



THE GAARU ("BARRACK") SYSTEM OF THE CHUKA OF MT. KENYA

A CASE STUDY OF A TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION.

INTRODUCTION

The Meru district of the Republic of Kenya occupies the North East, East and South slopes of Mount Kenya. The present Chuka country harbouring 67,731 people,¹ is situated to the Southern end of the district and to the South Eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya. The current boundary of Chuka land whose area is about 250 sq. miles is the forest of Mt. Kenya to the north, which separates the land from the mountain Kenya. River Thuci is the Western and South Western border that divides Chuka from

the Embu and Mbeerelands. The east and south east is catered for by the Tungu(Ntungu) river that separates the countries of the Muthambi and Mwimbi from Chuka. The confluence of these two rivers as they join river Mutongafforms the end of Chukaland and the boundary with the Tharaka².

Chukaland is dissected by numerous streams which flow fast in deep steep sided narrow valleys making travelling on land very difficult and isolating each range from its neighbours. The deep volcanic soils and heavy rains have encouraged the growth of forests, woodlands and thick bushes for ages especially in the 'upper' chuka, roughly from the 3600ft contour. The 'lower' chuka's natural vegetation deteriorates from woodland to scrubland and more grassland, hence the local term weru (semi-desert or even desert) used to refer to the area.

Who are the Chuka? Are they Meru or a different people? These questions need a brief answer before engaging in the discussion of the gaaru system. The term Meru as used today is a collective name for all those peoples are nine different groups.³ Each group regarded itself as a nation by itself and independent of the others for practical purposes.

However, when need arose, the groups or some of them would combine to effect some issues together; such are exemplified by the administrative council called Njuri-Ncheke. The Chuka are one of these groups which was regarded by the others - except the Tharaka with which they have much in common - as peculiar in physique and conduct. These views were endorsed by the first colonial administrators in Meruland. For example, H.E. Lambert recorded:

The Chuka are distinctly different from the rest of the tribes of the Unit (the Kikuyuland Unit) - even from the Tharaka, with whom they are said to be akin,.... As compared with the rest, they are stocky in build and hairy in body.⁴

An even earlier observation had been done by Orde-Brown who wrote:

A glance at the illustration of the Chuka will show how characteristic their physiognomy is, and a comparative vocabulary will also indicate Chuka as the meeting ground of most of the peculiar phrases or words that can be traced definitely to Meru or Kikuyu.⁵

To Orde-Brown, any peculiarity within the Mount Kenya peoples "turns out to be the established Chuka custom." Views on the Chuka, both wild and sober, from both early White observers and their African neighbours, are varied and at times contradictory for instance, in 1911 Crowford saw them as isolationists and able to protect themselves but at the same time:

"They appeared to us just like a lot of little children in their primitive simplicity, so full of curiosity and wonder at all that pertained to the White man".⁶

The Mbeere, Embu and Kirinyaga people among other Chuka neighbours hold firmly that cunningness, toughness, treachery in Warfare and living in forest isolation were among the main characteristics of the Chuka.⁷

However, confused and mistaken as they are, the chuka are part and parcel of the mt. Kenya Bantu - speakers who arrived to settle when they are from the Southern Ethiopian highlands between 1385 and 1480. The difference in physique and ways of life coming up because of isolation in the forested slopes of mt. Kenya and conservatism that forced chuka to keep themselves and abstain from mixing and interaction with their neighbours like the Tharaka, Embu, Mbeere and Agikuyu did.⁸

THE GAARU SYSTEM

The gaaru system was not only in Chuka but in all sections of the Meru clusters. Although we are going to examine the chuka gaaru system then, it should be pointed out that this will also be true of the rest of Meru with differences of detail. The name gaaru normally means a man's hut. It is both singular and plural and was popular all over mt. Kenya zone in one farm or other, with the Agikuyu calling it thingira. However, it was most developed and pronounced in Meru. This is because whereas societies such as the Embu, Mbeere and the Gikuyu clusters took the gaaru as a building for elderly men's convenience (also as the stall for calves, goats and sheep), the Meru societies did not only force every mature male into them but "graded" ~~g"graded"~~ the gaaru there by farming institutionalised system.

