

CHAPTER NINE

PROVISION OF SHELTER

Mwaniki, H.S.K.

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

The Embu and Mbeere huts or houses were circular with cylindrical walls and conical roofs. Indeed all other ancillary structures which the Mbeere and Embu built were like the huts with slight modifications as will be described below. However, the actual architecture, materials for building and the use of the structures in a homestead differed in Embu and Mbeere mainly due to local climatic and economic conditions.

EMBU

A building site was normally chosen in advance and at times ritually blessed before bringing the building materials. It was then cleared and the size of the circular hut marked by an artistic person by drawing the plan on the ground with his foot. Two concentric circles were so marked with a distance of about one foot in between. Two concentric trenches of one and half to two feet deep were dug and building posts of about six feet in height placed in both trenches. The posts would be quite close in each line right round. They could touch each other or leave distances of about four inches in between. The two rows of posts would then be secured standing perpendicularly to the ground. A door space of about three feet in width would be left.

The materials for the walls and roof were chosen from hard, durable and insect resistant trees and shrubs. The standard hut-building trees were *miu* (singular *muu*) (*Markhamia hildebrandtii*) and *mukwego* (*Bridelia micrantha*) in lower and middle Embu. The people of Upper Embu, near the forest, used forest trees like *mithuguya* and *mianjati*.

These would form the posts, which would be over four inches in diameter. The long and strait pieces with diameters of three or a little more formed the rafters while the long, thin and bendable ones formed the rails for securing both the walls and roof. A thick, strong and tall pillar of any of the above hardwoods or *muvangua* would be planted and secured upright in the middle of the hut's floor. It would be seven to ten feet in height and about eight inches in diameter.

Once the two rows of posts were set up, the space between them was stuffed and well filled with green leaves together with thin twigs and branches of the above trees and ferns collectively termed *rukutho*. After two or so rows of the leaves placed one on top of the other, a mallet would be used to press them more tightly together so that light could not penetrate from the outside, and even wind or cold was supposed to be closed-out!. After every distance of two feet or less, a pair of rails were tightly put right round the hut from the door hole and tightly secured with fibres such as those of *migico/micico* (*Triumfetta macrophylla*), till the last one was placed on top of the wall that can be termed the "wall plate" today. The door space would be about three feet high with the space above this being continued as a part of the wall.

The roof was built after the wall was completed. The erecting of the roof began with the placing of strong, long "beans" or rafters across the walls which were used as the platform on which to stand. When, at times, they were not removed, they would be used later when the house was completed as a platform (*Nitara*) on which fire-wood was dried and stored. Standing on the "beans", the lead rafters, *Miratho*, were securely tied on the top of the centre pillar at an appropriate angle for easy rain water runoff, roughly at about 40-55 degrees. Too sharp an angle, say 30° or too large about 65° were considered inappropriate. The making of the angle with the lead rafters was termed *kuratha* and was done under the guidance of an acknowledged technician who stood quite a distance away on the ground directing the operations. These rafters were long enough to reach the eaves from the top. They were made of strong, durable and straight wood.

When eight or so of the lead rafters had been secured on the centre pillar, a pair of rails were tied, one inside and the other outside the lead rafters about three feet from the conical top on the rafters forming a ring. Termed *ngata*, "guarder" or "securer", the ring was used for supporting hundreds of thinner, shorter and less straight rafters called *mitiriro* which, once stuck on the *ngata*, were spread evenly to make the required eave of the roof that would be overhanging with about four feet on the wall. As the cluster of rafters filled the spaces in the ring, diagonal rails were tied on the rafters starting where these rafters touched the walls and going up towards the *ngata*. They did not necessarily reach the ring. Three or four of these, depending on the size of the hut, would suffice. These "diagonals" were called *miikio*, plural for *mwikio*, and used for securing the cluster of rafters together. Shorter "filling up" rafters could use the diagonal as their top point of holding as they filled the gaps of the widening eaves. All these rafters were finally secured at the end of the eaves with a pair of rails tied right round the end of the eaves, any protruding ones being trimmed. This rail was termed *nwa*, "of" *Kithaku*, *Kithaku* being the space sheltered by the eaves and the walls used for sitting on to shelter from the sun or rain. It was also used as a store for firewood or household gadgets like pots which were not of immediate use to warrant being inside the house.

After the walls and roof were built, came the thatching. Green banana leaves or those of the false wild banana, called *ikobo*, were lined up overlappingly over the whole roof. Then a layer of ferns was put on top of the banana leaves. Round the eaves, a second layer of ferns was placed. Then tough grass followed as the final layer in Embu East or Iveti while in Upper Embu or Embu North, the reeds called *ithanje* were used. The preferred *ithanje* was *rukiriri* got from marshes. This was popular because once it dried up, it became so tough and water resistant that it could be transferred to two or more huts after each got too old and would still be serviceable. To prevent rain water from getting into the roof, a sharp durable stick was planted firmly right on top of the centre pillar. A bundle of reeds was tied two-thirds of the way towards the eaves and from the stems, then the ends were folded towards the stems. The centre was thrust into the sharp stick and the ends spread over the apex of the hut. The stems were now, in turn, bent over the ends and apex to fall smartly on the hut's top. The reeds would be so well secured on the

centre stick that no rain water would penetrate into the roof. Instead the rain water would run down the grass to the curves and finally to the ground.

