Meru military units became a long-term process and an ambitious one in which all male initiates entered into warrior services. There developed an attitude that the greatest proof of the strength and bravery of newly initiated boys (Ntaane) was to successfully raid a people and bring the loot home. So, other than the external pressures brought to bear upon the society, the Meru military training in the period of seclusion created what can be seen as 'appetite' to raid for
cattle, ostensibly to prove the warriors' worth. It was more of the need to show their military valour that warriors engaged in battles within Meru than the sheer want for war. Both the internal aspects and external pressures can best explain the long military history that was to be found in Meru pre-colonial period.

Up to about 1800 the Meru witnessed skirmishes with other societies. It was a period in which they organized themselves into clearly defined military units and boundaries with other communities. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Meru faced external and inter-'miiriga' feuds.

The reconstruction of the significant military battles is traced through the age-set system. The names of age-sets were different even for those of the same period because of geographical and cultural disparities. Those disparities partly deterred interaction among the Meru sub-divisions. It will be noticed that nothing
like 'University names' for the age-sets system existed. However, some names were identical in more than one Meru sub-division.

In Chuka, the earliest remembered battles against other Meru congeries occurred in the period between 1765 and 1800 in which the Chuka fought the Amwimbi (Mwaniki 1982: 74). This was during an age-set called 'mukisi'. This age-set is exclusively remembered among the Chuka. The Chuka were target of attacks by surrounding people for most of pre-colonial period. The battles began in the late eighteenth century and turned more protracted in the first decades of the nineteenth century. From the year 1810-1825, the Chuka faced the Mbeere, Embu, Kikuyu and Katheri forces. The Katheri are a section of Meru 'Miiriga' of Imenti sub-division, who using the forest truck were able to reach the Chuka confined in forested and hilly parts that were divided by deep rivers.
The battles were a great threat to Chuka survival. The Chuka re-organized themselves militarily, they changed the traditional military setup in which warriors guarded the land and people resided in scattered 'Gaaru'. Instead they designed a new, more effective security measure in which they erected 'Gaaru' along the border of their territory, a military formation which was intended and indeed worked as a safety precaution (Ngara: 01: 13-5-1991; Njoka 01: 6-3-1991; Muthuri 01: 02-5-1991).

In a paper, 'The Gaaru' ('barrack') system of the Chuka of Mount Kenya: A case study of traditional institution', Mwaniki (1985) shows the Chuka in terms when he compares them with the 'tongue between the 'jaws'. In the analogy, the Chuka were the 'tongue' while the jaws symbolized the enemies. Because of the looming insecurity, the Chuka were forced to establish larger military units and also consolidate themselves so as to combat enemies from a single front. This partly
explains the 'compactness' of the Chuka as a people.

Among other sections of the Meru, the Maasai sustained a chain of raids through the last quarter of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The most protracted battles were those engagements ranging from 1814 to 1828 when the kiruja age-set was in power (Magana 01: 2-5-1991). There were two factors that were in favour of Meru in this war. One, there was intensive military mobilization. The 'Njuri Ncheke' played a central role in mobilising Meru military forces. Second, during this period, the Maasai were afflicted by natural calamities and the Meru had an easy headway (Jacob 1965). On Meru military developments, the battle not only called for greater military coalitions, but the decisions of 'Njuri Ncheke' were to be taken more seriously in the subsequent years.

During this battle, the Maasai were decisively overcome and pushed beyond Nanyuki up to
the Ol-Doigan (Ntaiga hill) leaving an empty stretch of land that Meru referred to as 'Buurif'.

The subsequent age-set Tamburu (Thamburi) which followed Kiruja was not very powerful. The victory that Kiruga age-set had shown from about 1814-1828 was not followed up. A peaceful time followed; it was a period of political consultations and consolidation. During this period, the Meru established more 'Gaaru' and informants do not remember any military engagement up to 1850 when the Maasai attacked Meru. This attack in mid nineteenth century began a process which in the last half of nineteenth century turned Meru into a field of upheaval: 'upheaval' because Meru had to put up with varied and frequent challenges both from neighbouring and distant people. It was a challenge which not only brought new changes within Meru but was marked by military engagements, diplomatic alliances, intermarriages, interactions and trade.

One of the most salient features, is the development of 'Njuri Ncheke'. This council was not
only to negotiate matters within Meru but also had to be a central link between Meru, neighbouring and distant people. The council was to play a representative role in view of the problems of universal character that affected the people. The operation of 'Njuri Ncheke' could not be limited to a small geographical scope! Its role extended to most parts of the Meru, though still with very little impact upon the Chuka.

