

## **Social, political and economic organization of Pre-colonial Meru people of Kenya**

**Dr. Caroline M. Kithinji**

*Department of Humanities,  
Chuka University, P.O BOX 109-60400 Chuka, Kenya*

---

**ABSTRACT:** Pre colonial histories of Africa have not been given adequate scholarly attention. This gave impetus to this study whose purpose was to examine the social, political and economic organization of the Meru people of Kenya with the intent of preserving their history. The pre colonial period broadly refers to the time prior to the introduction of European colonization in areas across the world. Before the arrival of the British in Meru the people of the area enjoyed a peaceful coexistence and had well established social, political and economic systems. Colonialism was introduced in Meru in 1907 when the British administrators arrived in the area. The study was conducted in Meru County Kenya. Purposive and snowballing techniques were used to identify thirty (30) respondents who were engaged in oral interviews. The research instruments included interview schedules and document analysis. The study established that before the advent of colonialism the Meru people had well organized social, political and economic structures that ensured continuity, social cohesion and stability of the community. The study recommended that the current social, political and economic structures could borrow some of the traditional forms of organization and come up with hybrid structures to improve efficiency.

**Key Words:** pre history, social, political, economic & Meru.

---

Date of Submission: 17-05-2020

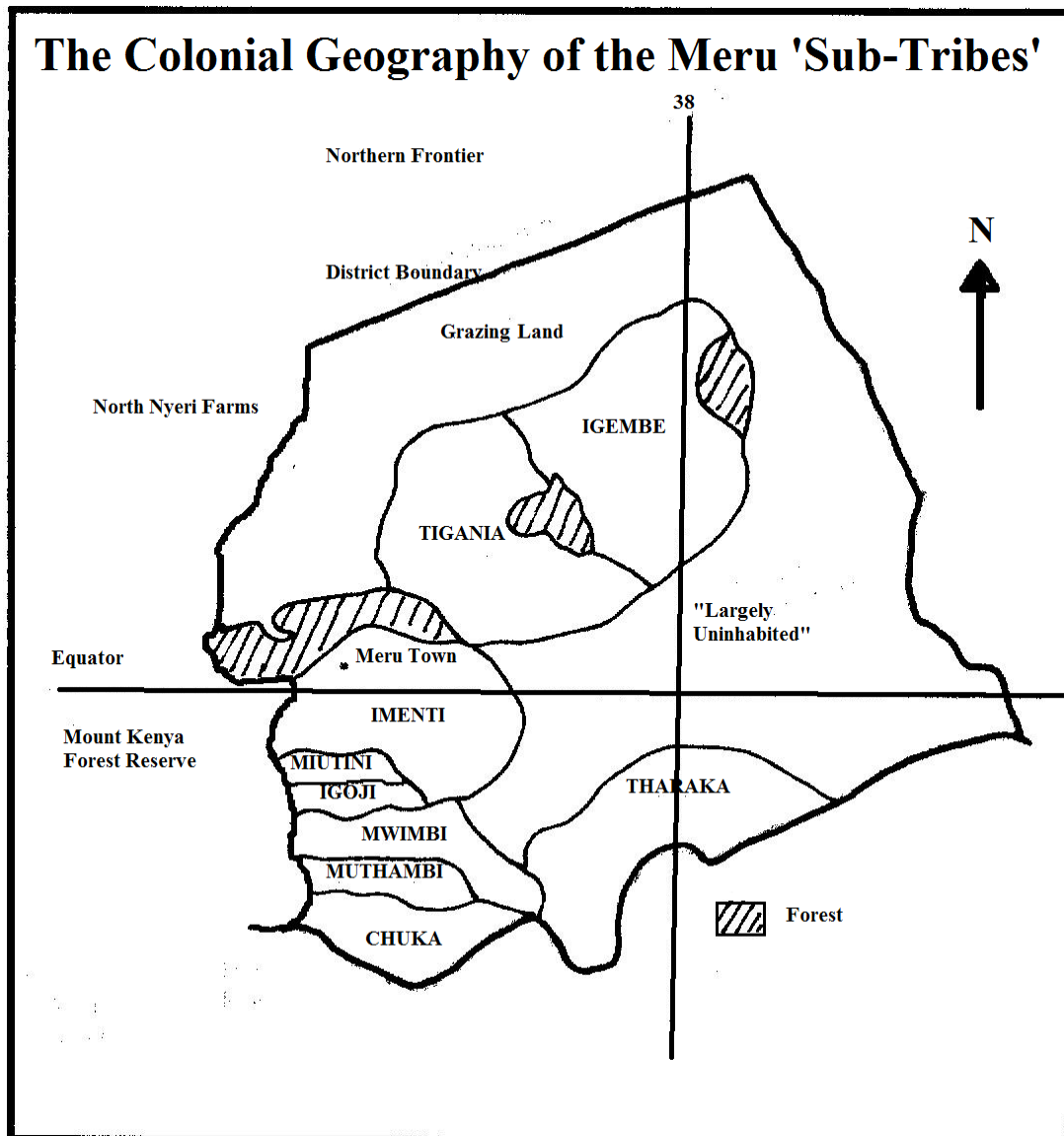
Date of Acceptance: 01-06-2020

---

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Meru are a people who live on and adjoining the N.E. slope of Mt. Kenya. The group originated on Manda Island, part of an archipelago off the Kenya Coast (Fadiman, 1993). According to tradition, the Meru once lived in a state of slavery far away from their present homeland, under a people called *antu ba nguu ntuune* or *nguo ntune*, meaning "Red People" or "Red Clothes") respectively. The king of the Red People was powerful and often harsh upon his subjects thus making the Meru to flee away to their present homeland, but no one knows for sure who the Red people actually were (Jens Finke, 2003). The meru are made up of nine sub ethnic groups as shown in figure 1

Figure 1: *Map of the Meru Sub- 'Tribes'*



Source: Lambert's 'Sketch Map of the Meru Sub-Tribes Land Unit'.

Rimita (1988) also notes that the Meru are a Northeastern Bantu group composed of nine different sub tribes: the Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Tharaka, Mwimbi, Muthambi and Chuka. The East Africa living encyclopedia also contends that the Meru are actually nine different groups of people. They migrated to the North East side of Mount Kenya around the 14th century from the coast, probably displaced by Somalis. Until 1974, the Meru were governed by a chief called the *mogwe*. They are part of the majority of the Bantu speaking peoples of Kenya.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

The study used the descriptive research design. The design was useful as the findings were presented thematically as given by the respondents. According to Kothari (1985) descriptive research is concerned with describing, recording, analyzing, reporting and presenting the features of particular conditions as they actually are. The research tools were the interview schedules and document analysis was also done.

