

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Both Embu and Mbeere were egalitarian societies which did not acknowledge any one person's authority. A person in these societies was accepted as a leader in a certain sphere of life only because of the qualities he or she possessed. Consequently, leaders were not elected they simply emerged and were accepted. It was not possible for one to impose oneself to the society as a leader without the necessary qualities.

A war leader had to be a champion in warfare and be recognised as a *njamba* or *njamba ya ita*. One had to be physically healthy, strong and agile. In addition, one had to be clever and brave in the battle field, as well as command respect of colleagues. One then was accepted as a leader of warriors and given authority over them. This person was termed *manjama wa ita* (sing). Many of them were called *anjama* or simply *njama ya ita*. It is important to note that even this office was recognised mainly in the locality where one came from Only after distinguishing oneself in the whole of Embu or Mbeere was one recognised as a territorial leader. This was rare.

A dance group leader had to be an accepted "wise" dancer, respected and even liked by other dancers of the locality. One had also to be mature in both age and conduct. Many formed *njama ya wimbo* or "Council of the dance".

The societies also needed noble qualities of those who became leaders for administrative, legal and legislative duties. For example, a village or even territorial leader, *muthamaki* in Embu or *Muciiri* in Mbeere, had to be an upright person in character, starting with his own home. He had to have proven wisdom, maturity, impartiality in justice, knowledgeable in total societal life of his and the neighbouring societies and quite uncorruptable. People of the above categories, both men and women with men playing a greater role, were the ones who ran the lands of the Embu and Mbeere politically. Chiefs and headmen came with colonialism.

The political structure of the Embu and Mbeere was divided basically in to two main divisions. The first division dealt with administrative politics. This division operated on day to day basis in the localities concerned ranging from individual homesteads and families, through villages and regions to the societal level. The second division encompassed the whole society, and dealt with socio-political aspects of the societies. Its decisions affected the whole society, for one or more generations. This division was called *Nthuke*, the genealogical generation ageset that theoretically included half the population of both Embu and Mbeere. However, the works of the two divisions were so well interwoven and synthesised that they rarely conflicted.

DAY TO DAY ADMINISTRATION

The running of the society in both Embu and Mbeere began at the family level. Here the father had the authority assisted by his mature sons. If the family had a grand-parent, his/her word was considered in the making of decisions. Matters that concerned a unit wider than a family were dealt with by the village. Villages were composed of three or more sizeable families. The third unit was composed of a number of villages within reasonable radius from each other and could, at times, be separated from the others by some physical features like rivers in Embu or dry river beds or small hills in Mbeere. These were zonal regional units, popularly called ridges, *itumbi* or *ng'ongo*. The dwellers of each village or ridge could be of many different clans, they were not necessarily

members of only one clan. Each unit was supervised by its own authority made up of elders possessing the leadership qualities mentioned above. They belonged to different clans depending on their merits and took the responsibilities of directing the village or ridge affairs, settling disputes and running the general welfare. These elders were mainly men and were termed *athamaki*, plural of *muthamaki* or *aciiri*, plural of *muciiri* in Embu and Mbeere respectively. Their organisation or council was called *kiama* (singular) or *ciama* (plural).

It is at the village and zonal levels that the dance leaders, *njama ya ruimbo* or *karabai* was found. Its duties included deciding when and which dances should be performed and also the venues for the dances. They supervised the dancing, controlling the performances and even the discipline of dancers. Some matters of villagers could not be settled by the *ciama* of these villages. These would be mainly matters specific to the clans like a serious conflict of a man and his wife or child. His clan would be called upon to solve the problem. Another would be a matter concerning land, and finally, a matter of clan nature affecting two people of different clans. Their clans would be called to settle the matter. These clan matters necessitated the forming of clan councils, *Ciama*, made up of the prominent persons. For all practical purposes, these were the bodies and procedures that ruled Embu and Mbeere since the territories were segmented above. Every region was independent and autonomous.

The autonomy of each region was buttressed by its warrior system, the *ita*, led by its *njama*. The warriors defended their zone, raided to enrich the zone, and kept the zone well policed and economically productive. When they wanted to invade an enemy country, they would not need to consult the whole of Embu and Mbeere unless the invasion was to be country-wide. They consulted the elders of their local areas who would bless the venture if they approved. The warrior would also conduct initiations or circumcisions at a regional level independently. The warriors of each region acted as the executive arm of the elders. They enforced what the elders or other decision making bodies, like the *Ciama*, ordered but under the direction of the elders. They could raid someone's home to capture property for payment of a debt if the owner or his relative had failed or refused to comply with a decision. They could even raid a section of the country and destroy it if ordered to do

so, especially if the affected part had become outlawed after repeated warnings. These warriors were grouped in circumcision age-sets and each set retired as they married after they completed their warrior service.

Times came when country-wide issues forced the whole country to unite, thereby surpassing the regional autonomy. This was mainly on legislative and judicial matters.

LEGISLATIVE MATTERS

General issues which forced the law makers to legislate could be done at regional levels. These would be matters regulating dancing during certain seasons, matters dealing with public property, like grazing fields and fords and conservation of the environment. What was done regionally was eventually conveyed to the other regions so that after some period it was practised by the whole country.

However, there were other issues which, because of their national nature, demanded the consent of the whole country before legislation. The legislation involved the invitation of regional representatives to a chosen venue and as many people as could physically attend from the areas within an accessible radius. The forum would be a dance called *Kivata* or another termed *Kwanyi*. Chosen regional representatives and some elders would go for a consultative session in secret places. In upper Embu, they would go to the forest of Mt. Kenya or other thick groves while in lower Embu and Mbeere, they hid in the wilderness. The consultation usually lasted over one night and the elders would emerge from hiding only at the venue where the whole country was assembled. The chosen members of the consultation group, *Guvi*, would then step forward and announce the laws that had been made. These laws were effective with immediate effect and were not debated. Representatives carried the laws to their local areas. The laws in this category would be dealing with national matters, such as the security of the country, beer drinking ages for young people, the conduct of the warrior class and utilization of the environment.