The Meru, and especially chuka, gaaru was a three tier system. On the first tier was found the gaaru of uncircumcised boys - ibici ranging in age from about ten to over twenty years in age. The second grade was that of all circumcised unmarried warriors including men with initiated but unmarried children. Here also a few elderly men were found who acted as advisors or consultants of the gaaru. This gaaru was termed ya nthaka, of the warriors. The third tier was made up of the gaaru ya mukuru, of an elder. ^EEvery male left his mother's hut at the age of ten or just before and joined the boys' gaaru to sojourn through to the elder's gaaru

He would remain the boy's one as long as he was uncircumcised and left it on circumcision day. When the circumcisonal would healed, the neophyte warrior was ceremoniously welcomed in the nthaka or warrior gaaru where he would remain till old age. The gauge for old age was the fact that one's children (or those of his initiation age mates) had married or were marrying after initiation. Then one built a gaaru in his homestead wherein he lived until he died of old age.

Why did the Chuka - and indeed the rest of Meru - find it necessary to institutionise the gaaru system? The Chuka sum the reasons behind their resulting to the gaaru system - excluding the elders' - in one word, defence. The chuka are agreed that in the pre-colonial era, they were a small population compared to other societies and that they were entirely surrounded by enemies, thereby living a life like that of a "tongue between the jaws" - the chuka being the tongue while the enemies were the jaws. This assessment is unanimously agreed^{up} on by both the chuka and their neighbours. It was well summed up by Jeremiah Kabui of Kirinyaga as follows:

Except the Maasai, everyone hated the chuka. Everyone fought them; the Embu, although they were neighbours, the Muthambi the Mbeere and we Gikuyú. The other Meru also hated them. People wanted to attack them and deprive them of their livestock and to exterminate them. It looks^o as if they were not "of here" - everyone hated them.

The dissected topography of Chukaland forced the population to live in ridges which were isolated from each other and at times even difficult to reach without having to make circuitous movements. The climate encouraged forests in the upper zone which made people live under virtual forests. These factors forced chuka to create defence centres - like military barracks or police stations - where personnel was always available at the time of need for defence and invasion. Hence the principle of the gaaru for both boys and warriors.

BUILDING THE WARRIOR GAARU

The boys built their own gaaru under the leadership of the old mature boys and the guidance of warriors. They cut the building materials such as poles and rafters and carried them to the building sites and did the building till the work was complete. The warrior gaaru was built with much sacredness and ceremony all over Meru. In Chuka and Tharaka especially, an elder considered sacred for his godliness and commended conduct chose a central, well-secured and defendable site for a gaaru of warriors. He conducted the appropriate rites including ritual copulation and put up the first pole. He would henceforth be considered the gaaru. Then warrior would bring the rest of the building material excluding the thatch. Girls would bring the thatch. The material would include, at least, forty giant poles and the same number of giant rafters called miratho or trusses.

The poles and trusses formed the core of the framework of the gaaru hut that was peculiar compared to normal huts. The first peculiarity was the size. Whereas normal huts were six to ten feet in radius, the gaaru could have twenty or more. The external structure of the gaaru was cone-shaped with a sharper angle at the apex and the eaves almost touching the ground as opposed to the gentle angles of normal huts whose walls could be seen for the eaves were much higher above the ground. The walls of the gaaru were only four or five feet high while centre pillar caught the trusses some twelve feet or so above the ground. Outside the gaaru would be a big heap of ashes, dumped from the hut, sometimes being as high as over twelve feet!

The internal structure of the hut revealed more peculiarities. For example, arranged hexagonally around the centre pillar would be six or nine poles but away from the middle one.¹⁰ The greater portion of the inside against the walls - some claim as much as 2/3, would be an earthen raised platform that acted as extended bed. The platform was about two feet high extending from wall to the subsidiary six or nine poles.

The occupants of a gaaru could be anything between thirty and a hundred although reports indicate that the Muthambi's could hold more warriors. But the Muthambi do not seem to have laid stress on the boys' gaaru like the Chuka.