From 1840s to 1870s, the Nturutimi and Kubai age-sets were in power. At this period, the Maasai attacked the Meru. The Maasai who had withdrawn earlier because of domestic problems, came with renewed vigour. This time the Maasai attacks were devastating!

The 'Njuri Ncheke' and the 'Ramare' discussed ways of combating the wars. At 'Nchiru', the 'Njuri Cheke' met at 'Nchiru' and decided on mobilization of forces. It was at this period that decision was taken by 'Njuri Ncheke' to establish military alliances in Meru so as to diffuse or
combat external military attacks (M'Itania 01: 19-2-1991). This was an important landmark in the political affairs of the land. The Meru were moving towards an organization that operated beyond the 'Mwiriga' and 'Biama'. The challenge for greater consolidation had been implemented.

In the raids of the 1870s, the Maasai were defeated. This however, was largely because of the large scale mobilization that the Meru 'Miiriga' assumed. The joint military defence became meaningful! The period from 1850 also saw the influx of the Arabs and Swahili traders who penetrated Mount Kenya, in search of trade items. Traders into Mount Kenya had not begun penetrating the land in 1850 but even earlier on. For instance, Jackson (1976:217) shows that from 1775 into the nineteenth century, the Kamba were trading with the Tharaka section of Meru, a sub-division with closer geographical proximity to the Kamba than other sub-divisions. In fact, the southeast border of Meru sub-divisions is divided by the Tana river. Both the Tharaka and the Kitui share this boundary. The
symbiotic economic relationship supposed to have existed must have been entrenched in History.

The Maasai traded with the Meru even in the midst of skirmishes and in fact traders were not attacked by either side of the fighters. But, it was in the nineteenth century that the traders had an impact on the society that substantially shaped most political relationships commensurate with the attendant requirement.

The penetration of Swahili and Arabs traders in Meru has been recorded by among others: Chanler (1896:472); Neumann (1898:8,80); Tate (1904:223); Mwaniki (1985:8), Ogot and Kieran (1968:218), Bernadi (1972:40). The trade relationship however, has not been linked to the political organization of the Meru. It must be pointed out that by the time these trades were entering Meru the external impact was becoming intense and was evoking the Meru into stronger military campaigns. The Zanzibar and coastal Swahili and Arab traders were causing anxiety in
some parts of Meru. Among the Chuka who earlier lived in fear, they organized military forces to protect the society against the traders. Warriors were assigned duties to keep vigilant over the traders to ensure that they did not threaten the Chuka internal security.

From 1870 the Maasai put serious battle against the Meru. One of the fiercest battles remembered in Meru history was fought between 1870 and 1880. Out of sheer need to display power and the need to replenish their cattle, the Meru warriors attacked the Maasai in an impromptu raid across Nanyuki. The Meru warriors were mobilized from different 'Gaaru' from Imenti. The Meru waged a battle and won. However, out of sheer happiness and battle frenzy, the Meru warriors did not return home immediately. They remained within Nanyuki region for a day. This was an unfortunate military miscalculation! The Maasai reorganized their forces and attacked the Meru. The Meru lost many lives. The Livestock they had captured were recovered by the Maasai.

At the turn of nineteenth century, the Meru sub-divisions were now concentrating on the
internal affairs. The Chuka remained a target and when the other Meru sub-divisions wished to replenish their cattle, the Chuka was looked upon as the internal traditional enemy. The Mwimbi fought battles with the Chuka in about 1870 and they were able to evacuate the Chuka from their areas and pushed them across the river Mara (Mworia 01: 13-4-1991). After that, the Mwimbi, who were the 'victors' established themselves in the vacated land (Orde-Brown 1970: 30). The area referred to as having been vacated by a fraction of the Chuka is the present day Muthambi section. In Chapter Four, the discussion of the 'Gichiaro' (bloodbrotherhood relationship), the Muthambi are shown as the group with whom most Meru sub-divisions, save the Chuka established relationship. To other Meru sub-division Muthambi was an important strategic position.