## III. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES AND PRESENTATION

Data was analyzed by the use of Qualitative Data Analysis. Qualitative Data Analysis was used to describe the social, political and economic structures of the Ameru of Kenya up to 1907. Presentation was thematically done.

## IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### 4.1 Political Organization of the People of Meru

The Ameru did not have a single leader of their people. They had spokesmen by 1907 as noted from the oral interviews. Oral sources obtained from Mzee Mwenda Marete (O.I, 2019) indicated that the institution of the chief came with the arrival of the British in the early 1920s.

They had an age set system. The age sets were three – grandfathers, fathers and warriors. The grand fathers assumed the position of retired elders while the fathers were the administrators. The oldest men rose to the ultimate role of ritual elders because as they neared death, they were closest to their ancestors (Fadiman, 1993). As noted by oral respondents the warriors had the duty of defending the community.

The community also had a council of elders. This was referred to as the council (*Kiama*) system. The research established that there was a series of councils that governed the Ameru. The duty of the council of elders was to resolve a conflict or to plan for a cattle raid. There also existed a Supra-council consisting of a spokesman from all other Meru sub-tribes. It was not a permanent council but would be selected to temporarily solve a conflict. This supra council was referred to as *nkome* meaning the highest council of elders.

Among the Ameru there also existed women councils as observed by Paskwalina karimi and Eustace Nkonge (O.I 2019). They further noted that the women councils and their activities remained secret to men. There were also three levels of women councils as noted by Murugi Kinigeni (2019). The youngest set of women councils consisted of girls in their early teen which was referred to as *Ncurubi*. A second level was composed of women who had married and produced at least one child (*Munyange*) and the ruling council composed of senior women whose children had reached adulthood (*Chingiira*). Each woman's age-set was initially regarded as an extension of the male age-set in which they were to marry. They assumed the names such as *Ncurubi*, *Munyange* and *Chingiira* whose meaning remained secret to men (Murugi Kinigeni, O.I 2019). Further interviews established that the *Chingiiraa* council of women elders initiated female circumcision and passed on the secrets of the women council of elders to the young girls in their early teens (*ncurubi*).

Paolo Ndatho (O.I 2019) confirmed that a judicial system existed among the Ameru. The judiciary dealt with matters such as violation of community norms and targeted persons such as thieves, adulterers and cursers. Such offences were punishable by death through stoning. Fines could also be paid in the form of cows. There was a set procedure for stoning the culprits where the first stones were cast the closest relatives. Other offences such as unfaithfulness in marriage were punishable through fines imposed in the form of goats.

### 4.2 Economic Organization of the People of Meru

The Ameru are a Bantu community. They are therefore predominantly farmers. Oral interviewers revealed that the Ameru are mixed farmers, planting crops and rearing animals like cattle, sheep and goats. Crops include maize, beans, cowpeas, pigeon peas, millet, sorghum, cassava, yams and bananas among others. A section of the Ameru thus the Tigania and Igembe cultivated and still cultivates *miraa* (*Catha edulis*) in large scale for commercial purposes.