The door space was the only ventilation of the hut. The door proper, called *Irigi* was made of wickerwork. Some upright sticks were interwoven with creepers of the tough and flexible type called *miugu*, normally used for securing beehives on trees. The door space could also be closed by *iti*, a high pile of well trimmed logs of the appropriate diameter. To close, one had to place these logs one on top of the other till they reached a foot or more above the door holes. Then, like the *irigi*, they were secured with another pole placed diagonally and secured at both the bottom and top. Banana stalks could leaf also make a door proper material as well as a wide plank or planks of wood called *ikongoro*.

The family hut had divisions inside. As one entered the hut, one found the goat's shed or *kiaga* directly to the left-hand side. Then followed the initiated or clitoridectomized girl's bedroom called *kiriri*, almost opposite the centre pillar where the fire was lit and the family cooking took place. Beyond the girl's bedroom came the large family bed which went right to the end of the wall. A small place remained by the wall end of the family bedroom and the girl's one, termed *Gituri* or *Thegi*, "the blind end" where boys never stepped in and where the family sacred gadgets such as the oil-gourd were stored. A small portion to the right hand side of the door and a little way from it was kept aside as the store where gourds, baskets, pots and other household utensils were stored. The rest of the room, except the space between the door and store which was used for storing firewood that would be in use, was left as the family sitting room and kitchen.

After this family hut was built as the first structure on the homestead, the owners embarked on building *ancillary structures*. A kitchen or *ngucu* would be built next. This would be done exactly like the family hut except that the wall would often be exactly one row of posts and so no *rukutho*, the stuffing material. It could house a millet store at times. Once built, the kitchen would take over the storage of all what had been stored at the hut's store.

was done with other structures. If a third, fourth and other wives came, the process was repeated. The homestead would be fenced against wild animals and human enemies and only one official gate was left. This was termed *muviriga*, as opposed to the unofficial back gate that only the people of the homestead used called *giturio*. It was a taboo for any foreigner to pass through this under normal circumstances. The fence would be planted with growing plants eventually, such as *miururi*, which would later become supports of yams and *mbumbu*, the creeping plants which resemble beans. Other plants planted on fences were *mitura* and *mitare* or brambles, all of which were thorny and properly cared for; they joined so interwovenly that they were impenetrable even to animals like lions and buffaloes.

A permanent fire place, *itogi*, would be set up just near the gate and usually to the right hand side, almost next to the *gaaru*. All the men folk sat and ate there as stories were told and advice was given. Anyone who passed to the homestead would therefore be noticed first by the fire place occupants. A cattle-shed could be within the fence or just outside it.

MBEERE

Once the building site was selected, a skilled **builder** was invited to measure the circle of the hut by marking it on the ground with his foot, just like with the Embu people. As time passed, it was discovered that a string tied on a stick at the centre provided a radius that could be used to draw the circle more quickly by ordinary people. Then a single trench was dug about one and half to two feet deep. Posts of durable trees would be put in the trench and arranged side by side pressing on each other firmly - at times leaving not even a space for light. The posts would be of trees and shrubs like *migiti*, *migucii*, *mirama*, *mirati*, *mivaru* and *miruva*. These were chosen due to their varied characteristics which were favourable to building. *Muruva* for instance, was popular because its posts were very resistant to pests like weevils and white ants and when the hut became really old and needed pulling down, *miruva* posts could be used again.

The posts would be secured by two or more rails finishing with the wall plate. Like the Embu hut, a strong, long post would be planted right in the middle of the walls to be used as the support for the roof. The rafters used would be hard, durable, straight and long. Such wood would be provided by *murati* which is said to harden more and more as it was heated by the fire from the hut. *Migucii* and *mirati* also provided long and straight rafters. The roof was not as sophisticated as that of the Embu, so it took few rafters and rails and the rafters could be further apart, though the general structure was the same. When it came to thatching, the Mbeere used the natural grass that grew in their environment. Such was the type termed *kiutha* which was widespread but did not last very long. The other type was *kiratha-ngi*, that which pierces or 'shoots' flies. This was rarer in finding and more durable. It could be re-used after a hut was pulled down because of old age while *kiutha* was used only once. The roof of a Mbeere hut had a bigger conical angle than that of the Embu. This was because the area had less rain than that of the Embu and so roof-leaks were not as much of a problem. The Mbeere, also having no bananas and ferns and with the less rain, used only grass on their roofs. This type of hut was called *gikuru thiro*, "interwoven-ness".

The hut would also be divided inside. Fire was lit at the centre of the hut, the place which was used as the kitchen and sitting room. The family bed would be to the left hand side as one entered the hut. To the far end would be a platform on six or so posts of *mithigira* or other hard woods. Goats were tethered under this bed. Between this bed and the doorway, and on the same side, was the initiated girls's room called *kiriri*. Household goods would be stored in the rest of the space, some hanging on hooks fixed on the wall.