It is still in dispute whether Muthambi was part of the Chuka section. But, assertions of the traditions that Muthambi was born out of battle cannot be ignored because
during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Chuka was in siege. The Chuka could not effectively defend its borders and constant campaigns had weakened Chuka tremendously. Muthambi, was thus made up of a fraction of Mwimbi remnant warriors and the Chuka prisoners of war particularly the women and children who were spared in battle. This battle had far reaching effects because it led to territorial adjustments.

The Embu and Mbeere also attacked the Chuka within the years 1870 to 1885. A combination of Kikuyu, Embu and Mbeere forged a serious campaign against the Chuka. The battle was led by one Njeru Karuku, believed to have had magical powers (Mwaniki 1985: 28; Orde-brown 1970: 31). Much property and lives were lost by the Chuka.

The battles that the Maasai won over the Meru led to a period of change of relationship between the Meru and the Maasai. There rose the
need to engage in diplomatic alliances and intermarriages in order to diffuse Maasai attacks. This was a political calculation intended as a safety precaution to ward off Maasai onslaught. Those Maasai who had invaded Katheri and other Imenti sections sought peaceful relationship with sections of the Meru Bloodbrotherhood with external foe created an opportunity to curtail warfare and can be seen as an aspect of social political diplomacy - it was a strategy the Meru evolved to resolve conflicts instead of resorting to battle.

The Purko Maasai entered the Tigania and Igembe areas in large numbers because of the wars between the Laikipia and Purko Maasai. Some of the late nineteenth century travellers including Neumann (1898:128), witnessed the Maasai living peacefully among the Tigania and Katheri Zones. The Tigania interaction with the Maasai dated to the period of Meru settlement. Thus, though skirmishes over the years never ceased, by the end of nineteenth century, mutual relationship was being
established, creating a conducive atmosphere for the co-existence of the two parties. The problems of drought and famine that made the Maasai very weak militarily can explain the intensified effort by the Maasai to create amicable relationship with Meru at the turn of the nineteenth century. Jacob (1965) observes that problems of drought and famine made the Maasai seek peaceful co-existence with neighbouring peoples. This is true of the relationship the Meru established with the Maasai. For example, the drought and famine afflictions of 1891 forced the Maasai to penetrate Imenti and Tigania 'Miiriga'. The calamities of early 1870s were not exclusively a Maasai phenomenon but a problem that affected most of the East African Societies. Franklin (1987:47) reports the existence of calamities in Samburu, while Mwaniki (1985) shows those of 1885 in Embu and Mbeere. Even among the Kamba and the Kikuyu, the last decade of the nineteenth century was known for catastrophes.
Interdependence was seen as one of the best solutions to the problems of that era. This explains the decline of wars in the last decade of nineteenth century between Meru and her neighbours. Greater socio-political interaction was being forged. The 'Njuri Ncheke' was assuming fuller universal status. It was able to overcome the mere enthusiasm of the 'Mwiriga'. Although the 'Mwiriga' did not cease to exist or operate, the 'Njuri Ncheke' was assuming supremacy over all Meru councils.

The Maasai penetration in Meru land had an impact on the Meru political and social character. The Meru are said to have borrowed attire and weaponry from the Maasai. The Meru spear was modified from the hitherto short blade to a long one. Meru traditional hair-dress resembled that of the Maasai. It is however difficult to tell who borrowed from whose style. Interaction and intermarriages with the Maasai became more pronounced among the Tigania section of the Meru.
There were some developments born out of the interaction. For example, there are many words to be found in Meru which are of Maasai origin. Those attest to the profound interactions and intermarriages. It is however, difficult to prove who borrowed words from who. The examples of such words are on the table below.

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH WORD</th>
<th>MAASAI WORD: SINGULAR/PLURAL</th>
<th>MERU WORD: SING/PLURAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basket</td>
<td>Englando: Singular</td>
<td>Kiondo: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axe</td>
<td>Entolu: Singular</td>
<td>Mtuulu: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calf</td>
<td>Olashe: Plural</td>
<td>Lashe: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniper tree</td>
<td>Altarakwa: Singular</td>
<td>Mutarakwa: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only</td>
<td>Ake: Singular</td>
<td>Aki: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>Maskali: Singular/Plural</td>
<td>Magati: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Murata: Singular</td>
<td>Murata: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey</td>
<td>Naisho: Singular</td>
<td>Naichu: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbit</td>
<td>Engilojo: Singular</td>
<td>Mgituju: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old man</td>
<td>Olmorow: Singular</td>
<td>Mumawu: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td>Ngureu: Singular</td>
<td>Mkumu: Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corpse</td>
<td>Menenge: Plural</td>
<td>Menenga: Singular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Mboroki, J.H. (1972). 'Community relations between the North Imenti and Tigania of Meru and the Maasai.'
These words are found among the Tigania section of Meru. They indicate certainly that interaction existed that produced dialectical similarities.