The 'beds' in the gaaru were fitted on seniority basis starting with the area for the newly circumcised warriors just next to the door as one entered, followed by that of the old warriors somewhere about the middle of the gaaru and finally by the section of the consultant elders near the door on the opposite side to the young warriors' area. On the left side of the door was a circle of stones used for sanitary purposes as a urinal which the elders demanded had to be kept wet. A fire was lit in the centre of the gaaru and secured by stones. There were young warriors always on duty to keep the fire burning. If it went out they would be disciplined by severe beating or even fined a goat.

On entering the gaaru, with the spear facing the outside, the same was placed on the door ledge while the shield was placed by the warriors bed's head. His sword, sheath and belt were hung on the wall. Bows, arrows, musical horns and drums were kept together at the end of the bed platform to the right as one entered the gaaru. Gourds and other vessels and the Kiuthi (draught) board were also kept in this place¹¹.

FUNCTIONS OF THE GAARU

Whenever a gaaru was built in a village, region, or ridge, it became the recognised headquarters of the affairs of the area. These affairs could be socio-religious, political or economic. That is why it was situated in a central place and away from the women's villages. Under normal circumstances, men or boys went to the gaaru only in the evenings to spend the night. They woke up in the morning and went on their business during the day & till the evening again. They would eat from their mothers' or wives' homes, not from the gaaru.

It should be noted that even when they went for feeding at these homes, they did not enter the women's huts, but called for the food and drinks from a far using some coded means of communication. The women would place the food and drinks at the appropriate place where the men would return the containers after feeding. Only rarely the gaaru occupants would eat roast foods like yams and bananas in the gaaru. During certain ceremonial occasions, foods and drinks could be brought in the gaaru and consumed there.

The gaaru formed a nucleus for social activities and practices. Members of one gaaru behaved very much like brothers or one family and identified themselves with that gaaru when they interacted with other peoples and areas. They would form dancing groups or other social units which would not only entertain their locality but challenge others in organised occasions. When it came to activities where women were required the gaaru took their womenfolk like like members of the gaaru. Outside their area, the women also identified themselves with their area garru for men, the gaaru was the natural social meeting place as well as a home in the evenings and during some day occasions. Even men from other regions went to the local gaaru for accomodation and social activities whenever they were in the foreign areas.

Permission for such activities like initiation originated from the gaaru. This same gaaru processed the initiation candidate whether for circumcision or clitoridectomy taking this duty zealously till the end of the initiation.¹² The naming of the new warriors, some type of 'baptism', after they joined the gaaru community was done in the same gaaru. This used to be a ceremonial and joyous occasion when even the women came to participate.¹³

An indirect result of this social segregation of males was the fact that the females were also segregated by themselves in the homesteads. The women then formed their own social groups such as the Kagita kiama or council for "eating".

Economically the gaaru system contributed quite much. Most cultivation especially the ground breaking and that of dangerous areas - the rwanda - was left to the gaaru warriors. They organised security escorts to the women and old people and did the cultivation contingents of gaaru warriors were instructed to scare vermin and so avoid crop destruction. It is in the gaaru where the preservation, conservation and exploitation of natural resources such as the forests, minerals and wildlife as well as land were discussed and resolved. The gaaru organised the exchange or trade systems. For instance the caravans from Chuka to Tharaka would be organised and escorted by particular gaaru ¹⁴. In ~~the~~ away the gaaru produced most of the productive labour either directly or indirectly and conducted it as well as secured the same.

It is in the political field that the gaaru - system seems to have contributed most. It is no exaggeration to say that the males were fully politicised in the gaaru from their youth. The gaaru instilled much patriotism or, one is tempted to call it, nationalism, in the gaaru occupants that made them harbour strong loyalties to their gaaru, ridge and the country as a whole. Each gaaru was charged with the guarding of the area in which it was located for the welfare of all Chuka. Hence it was the base of defence it was the base of defence - and offence - of the country. The gaaru could also be seen as the headquarter of the political authority for the zone concerned. This included the enforcement of justice and the law. Any decision of gaaru could be enforced by the warriors of the gaaru after a command by the head of that particular gaaru. They could punish or penalise an offender unquestioningly.

To enable the gaaru to perform the above tasks, much discipline was installed and observed by members of each gaaru. The discipline was, with very little local variation, uniform and a novice was introduced to it soon after admission to the gaaru especially during the period of Kwatha nthaka, to advise, instruct, the warrior. Rules and regulations of conduct were issued and had to be adhered to the letter.