Traditionally, the people of Meru practiced hunting and gathering. Fadiman (1993) records that when the British came to Meru, they found a group of people known as *Athi* (hunters). This group occupied the forested area of the Meru where they hunted wild animals and gathered wild fruits and honey.

They were also cattle raiders. Oral respondents noted that to graduate to warrior hood young men had to conduct a successful raid. The other importance of raiding to the community was that the animals raided were used to pay bride wealth according to oral sources.

Bee keeping was also another economic activity. Honey collected from bee hives was used to make local brew which was used in social functions like weddings. Oral sources also mentioned some traditional industries among the Ameru such as pot making, weaving of baskets and mats and iron smelting.

### 4.3 Social Organization of the People of Meru

According to Tarasira Bonyai (O.I, 2019) the Ameru believed in ancestral spirits. The Ameru valued and highly regarded the ancestral dead. To keep this relationship alive the Ameru named their children after the ancestors.

They believed in witchcraft. An early Christian missionary is quoted having said, "No tribe in Kenya is so steeped in witchcraft than the Ameru. Witchcraft is their religion and the wizard is their high priest" (Platts, 1913). Fadiman (1993) also noted that the Ameru believed in witchcraft in his book "when we began there were witchmen; an oral history of the Ameru". This information was confirmed by Kanga Marete (O.I, 2019) who observed that witch craft was a preserve of the very old men in the community. Fearing to affect members of their own families the witches lived in isolation and mainly in the forest where they formed a guild of the witches.

The Ameru also had the office of prophets. The research established that the main duty of the prophets was foretelling the future. These specialists were consulted on various community issues such as the success of raids, future marriage partners, calamities or even invasion by a neighboring community which was a common phenomenon. These were trusted individuals who were highly regarded in the community.

There was a general consensus among the oral respondents that the people of Meru believed in curses. There were specialists who conducted the cursing ceremony. Cursing was done mostly when an individual felt that he had been wronged by another person who was not willing to own up. In such instances, the offended party could consult the specialist who would invoke the ancestral spirits to revenge by harming the offender. The cursers were however highly despised and since nobody wanted to be associated with them they were mostly consulted at night.

Oral interviews also confirmed that there existed curse removers. This process involved rituals to counter the effects of curses. The relatives of individuals who were cursed for one reason or another would consult the curse remover specialist who would perform the curse removal rituals.

The community also had diviners. The purpose of these practitioners was to identify the originators, living or ancestral, of each human calamity, thereby showing the victim to undertake whatever further rituals that might be required to appease them.

Social classes also existed, mostly the half-castes. Being a raiding community the Ameru not only raided for livestock but even people and especially women. They were also involved in tribal warfare and therefore there were war captives. Since most of the captured were women their offspring were men and women of mixed tribal ancestry who could not rise to positions of social prominence in the community.

The Ameru also upheld certain ceremonies like Birth, Naming, circumcision, Marriage and Death. The birth of child was highly celebrated as a way of welcoming a new member of the community. Children were named after the living and also the dead to maintain the relationship with the after world. Marriage was a highly valued institution as it was in marriage that life was perpetuated. During circumcision and burial ceremonies, there were special rituals performed to invoke the presence of the ancestral spirits. The research established that the Ameru had way of socializing the young boys and girls. There were specific roles for boys and girls. The boys herded animals while the girls stayed at home with their mothers and taking care of the small children. The boys were taught the virtues of courage as they would grow to be warriors to defend the community. The girls on the other hand were taught on how to become good wives and mothers. The boys and girls played separately and girls were taught to respect the boys.

## **V. CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY**

The study concluded that the Ameru had well structured Social, political and economic systems during the pre colonial period. For example the systems were structured in such a way that every member of the society knew their social, political and economic status and this minimised conflict in the community.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1]. East Africa living encyclopedia Kenya -- Ethnic Groups <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/kethnic.htm>
- [2]. Jeffrey A. Fadiman (1982). *An Oral history of Tribal Warfare: the Meru of Mount Kenya*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press
- [3]. Fadiman, J.A. (1993). *When we Began, There Were Witchmen; an Oral History From Mount Kenya*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [4]. Jens Finke (2003). Meru History. <https://www.bluegecko.org/kenya/tribes/meru/history.htm>
- [5]. Kothari, C. (1985). *Research Methodology; Methods and Techniques*. New Delhi: Eastern Ltd.

Dr. Caroline M. Kithinji. "Social, political and economic organization of Pre-colonial Meru people of Kenya." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(5), 2020, pp. 27-30.