The Maasai interaction with the Meru had important political implications. The interactions are proof of the fact that Meru and her neighbours were not engaged in feuds throughout their lives. This enabling environment was to be the cornerstone of peaceful existence in the areas they settled and the relationship shows the advanced level of adjusting from the fear-lurking place to a most accommodating home.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries witnessed the invasion by European traders and travellers in the land. This period was foretold in Meru as early as 1850 (Fadiman 1982:157). The travellers and traders did not assume direct political administration, but they had an adverse impact on Meru political setup. Those white men were
variously referred to as 'Achuku' (Pl. Muchuku), 'Chomba', 'Ngeletha' and 'antu babatune'.

The coming of the Europeans is remembered in the 1880's when the Meru Kaburia age-set was in power and thereafter during the 1890 when Meeme/kiriamaana and Muthamia were the age-set in 'Gaaru'. Subsequently in 1903 when Murungi age-set was in 'Gaaru' many 'white' men penetrated Meru.

Some of the visitors included Neumann, Chanler, Arkel-Hardwick among others. They were given nicknames depending on their characteristics. The problems they caused were that of irresponsible interference with the political setup disregarding the existing authorities. They plundered villages, burning and killing people. One of those who plundered is remembered as 'Litharike'. This is a word meaning 'bloody' emanating from his killing practices. The newcomers were not courteous and from time to time they dislocated the existing inter-'miiriga' relationship creating jealousies and denting the political equilibrium as they psyched and led some Meru warriors against others.
For instance, Arkell Hardwick (1889:319 - 326) reports how he led munithu warriors against Ntakira warriors. These were two closely related Imenti 'Miiriga'.

The travellers lured few of Meru men offering them hope of protection against their enemies. The influx of these 'visitors' confused and found the warriors unprepared for battle. The last decade of the nineteenth century had been shown as one when Meru was consolidating itself.

War was slowly being diffused by diplomatic alliances and the natural calamities of 1890's, of plagues, drought and famine encouraged the need for peace. Peaceful trade linkages, intermarriage and diplomatic alliances were therefore the main areas of interest between Meru and her neighbours. Therefore, the coming of the European intruders exhumed those tensions that the Meru were attempting to bury. The 'Njuri Ncheke' at this moment had gained a status as the supreme Meru council. However, its impact among the Chuka was
still minimal. The late nineteenth century save for the penetration of the few unfriendly European visitors, was a peaceful period. The Impact of these 'visitors' cannot be over-emphasized. It should be noted that their effects were not widespread as only the Imenti and the Tigania Sections of the Meru were essentially affected. What the interference did of significance was that it provoked the Meru warriors to seek counsel with colonial administrators - who instead of resolving the 'visitors' interference went ahead to establish their rule.

In Imenti where few of the travellers penetrated, the 'Miiriga' were peaceful. But, two Meru Men (traitors) allied themselves with the white 'visitors'. They were lured to accompany the whites in plunder and also divulged Meru military securities to them. Although those people did not pose a threat with their guns and crafty tactics of ambush against the numerically stronger and trained warriors - they did dent peace at a moment when Meru needed it most.
By about 1905, the travellers with their handful of Meru 'traitors' attacked Thuura 'miiriga' and captured two sons of a prominent Meru 'Mugambi' and a respected warrior called M'Mwitari wa M'Karandu. This may have been a small incidence, but it was to compound to an actual danger because it led to the formal invitation of British administrators. Although British administrators may have been invited by other people such as Mbogori of Mmwimbi as tradition maintains, Mwitari was one of the prominent Meru figures who played a direct role in calling them.

The captors asked Mwitari to give some goods as a condition for the release of his sons. He was required to produce cows, goats and sheep. He refused and in anger, by-passed the traditional authorities particularly the 'Njuri Ncheke' and walked to Embu where the colonial administrators had a post and he reported the offense, hoping to get 'defence'. Ironically the call for defence led the Meru to be dominated by the British administrators.
The decision of Mwitari to go to Embu had two implications. One, it showed an erosion of trust and confidence in the traditional authorities. However, Mwitari thought that it was the white man who could deal effectively with the menace of their fellow white man. He was mistaken! Like in the famed adage, his 'act' of inviting the white man to resolve an internal crisis was like 'jumping from a frying-pan to the fire' because the white man who followed him, Horn, was to become the first Meru District Commissioner.