A slight disobedience of any was punishable first by a severe beating and second by a penalty of a goat or bull. One could also be ostricised. The beating took the form of terrible whipping as the victim stood holding the gaaru centre pole firmly and unflinchingly despite all the pain. Showing 'sentimental' feelings of pain or fear was punishable by further beatings or penalty.

The rules of gaaru included not entering one's mother's hut, not going to eat out of the gaaru without permission. If one was from his gaaru either wooing or on an important mission far away, he was supposed to spend the night in the nearest gaaru. Any sign of disrespect to elders of all sexes or even older warriors was an offence. One had to endeavour to persevere all hardships and show no signs of defeat feelings or sentiments - for instance complaint about hunger or feelings of wanting to relieve oneself. This was termed gukava uthaka - to maintain or secure manhood - and was done under great pains successfully, making the warriors appear as gods in the presence of women and the youth. No warrior could associate socially with uninitiated persons both boys and girls and had to maintain a high moral standard. Training for warfare was done in the gaaru by **clashes like** practical warfare. These clashes were internal and could even kill, only the participants used sticks, clubs and not fatal weapons. Actually, the champions of these fights became the gaaru and warrior leaders even during periods of actual external warfare. In this context, the gaaru became the centre of the country's defence system.¹⁵

Chukaland had many gaaru arranged all along the borders with neighbours and the forest with a number in the middle.¹⁶ During times of trouble by the many enemies, the gaaru that spotted the trouble sounded a drum or horn to summon help. This was termed muragu. It was the duty of the next gaaru to relay the call and if necessary, send reinforcement. Help could then be relayed that way from one corner of the country to the opposite.

Usually, the middle gaaru were the ones which sent reinforcements as the border ones kept guard in their areas lest fresh invaders break in at the vacated place. However, when need arose, every gaaru sent a representative in gatherings like the ones convened by the Mugwe. As such, the whole of chukaland was represented. The representatives sent the messages back- in their gaaru thereby having everyone know the deliberations.

THE END OF THE GAARU SYSTEM

The British colonial government officially 'conquered' chuka in 1908 and charged the first round of hut-tax. In 1913 the government went further by building the Chuka Boma or administrative centre as a sub-station of Embu from where the Chuka (with Tharaka, Mwimbi and Muthambi) were until then administered. This invasion and consequent gradual controlling of chukaland sounded the death knell of the gaaru system. The same was true in the rest of Meru. The colonial government looked with much suspicion and fear to the gaaru system and ordered the destruction of the gaaru and defence systems such as the trenches and nkandə or fences with barricaded gates. The gaaru warriors were disbanded and deployed as carriers and labourers who were moved outside their country. The warriors were forced to being submissive salaried workers to salvage the colonial economy and the gaaru system finally died by the second and third decades of colonialism.

With the gaaru - system also died the traditional systems maintained by the gaaru warriors such as the justice, defence, social centres, discipline and the ecological balance that was maintained within natural vegetation, animal life and the human population within the relatively small chukaland. The people engaged in 'civilized' life. Today, only outcries of, for instance, conservation and 'exploding' human population, are heard loudly and clearly.

CONCLUSION

This brief paper has tried to explore this peculiar system of the Meru in general and Chuka in particular. It has shortly illuminated the geography and geographical location of the region. A brief historical note of the chuka people attempted to identify the chuka as some of the earliest Bantu-speaking migrants in Mt. Kenya zone, who remain isolated in their forest fortress and defied the change that affected their colleagues the Tharaka, Mbeere, Embu and Agikuyu. The necessity for creating the gaaru system and its operation to the end has been examined.

