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Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est

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the Meru in Kenya

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This paper was presented at a seminar jointly held by the *British Institute in Eastern Africa* and *Institut français de recherche en Afrique* (IFRA)**

Introduction

The fieldwork for this study was carried out between 1986–1989 and in 1993 among the Tigania and the Igembe. Further information was obtained from the Kenya National Archives. The Meru people speak a Bantu language called *kimeru*. They live on the north-eastern side of Mount Kenya. Meru is a collective name, dating back to the colonial era, and is constituted of different tribes as follows:

- from the south to the north: Chuka, Mwimbî, Imenti
- further east, on the Nyambeni Hills: Tigania and Igembe
- along the southern slopes of the Nyambeni Hills: the Tharaka.

These people groups share many cultural features, social and political principles. However, in the past, each of these groups constituted separate and independent units. Some among them were enemies, while others were allies.

The Tigania-Igembe

The Tigania-Igembe constituted a strong political association controlling the whole area of the Nyambeni Hills, from the top of the forested summit to the bushy areas lying downhill. At the beginning of the British colonisation in 1908, the Tigania-Igembe were a population of about 90,000 people. They were a powerful tribe who engaged in agriculture and herding, hunting and different crafts. They are renowned blacksmiths. In 1989, according to the last available census, they numbered about 500,000. Currently they are a population of smallholders, cultivating cash crops like coffee, tea, and *miraa* (khat). They live in a fairly well-endowed area but they have to cope with ravages of nature such as drought in the lower parts of the Nyambeni Hills, and insecurity.

The conspicuous feature of their traditional social organisation is their grouping into strong, well-defined, age and generation classes which are invested with socio-political and ritual functions. Age and generation systems are widely used in traditional East African societies. They address the combination of the individual life cycle with the successive generation classes whose demographical drift results in over-ageing and under-ageing, which can quickly bring any system to an end. Much anthropological research has been carried out on this topic mainly among Nilotic and Cushitic speakers than recorded among Bantu speakers.

Men were included in one generation class at the time of their initiation, and women were recruited into their own classes at the time of their marriage. Both groups remained in the same class until their death. At the appointed time, each class holds power for about 15–20 years until the next handing-over to the following class. As the ruling class, men—"Fathers of the country"—governed the society through councils called *kiama*. They also kept a class of warriors under their control, which often included their own sons. Moreover, each class in power had a religious dignitary called the *múgwe* whose function was to bless and to protect the current class of warriors, the generation classes and the country. There were two *múgwe* in the Nyambeni Hills; one for the Igembe, and another for the Tigania. Tigania was separated into two units: there was one *múgwe* for Igoki and one *múkiama* for Athwana. In my opinion, the presence of a *múgwe* is the best criteria to identify who is Meru or not.

Age and generation classes were thus a multipurpose structure. It was the framework of a highly integrated political system. It also organised family life, the domestic cycle, and the life course of both men and women.

Funeral rituals

Contrary to many other African funeral rituals, the Meru did not involve a lot of people in funerals. Death was a private affair, involving only the close family. In Kenya, the Luo or the Gusii of western Kenya place great emphasis on death rites, but the Meru are like the Maasai and the Kikuyu.

As a rule, the proper ritual was performed **according to the age of the dead person**. In the Meru society, age was not defined by the year of birth. It was defined by an age-grading system, which was related to the age and generation classes. People were considered grown-up when they reached the last stage of life (*mwariki*), and became grandparents. This means that social and psychological maturity was a lengthy and elaborate process.

If anybody died before the last grade—before reaching grandparenthood and complete maturity—his or her corpse was regarded with dread. This corpse, be it child, youth, father, or mother, was taken away by a *mwenje*. A *mwenje* is a poor man whose main task was to take away corpses of "uncompleted" persons and dispose them in the bush, to the mercy of hyenas and vultures. The *mwenje* also took away the dead person's belongings since nobody wanted to keep them.

Why were these corpses considered with such dread? Death could be due to, for example, an accident or illness, which are rational causes acknowledged by the Meru. However, any premature death was also related to a state of *múgiro* which places one in a state of danger. *Múgiro* is a key concept for explaining illness and misfortune. It is the result of breaking of a rule, and of the transgression of a prohibition, either deliberately or unknowingly. It can also be the result of a curse, or of the lack of blessing by a relevant individual.