From 1906 'Kangangi' (a nickname for Horn) penetrated Meru, but did not institute any real authority over Meru until 1908. One notices that, the few white 'visitors' did not directly become overlords, but they provoked situations which led colonial administrators to take over Meru. They did not create much alliance with the Meru but used only a handful of Meru warriors to stain the existing peace and cohesion which was being forged. They disregarded such authority like the 'Njuri Ncheke'. It was the 'divide and rule' method whose
signs were shown by those 'visitors' that were later to become the bedrock of colonial political establishment. The 'visitors' of the nineteenth century safely remained as catalyst!

In late nineteenth century, Meru were reaching a high level of political consultations and consolidation. The entry of the white men who had little interest in the indigenous authorities, dented the Meru political image. Though their presence was thin in numerical terms, it had a destructive and provocative quality that set a wave of disorder. Unconsciously or knowingly, Meru ran prey to British colonial scheming with ease that would rarely be suspected of a society known for substantive 'military valour'.

CONCLUSION

The chapter has attempted an analysis of the military set up and age-sets system. One can conclude that, the military aspect of the Meru political dimension, began slowly. It is both the
inside and outside pressure that led to the elaborate 'Gaaru' system ensuring a standing army and also mobilization for greater military composition in time of imminent threats. Peaceful settlement of conflicts was attempted and was best seen in the form of the blood brotherhood diplomatic alliances between Meru 'Miiriga' or Meru and her neighbours.

The 'Njuri Ncheke' as the highest social-political authority in Meru, expanded its role because of the military pressures. For instance in the 1850's, when the Maasai were invading the Meru, the 'Njuri' called for greater unity and mobilization of the warriors units. Consequently this made the 'Njuri Ncheke' the 'spokesmans' council for all the Meru parts even slowly getting into the hitherto isolated Chuka. Elaborate military preparations through circumcision, training and assumption of power attest to the development of the military part of the Meru political institutions which by 1750 constituted a mere handful of small autonomous military
groupings. The 'Ntuiko' brought about the enabling atmosphere for transfer of power and the existence of respective moieties gave the Meru a format of transferring their power and leadership without succession disputes.

Meru military units grew both as a result of internal pressures such as the need to maintain security and also for personal valour. External pressures challenged the expansion of groups. It was in the late nineteenth century that Meru warrior - group was to be checked by the British. By about 1908, the long Meru military history was coming to an end as Meru people were initiated into a new historical phase under colonial domination.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This Thesis attempted an analysis of the 1750 - 1908. It is argued that the Meru are the offspring of the legendary 'Mbwa' stock who lived at the coast of East Africa and penetrated the slopes of Mount Kenya by early eighteenth century. By about 1750 they were already settled in their present land and it is to that period that their political process is traced.

The study demonstrates that rudimentary political formation was evident by about 1750. This grew overtime into an elaborate political set up. By about 1908 Meru had evolved into a society in which political authority and power did not exclusively rest in any single person or institution. Political authority and power were vested amongst different institutions like the
'Kiama', 'Mwiriga', military units and Age-sets system. There were representative personnel in the institutions.

The various institutions analyzed were intimately intertwined. The 'Mwiriga' is portrayed as the hub of social and political negotiations. From simple 'Miiriga' groupings evident by the middle of the eighteenth century, the 'Mwiriga' institution expanded to form such identifiable socio-political sub-divisions as Imenti, Tigania, Chuka, Tharaka, Mwimbi and Igembe.

The 'Gichiaro' (bloodbrotherhood) relationship is shown to be an important landmark in Meru diplomatic negotiations. 'Gichiaro' resolved differences between the 'Miiriga' and also forged amicable relationship between Meru and her neighbours. The Meru invested in this relationship greatly and by the late nineteenth century, they were able to diffuse tensions and would-be battles within and without.
The 'Kiama' is depicted as a significant component of the Meru political process. The study has established that institutions such as 'Njuri Ncheke' constitute a part of, but not the absolute embodiment of authority in the social and political affairs. There were various councils which affected an individual's life process and cut across gender lines. The process started from childhood into adulthood.