A Mbeere homestead's next most important structure was the *gaaru*, or kitchen. This is not to be confused with the Embu one which was for the men's use only. This structure was normally built before the others in Mbeere as it provided the facilities such as those of a living hut, kitchen and store. However, it was basically a kitchen to start with and later reverted to a man's hut wherein his wife joined him when she gained past childbearing age. To build the *gaaru*,

a millet store, *mururu* was first made and properly supported on the site of the kitchen. It stood on a platform of stones or straight hard poles. Then the kitchen was measured enclosing the millet store and eventually built exactly like a living hut. Storage of millets and most household goods was done here. The hut would later be built and the family would move into the kitchen and live there permanently till, as said above, the wife joined him, to live there till they died.

Ikumbi, the grain store, was the third main structure in a Mbeere homestead. This was built exactly like the Embu ones but the walls were made of the straight, long but bendable sticks of the plant called *mukumbi*. The walls and base platform were smeared with cow-dung and ashes.

A person who was so hard working that his harvests could not be accommodated in the kitchen and grainstore built a temporary millet store on his compound. This rested on the ground unlike the *mururu* in the kitchen and the temporary millet store was smeared with cow-dung (and ashes) on the inside. A roof supported by a few posts and thatched would be provided over the temporary grainstore. The whole structure was called *gitu*.

If a man married a second wife, these structures were repeated but on the front side of those of the first wife, that is closer to the gate. Most Mbeere fences used the materials for cattle sheds or thorny twigs to keep out wild animals like the notorious hyenas, leopards and lions. The fences also kept human enemies out. Often, the Mbeere cattle shed would be within the fence although most of the livestock grazed away from the homesteads, especially in the Mwea plains.

In both Embu and Mbeere, toilets or lavatories were not built but sections of the bushes within the homestead complex were set apart for this use. There was a specific area called *kiara* which was used for household rubbish or garbage dumping. In time, this could accumulate to a big heap under which very old great-grand parents were buried if they were respectable and wealthy.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE

After the penetration of colonialism, the above Mbeere/Embu modes of building began to change. Materials for building changed gradually and faster in Embu than Mbeere from about 1910. Many Embu groves and forest areas where they used to get the materials were either cut down or alienated. Black wattle trees had been vigorously introduced to occupy large areas which used to yield the materials. These were soon used to provide posts, rails and rafters for the building. Nails began replacing vegetable fibres.

The circular and conical shapes of huts were soon replaced by rectangular houses with four dimensional roofs. This mode of building was popularly called *kithairi*, the 'Kiswahili', connoting that the architecture came from the Coast, the dwelling place for the Waswahili. The walls were made of only one row of poles with pairs of rails. Wet mud was stuffed in between the rails instead of *rukutho* or the way cluster of posts with windows provided. Divisions of the hut inside also changed to separate rooms for particular members of the family like the parents, children's of different sexes and store with the livestock living in a different hut. Portable beds also gradually replaced the fixed platforms of the pre-colonial times. Iron sheets first from tin containers which were split open and flattened, termed *macaa*, and then normal corrugated iron sheets that persist to the present called *mavati* replaced the reeds and grass on roofs.

In Embu, force was effectively used to add pit latrines and their consequent building structures and composit pits replaced *ciara* (plural for *kiara*). From 1953 when the Embu were collected into the emergency (popularly called Mau Mau) villages, all the known structures were destroyed and replaced by large buildings which were usually shared by several families at the beginning. In this building, each family was supposed to do its best to accommodate all the things the former homesteads used to. Leaving the villages in 1960s people settled in their consolidated and demarcated lands with only some of their pre-emergency homestead structures. Consequently, such structures like the *kirera* and the millet stores, the men's huts and even grain-stores in some cases were left out. A big family house served all the

purposes. But firmly in the homestead was the latrine and a houselike cattleshed which have now become permanent features of homesteads in Embu.

The forced colonial measures were not as effective in Mbeere as they were in Embu. The emergency measures with their attendant destruction of traditional life were also not effective in Mbeere. Consequently the Mbeere traditional building architecture remained, even after the independence and in many places still remains. The building of semi-permanent and permanent houses cropped up in Embu and Mbeere soon after independence. Hence the building with stone foundations, cemented floors, timber walls and roofs of corrugated iron sheets. Permanent houses built of stone or brick with either iron sheet or clay tile roofs are observed even today. The homes with these houses seem to greatly reduce the old time structures. This is because these old structures like millet stores are regarded as non-progressive and ancient.

However, many people realise that grain stores are inevitable for proper storage as opposed to one room in the 'big house' labled 'store'. Hence they seem to be reappearing in most homesteads after a long disappearance. Some people are even using stone pillars as supports. But this, like the permanent houses, are too expensive. It should be noted that all stone building materials for Embu came from either Mbere, Siakago and Nganduuri areas or Sagana. Though the Mbeere have building materials near them, most cannot afford the cost of the supplementary materials like cement, iron sheets and tiles, as well as the labour for the building. It should also be pointed out that grain storage has greatly deteriorated. Old people still seem to prefer their small wooden houses to the modern stone ones because the modern ones are too large and even cold due to the many doors and ventilations.