The corpse of a dead person with *múgiro* was regarded as "hot" because life was "still active" in it. It was very dangerous because *múgiro* is contagious. It could affect anybody who approached it. The family of the dead person was also considered contaminated. They were quarantined for 2–3 months while the *múgiro* was expected to mitigate (*kúbirika*) the contamination. At the end of the quarantine, the *mwenje* returned to perform different rituals, rituals believed to restore the course of life. He was paid with a goat and this brought to an end the contagion period. The *mwenje* was

believed to take away with him any remaining taints of *múgiro*. He was a kind of scapegoat, but he was not despised. He was feared as he had a very potent curse. The *mwenje* was supposed to die alone in the bush, away from the community.

Death of a *mwariki*

The death of a "complete" person or *mwariki* was not considered as an actual death, but the normal end of the life cycle. The ritual involved was not a funeral but a celebration of the completion of life.

Sons and grandchildren gathered at the home of the dead *júújú* (grandparent) and performed the appropriate ritual. A ram (male sheep) was sacrificed by suffocation. The corpse was smeared with the oil from the fatty tail of the sheep. Afterwards, the corpse was wrapped in the skin of the ram, and was carried off by the sons. They placed the corpse on the *kiara*, which is located at the edge of the homestead, on the left side on the way out. The *kiara* is a hole dug into the ground, where cow dung is kept. The corpse was laid down on the right side for a man, on the left side for a woman. The grandchildren would stand by this 'grave' singing lullabies. They were not to weep as it was believed that they would replace their dead *júújú*. Any new-born child was to be named after a grandparent, and this naming is like a seed—the *júújú* was not dead. After this, there was a two-month period during which the family awaited the decay of the corpse. Fires were lit all around the *kiara* to scare away hyenas and vultures, and also to eliminate the smell of the decaying corpse. Sons took turns to watch over the corpse day and night. At the end of the two months, the remaining parts of the corpse were turned down into the cow dung and the ritual was over.

What does this ceremony mean? The *kiara* was a propitious place. This is where the cow dung for plastering the walls of the huts was stored. The plaster was a mixture of cow dung, ashes, water and soil, and the more cattle, the more the cow dung, therefore, the more successful the homestead. It is also into the *kiara* that the afterbirth, placenta, umbilical cords, all and symbols of successful birth were thrown. Therefore, this is why the corpse of a *júújú* was put into the *kiara*, as a token of a successful life. The corpse was not a dead human being, but the remnant of a fulfilled life. Soon afterwards, the sons separated. One son could remain in the homestead of the dead man but this was not obligatory. People often moved away and forgot about the old homestead and its *kiara*, and in the end, the name of this *júújú* would be forgotten.

Whatever the differences between the ritual for a premature death, and the ritual of a completed person, these two rituals share a common feature. Nobody was buried, because of a strong prohibition against the burial of dead. This is a key concept of Meru traditional religion. According to the traditional belief, the burial of a corpse attracts misfortune since any burial brought together two elements—the earth and humans—that must be kept apart. A buried corpse would pollute the earth, and stop the cycle of rain and harvest, thus causing famine. It would also endanger the offspring of the buried person and, more generally, the reproductive cycle of human beings, cattle, and even bees. When one buries a corpse, one also buries the fertility of human beings and of domestic animals.

Through this, one finds a local theory of nature and universe. The universe (*nthúúgáru*) is organised along dualistic principles. Life is the result of the interaction of two complementary cycles and also two competing ones.

rain	<i>versus</i>	sun
earth	<i>versus</i>	human beings
crops	<i>versus</i>	domestic animals
peace	<i>versus</i>	war
sheep	<i>versus</i>	goat

There is a time for rain and crops, there is a time for sun and for reproduction of man and beast. There must be a balance between the two cycles which fits into the seasonal cycle. Too much rain or too much sun brings problems, and in order to restore the balance, one must sacrifice either a sheep or a goat.

Meru people were aware of the prohibition of burials and that entailed particular rituals performed to counter difficulties. For example, when a Meru died in a foreign land, he was supposed to have been buried. The family organised a kind of unearthing by burying for example, a bunch of bananas, or a dead goat, and unearthing it formal ceremony supervised by the *mugaa*, who is the traditional healer and seer.