Side by side with the elders who legislated at the countrywide level came the *nthuke* in both Embu and Mbeere. *Nthuke* also worked at a national level. The *nthuke* were genealogical generation age-sets and

each country had two. Again, these operated side by side like two autonomous political parties. None of these parties was the government and none was the opposition. Both were the government and they moderated, as well as supplemented each other. After about 30-35 years of "rule", each *nthuke* handed over power to its "children". In both Embu and Mbeere the handing over was accompanied by the pomp and **fanfare** of the ceremony called *nduiko*. In the two areas, the *nthuke* were the same bodies, and the *nduiko* were performed in the same way; their functions and even cardinal sacred groves or shrines were the same. However, some names were different and the *nduiko* period differed, however, the Embu consulted each other the *nduiko* periods. The two Embu *nthuke* were *Nyangi* and *Kimanthi*, each with a number of "children", of descendants who carried their own names like the *Kenya-kamburi*, *Ndiiriri* and *Irungu* of the *Kimanthi*. Those of the Mbeere were *Nyangi* and *Thathi* the *Thathiis* "children" were called the *Nthuuire*, *Ivate* and *Kinyaari*. Every *nthuke* in Embu had its equivalent or counterpart in Mbeere and vice versa.

The *nthuke* in power could legislate as it found necessary without conflicting with the elders or even the warriors because many of these would be the same members of the *nthuke*. The difference being that as elders, they would be seen as local unless they were regional representatives. But in *nthuke* affairs, they would be perceived as countrywide for, theoretically, each *nthuke* was in the whole country. Since they were two, each represented about half the population. The *nthuke* were very powerful and were unquestionably accepted as the *ene nthi*, "owners of the land (or country)". Their legislation tended to be more socio-cultural than politico-economic, the sphere in which elders and warriors mostly specialised. However, they legislated or influenced legislation on whatever they felt affected the country. These legislation included matters on marriages such as dowries which they reviewed from time to time, initiation systems sacred groves and matters of general welfare.

JUDICIAL MATTERS

Even though judicial matters were mostly dealt with at regional levels, some matters reached magnitudes that the regions could not manage. In such cases, the whole country came in with its judicial bodies whether in Embu or Mbeere. These bodies were equal in status

although they could be called separately.

A general body of representatives from all the regions of the country formed a council or court, *Kiama* termed *Kiama kia mugongo*, council/court of the people. It could also be called *kia bururi* "of the whole country or land". This would deal with issues that affected the whole country or the Embu and Mbeere and any of their neighbours, the Gikuyu, Kamba and Meru groups. For instance, matters to do with the setting up of internal or international trading systems like market centres, caravan routes, conduct of traders within and outside their territories, and the general welfare of the land. The members of the *Mugongo* were not specific. Anyone near the meeting place could attend since she/he was a part of the *Mugongo* or "the people". However, the *Mugongo* had its specific *athamaki* or *aciiri* who made decisions after consultations. Their decision could not be challenged by anyone because there was no higher judicial body.

Besides *mugongo*, which was dealing with general matters were other judicial bodies which dealt with specific issues in both Embu and Mbeere. Examples are the *King'ore* in Embu which dealt with, among others, witchcraft affairs and were empowered to oath or kill witches, wizards and notorious thieves. It was a body that everyone feared in Embu, like the *makara* of the Mbeere. *Kiama kia ngome* was in both Embu and Mbeere. Its members were very old, most of them being 70 years or more and were supposed to be past childbearing-age. Consequently, the members could be consulted at any one time in the whole of Embu and Mbeere. Their residences were as well known as the police stations of today. The *ngome* were the highest judicial body and dealt only with matters that affected the country, not regions. All death matters, like homicide, and serious land issues were the responsibility of the *ngome*. Actually, the *mugongo* and *king'ore* worked as the executive arms of the *ngome*. The members of this body were called *ngome* because they wore a long half-tubular metal ring as a badge of authority on the right hand middle finger, in Embu or either middle or smallest fingers in Mbeere. Since they also carried forked black staves, they were called *kia muragi mwiru*, "of the black staff". Their main job was to prevent deadly crimes and bring compensation and reconciliation when these took place, as well as advice the country-wide bodies on how to run the affairs of the land. They were therefore said to deal with *thamandia*, destruction.

Beyond the borders of the Embu and Mbeere, the *ngome* had jurisdiction. If international relations seemed to deteriorate, the *ngome*, escorted by the *njama ya ita*, would cross the border to go and discuss the issues with their counterparts in Meru land, Gikuyu or Kamba land. The *ngome* would bless invasions for raiding the neighbouring lands or veto if they (*ngome*) did not approve. The *njama ya ita* would not go against the decision of the *ngome*. If, during an invasion, the Embu or Mbeere warriors or other people were captured, the *ngome* and the *njama ya ita* would go to redeem the victims by compensating the captors. When alliances with any of the neighbours, for military, economic or even social welfare, were thought necessary, it was the duty of the *ngome* and *ndama ya ita* to negotiate and arrange for the appropriate ceremonies and, after that they make sure that the terms of the agreement were observed by both sides. One would then conclude that all matters concerned with the neighbouring lands or even lands further away-- which can be termed "foreign policy"-- was the duty of the *njama ya ita* and the *ngome*.