The gaaru - system was only one of the many institutions in Meru and Chuka which can be given the same treatment. Such are the bee-keeping fraternity, the Wathi or hunting society, iron working or black smithing, initiation systems, the Mariika or genealogical generation age set system and the office of the Mugwe. Implied here is the fact that many important institutions which served their countries well must have existed in other parts of Kenya. Some are already known but not explored scholarstically. These should be studied and the information exposed. If they served successfully in the pre-colonial times, can we learn anything from them and is there a way we can use them today to combat some of our current problems even if it is by modification or adaptations of only small sections? Whatever, is the answer, scholars need examine them before they are fully forgotten.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kenya pop. Census, 1979.
2. See map at the back.
The boundaries of chukaland have fluctuated in historic times till about the second decade of colonialism when they were fixed. About 1700 AD. Chukaland allegedly included modern C Chogoria area, Marima Zone of Muthambi to the forest and Tungu river. The country went to altitude 8000 feet above sea-level. By 1830s the country had been reduced to the land between the rivers Tungu and North Thuci and the people had been driven about 2000ft down Mt. Kenya slopes. The colonial rule drove the Chuka from the forest immediately above their open country thereby reducing the land even more.
3. These are the Tigania, Igembe, North Imenti, South Imenti, Tharaka, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi and Chuka.
4. Chuka political records, 169, MRU/31 Microfilm, Reel 2802, r,10, "Lamberts Articles", in E.S. Bird Library, Syracuse University, New York, U.S.A. Microfilm. Lambert observed this in 1930s.
5. Orde-Bröwne, Major, G. st. J. The Vanishing Tribes of Kenya (London_ seely Service and Co. Ltd., 1925) pp. 26-27.
6. E.M. Crawford, By the Equator's Snowly Peak (London: CMS, Salisbury Square, 1913). p. 140.
The D.C. DR. Crampton in 1927 described the Chuka as of two main types namely Bushmen - projecting cheek-bones, lumpy forehead, heavy jaws, matted hair and beard - and chinese characterised by wide narrow eyes, high cheek bones, wide mouth and sloping forehead.
7. Elderman, Simba Muturi (Mbeere) Oral interview (hereafter O.I.) by this writer on 105/ 10/5/81 and Ngunyuu Mucina, O.I. on 17/5/81. Kamunyori Giceru, (Embu) O.I. 13th July 1981 and 17th December, 1983 and J. Ndungo Kithigi (Kirinyaga) O.I. 2nd July, 1981.