The management of the 'Biama' was essentially in the hands of the charismatic people in the society. Aspects such as age and wealth amongst others, were important variables but remained subsidiary to wisdom in gauging an individual's suitability for such positions as 'Agambi'. The 'Njuri Ncheke' is shown as the highest authority in Meru. By 1908 it was the highest authority in Meru. By then it was a formal entity with a specific meeting place at Nchiru in Tigania and mainly concerned itself with issues of universal interests to the society. The development of Meru councils was an important
watershed in Meru political organization. The councils effectively governed people's lives and provided resolutions for a wide range of social and political issues.

We have also argued that Meru military units began to form at the moment of settlement when the military set up constituted units with small population and fragile organization. Both internal and external pressure precipitated the establishment of an elaborate military set up which provided a standing army and led to rigorous military education for initiates. The founding of 'Ntuiko' created conducive conditions for the transfer of power from a ruling moiety to an incoming one. Military units evolved as a consequence of the external and internal insecurity looming large in Meru, but it was also partly as a result of personal military valour.

It is indicated in the study that the Meru 'Mugwe' was a reckoned dignitary in the society. The centrality of the 'Mugwe' office in socio-political and religious spheres was as indispensable as it was indisputable. The Meru
looked upon the awesome 'Mugwe' as the Ultimate consultant in social and political affairs.

The Meru political process was checked by the British in the first decade of twentieth century. The British instituted their rule and lordship over Meru as part of the general colonial scheme in Kenya.

The political process analyzed in this study is proof that the Meru were capable of forging a coherent political organization. This was a conscious scheming and acknowledges the ingenuity displayed in the political organization by an hitherto 'island' people who turned into a 'highland' community. The existence of features like 'Gichiaro' the 'Njuri Ncheke' and 'Ntuiko' amongst other prominent institutions underscores the substantially specialized political institutions which the Meru evolved.

The section on Literature Review in our introduction shows the racist scholarship tends to classify 'societies like Meru as 'stateless
groupings with 'static' political formation. In the light of the foregoing discussion, one would re-state that, Meru political process was neither static nor an example of the so called 'stateless' societies. The political organization that was evident by about 1908, depicts a society which had made substantive strides in its organization resulting in the evolution of such specialized and closely-related institutions as the 'Mwiriga' the 'Kiama' military units and age-sets system. It is a society in which political authority and power were not a monopoly of any single individual or institution. Rather, power and authority were vested in various institutions and representative individuals.

Whether a society of this form is considered as complex or simple or poised between the two, there is appreciable amount of evidence to show that it was a society with coherent political formations. By about 1908, we have shown that, clearly recognizable institutions existed in Meru
where individuals participated and discharged their roles as defined in the society. This specialized political organization, was the outcome of factors within and without and underpin the creative potential of a people attempting to live up to the challenges of the period.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF INFORMANT</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>PLACE OF INTERVIEW</th>
<th>DATE</th>
</tr>
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<td>53</td>
<td>Keria</td>
<td>12/1/1991</td>
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<td>Kiunga, Manene</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Mitunguu</td>
<td>13/1/1991</td>
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<td>Njogu, George</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Kianjogu</td>
<td>3/1/1991</td>
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<td>Mutwambugu, Kithinji</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Ikuu</td>
<td>5/2/1991</td>
</tr>
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<td>50</td>
<td>Maua</td>
<td>15/2/1991</td>
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<tr>
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<td>54</td>
<td>Ngeru</td>
<td>2/3/1991</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60</td>
<td>Giaki</td>
<td>3/3/1991</td>
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<td>Kimbo</td>
<td>5/3/1991</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>Gikurune</td>
<td>7/3/1991</td>
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<td>Njoka, M'Mbogori</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Karimba</td>
<td>7/3/1991</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>Marima</td>
<td>13/3/1991</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>Ciokariga</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>Kanjeru</td>
<td>24/3/1991</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>Kithakanaro</td>
<td>3/4/1991</td>
</tr>
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<td>61</td>
<td>Keria</td>
<td>16/4/1991</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>Mikinduri</td>
<td>8/4/1991</td>
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<td>Igoki, Manene</td>
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<td>Ontulili</td>
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<td>Marete, Thuranira</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Ikingi, Manyara</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Kiringani</td>
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<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Miriti, Tiras</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>Mpindi, Mairanyi</td>
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<td>M'Imathiu, Mauta</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Mituntu</td>
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<td>M'Magiri, Mwobobia</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Kangeta</td>
</tr>
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