Another type of death is that of people called *ntindiri*. These are people who are still alive long after having attained the age grade of grandparents, people of an unusually protracted life span. They have become great grandparents, from a verb meaning "to wait while doing nothing". A translation of it could be "over-matured" or "over-completed". The corpse of *ntindiri* was actually buried. How could this be possible given the strong prohibitions described? In this case, there is a sort of symbolic re-adjustment, "*un bricolage*" to quote Claude Levi-Strauss. The *ntindiri* were people out of the society, out of the organised flow of the generation-classes, and age-grades, out of tune with the Meru social rhythm. There was no defined area for this category of people but this did not mean that they had to commit suicide. *Ntindiri* are just waiting, doing nothing. Their corpse could carried neither be taken to the bush nor placed on the *kiara*. They were buried—but this was not a celebration—it was a way to get rid of them. The remaining life in the corpse was so little that it could not affect the earth and the crops. The offspring of the dead had also been existing for a long time.

The traditional Meru conception of life and death is a rather unusual one. Men and women have parallel life cycles. Everything must be done at the appropriate time. There is a proper time for initiation, for marriage and parenthood, for politics and a proper time for grandparenthood and ritual duties ... and a proper time for ending. There is no life after death, no ancestors, and certainly no ancestor worship. Perpetuation is achieved through grandchildren, the flow of generation-classes and the web of affinities. For this reason the orderly flow of the generation classes must be maintained. This order originates from a paramount principle, *Ngai* or *Murungu*. *Ngai-Murungu* is an abstract deity resembling the God of the Bible, but this leads to misleading interpretations. *Ngai* is a kind of energy (*inya*) which brings life through the rituals and sacrifice performed at the appropriate time, and the blessings of the appropriate persons. The blessings of the *mwariki* and of the *múgve* were regarded as the most powerful blessings and curses since they were believed to stand close to *Ngai-Murungu*. The *mwariki* were powerful, having reached the last grade without being affected by *mugiró*, and the *múgve* because of special qualities they held through marriage and initiation. Generally speaking, any senior had the power to bless or to curse a younger person. Death is the by-product of the misbehaviour by human beings, as explained in the myth of Mbugi.

Mbugi was a hunter who had many sons. These sons were children of two women with two women, who were sisters. While the sons of Mbugi were quarrelling, hyenas took the advantage of the ensuing confusion, and began to eat people. This is the origin of death.

Finally, we will discuss briefly changes brought about by contemporary history. In the 1930s, after 20 years of colonial rule, the administration enforced the burial of the corpses. As long as corpses were not buried, hyenas roamed around the homesteads. The enforcement of burial rites caused opposition, especially from the women who held demonstrations at the DC's office in Meru town. They argued that lack of rain was a result of burying corpses. Other opposition was more personalised, for example, goats were buried instead of corpses to deceive the officer in charge of the inspection. However, in the long run, together with other changes, burials became a new habit. In the 1950s, as land pressure and land consciousness increased, the burial of the owner of a plot of land became proof of property.

Nevertheless, even with the spread of Christianity, this did not entail a new perception of life and death. For example, in 1987 at the time of the S.M. Otieno burial saga, Meru people eagerly followed the newspaper reports, and were intrigued as to how one could possibly quarrel over a dead body. Additionally, people often deny having asked the *mvenje* to get rid of corpses, but in the remote areas especially in the Nyambeni Hills, one may find cases where a young man who was not liked by his parents had been buried by a *mvenje*. Quarantine might also be observed. In some cases, the dying are sent to the hospital in Meru or in Nkubu because the families know that the hospital will dispose of the corpse. As a final example, I include a personal experience. Upon my return to Kenya in 1993 after two years of absence, a young man informed me that his father, an elderly man with whom I was well acquainted, had died. I was sad but the son reminded me that since I knew what death meant for the Meru people, I should not show any signs of sorrow. Compassion was out of the question.

Conclusion

This lasting attitude towards death addresses intriguing questions and these will form my conclusion. As the old social organisation is no longer operating and generation classes do not yield any power, women classes have lost their position, the *múgwe* have disappeared, and even the *njuri ncheke* does not really operate. How can the situation be explained? Part of the answer lies in the importance of the initiation of boys and young men, and also in the naming system of the generation classes and of the subsets which is still used. The Tigania-Igembe have eight revolving names and in each generation class one finds three other revolving names. This naming system is another criteria which differentiates the Tigania-Igembe from the other Meru speakers. Together with the language and the land, this system gives the young Tigania-Igembe their identity and meaning of life. Life is now and in the incoming cycle of generations, and not in any after-world.

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