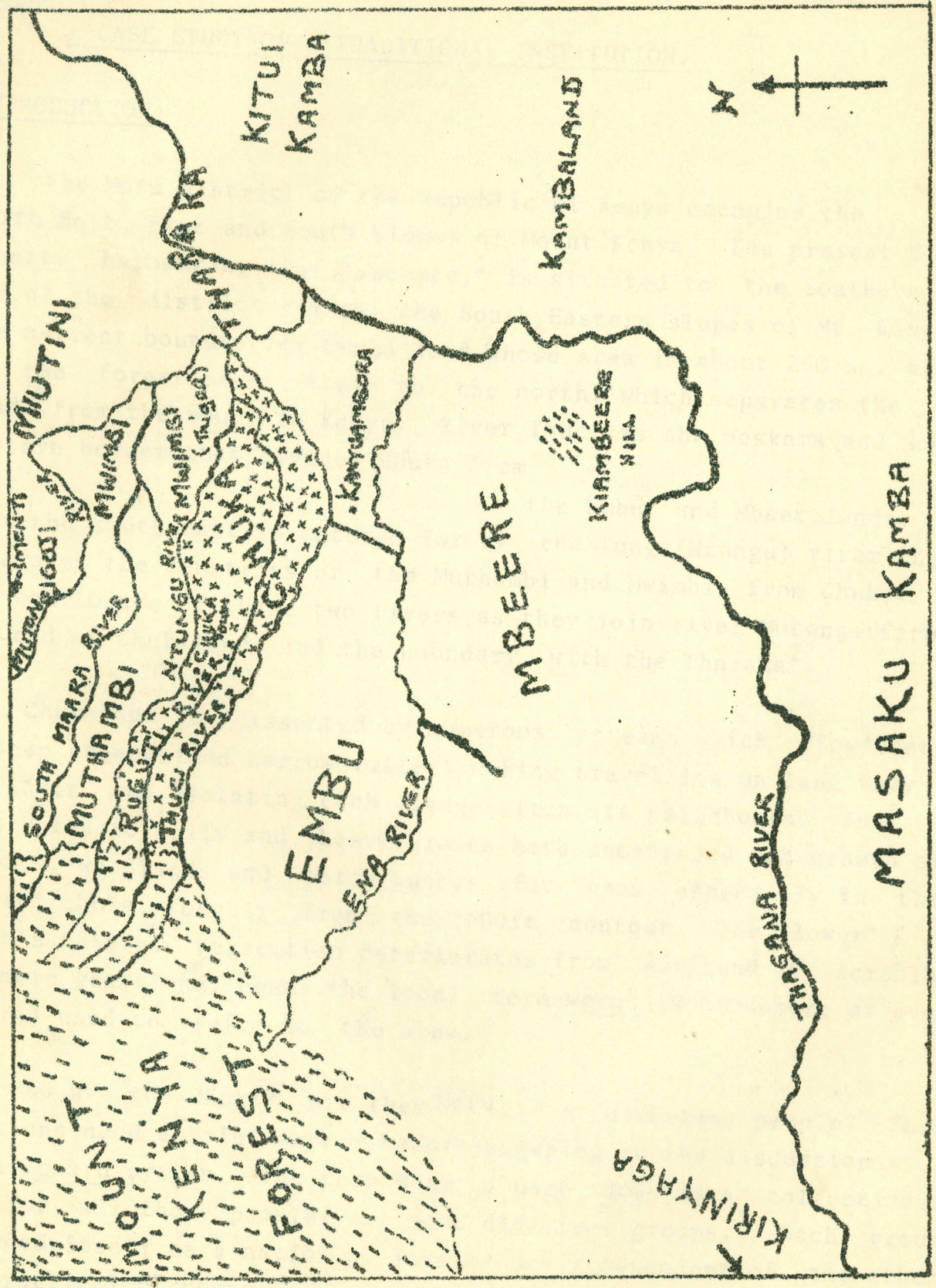
8. For a detailed theory of the origin, migrational routes, settlements and relationship with **the** other Bantu peoples of mt. Kenya see H.S.K. Mwaniki "A pre-colonial History of the Chuka of Mt. Kenya c. 1400-1908", ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1982, Chapter 2 and 3 (Copies are available in the University of Nairobi and K.U.C. Libraries.)
9. H.S.K. Mwaniki, "The Chuka: Struggle for Survival in the Traditional Days to 1908." *Mila* vol. III No. 2 (1972). A. y MuChuka who discusses warfare will confirm this point of Ezra M'Njau, O.I. 2/8/81 and 7/1/84 and Samuel Namu, 22/4/81.
10. It is said that the nine poles commemorated the existence of the nine Meru subgroups.
11. A description of "Gharu" can be found in Chuka political Records MRU/31 (apparently extracts from Orde-Browne's Work)pages in the Kenya National Archives, Nairobi.
12. It is told that if one gaaru took charge of an **initiation** candidate either by 'stealing' or snatching the same from a weak party of the rightful gaaru there was a likelihood of a severe inter-gaaru fight until one was defeated. In such a fight, some people lost their teeth or got seriously hurt.
13. For the ceremony of naming the warriors or giving a nthaka name, elaborate accounts are given of the fees paid, who gave the names and how they arrived at these names - usually the "nto" - the reactions of the audience and the publicising of the names. Informants on this include Mwiandi Muru O.I. 11/6/81
14. For organisation of trade caravans and the passage at Ruguca to Tharaka and the escort by Tharaka warriors back, see Kirindi Wa Mutwa - itunga in H.S.K. Mwaniki, Embu Historical Texts (EALB, 1974) pp. 224-225.
15. The Chuka defence methods were varied and effective. These included, Nkando or barricading the whole country with thick, high and impenetrable. (Cat times thorny) fences and hedges. Man traps, pit traps, treetop guard huts and deep trenches with dangerous sharp spikes were also a part of the defence system.

The fenced villages entered only through guarded gates as Mabiriga and the sentry system were also a part of the system. All these as well as the actual physical defence were planned, constructed and manned by the gaaru warriors

- 16. The many recent Chuka gaaru included Kaumi, Kiamwatu, Karima Mwaro, Thaombu, Ngubiu, Kaarani, Kiamuciu, Kathangani, Kaathani, Mwiriani, Kangutu and Iveti.



THE CHUKA AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS



Scale 1:500,000