

**ROOTS, MIGRATIONS AND SETTLEMENTS OF
MOUNT KENYA PEOPLES: FOCUS ON THE EMBU
CIRCA 1400- 1908**



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HENRY STANLEY KABECA MWANIKI



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PREFACE

The main intention of this work is to fulfil my childhood curiosity of the way of life of the Embu and their neighbours in the pre-colonial era. I developed the curiosity through sitting by the elders' courtyard fires in the evenings where stories, escapades, traditions and discourses on all subjects were related, even performed.

The curiosity was intensified by my forty years of teaching history in secondary schools and universities in which questions about Mt. Kenya peoples have been asked and interest portrayed on the same. This has been rekindled over GEMA (Gikuyu, Embu and Meru), GEMMA (Gikuyu, Embu, Mbeere and Meru) Associations and the Mau Mau movement of the 1950s.

Yet the materials on the societies are either too scanty or non-existent. The scanty available materials have distortions, misconceptions, colonial and missionary misinterpretation to the level of losing authenticity and originality. Consequently, I was forced to research so as to reveal the existing and the past, to reconstruct and even recreate what had passed and, finally, immortalize the data through recording and share the same with the current interested and posterity. As I worked, a final impetus came through the re-evaluation of African indigenous knowledge which is now in demand. The same had been discarded during the colonial era mainly through Africa. The clamour for indigenous knowledge comes within the backdrop of rapid change within Mt. Kenya zone as elsewhere in Kenya and Africa.

Other Kenyan zones affected by the change include Coast, Rift Valley, North Eastern and the Lake Victoria that includes the Western province, Nyanza and the Gusii/Kuria. All these regions require the Mt. Kenya zone treatment to capture the indigenous knowledge before the same disapea.

The Mt. Kenya zone is inhabited by Bantu speakers such as the Meru, Embu, Mbeere and the Gikuyu especially those of Kirinyaga. They are closely related ethnically and have very similar histories and cultures. The Kamba ('Athaisu') neighbour the above on the opposite side of River Thagana. However, many fundamental differences also occur which defy generalizations.

Due to the volume and intricacy of the work involved, Embu has been chosen as the epicenter of the zone and studied in detail. The Embu study forms a model for studying the others both in Mt. Kenya region and elsewhere. Cross references with other societies have been made and a map covering the whole zone presented to show the location of each society interrelationships.

The study is not an academic history, rather it is a zealous study in indigenous knowledge in which history was deeply impended. In Mt. Kenya zone, history was lived, not recited since it was a key aspect of the culture. This was true in many other parts of Kenya and Africa.

The main source of data is oral, supplemented by others specific to Mt. Kenya zone and elsewhere. The bulk of the oral data were researched and tape recorded in early 1970s from apparently authentic custodians. of the knowledge making the same acceptable and treasurable. Simple English is used creating a flowing narrative story telling style and form. Quotations, are employed to bring about the tone, mood and vigour of the informants. Foot notes are provided from the introductory chapter to the end to create authenticity and further sources of reference.

The major contents of this work are an examination of the Embu people's history from their roots or origins mainly in Ethiopia around 1400s through the struggles in migration to the conquest by the British in 1906. The migration from Ethiopia took them to the Lorrian Swamp, South to modern Tigania, Igembe lands, and

Tharaka, crossing river Thuci from Igambang'ombe the major Embu moved to, and settled at, the Mwenendega grove. Another section of the same people followed a route further south to settle at Kiambere Hill as the Mbeere and continued to move along the Mbeere plains to settle finally at Ithanga Hills which became the final dispersal station much later, forming the kikuyu, Mbeere and strengthening the Embu.

At the Lorrian Swamp, the group that did not cross to Tigania/Igambe and continued to the modern day Somalia, to turn South along the coast finally settled at the famous Meru 'Mbwa' or 'Mpwaa' to migrate later up and along the Thagana river, to enter modern Meru land by crossing the river from the Kamba side at Tharaka. This group spread all over Mt. Kenya region mainly becoming the Imenti and 'cross fertilizing' the rest of the zone from Tharaka, Chuka, Embu, Mbeere and Kikuyu about three centuries after they settled. For the Embu and Mbeere, this is what is narrated in chapters one to five.

Chapters six to eight discuss the creation of Embu society. Chapters nine and ten describe security, warfare, commerce and foreign relations. The Embu resistance against the British is narrated in chapter eleven while chapter twelve describes the final showdown when Embu were conquered and dominated by the British who built their headquarters at the modern Embu Municipality in 1907 thereby ending their independence and entering the 'pax Britannica' till 1963 when Kenya gained independence.

The Kirinyaga Kikuyu had been subdued in 1904. The Chuka, 'the gateway to Meru', having learnt a lesson from the disastrous defeat of the Embu, surrendered to the British in 1908 and an administrative centre was built at Gatumbi (Modern Chuka Municipality).

This example was followed by the other Meru congeries and 1908 saw the voluntary surrender, seen as 'suing for peace' of nearly all Meru and the building of the headquarters at the "Mutindwa jwa Kangangi". 'Kangangi', the roamer or wanderer as seen by the Meru, was the British chief administrator, Mr. B. Horne.

The work's targeted readers range from scholars of all levels – higher primary through secondary to university and mature people seeking entertainment and knowledge.

H.S.K. Mwaniki

22 December, 2008

FOREWORD

If a book were used as a measure of the author's nationalism and the desire to grasp and reclaim his people's past, their identity and cultural heritage, *Roots, Migration and Settlements of Mt. Kenya Peoples-Focus on the Embu* is it. Mwaniki Kabeca is unapologetically bold and able to sieve and cull nuggets from the oft ignored sands of time of his people, all multifariously and traditionally conveyed through succeeding generations vide proverbs, fables, folk-tales, songs and other forms of oral literature. Mwaniki has not only fulfilled his childhood curiosity to know his roots, he has immortalized indigenous knowledge before it disappears totally; he fills an important lacuna in our knowledge structure increasingly in demand henceforth.

And to this extent Mwaniki defies the shackles of colonial experience—both in their demonizing and brainwashing fronts. Without any fear, he spreads a colourful tapestry bare for serious students of our history—both critics and admirers—to dig in their fangs. From the treatise that follows, even students of sociology and anthropology will find as much to bite and chew as will those of history, largely because, due to his fearlessly excavating from *oraliture*, the expose cannot help but interest many students of humanities.

How eternally fulfilling for the liberated reader to thumb through a text that has been comprehensively researched by an unshackled scholar - there are few Kenyan historians who have had the colonial experience yet have fairly exorcised the colonial *dudu* from their heads to tell the story as it is. Mwalimu Kabeca Mwaniki is such a historian. Here is an unflinching believer in the cosmology of the traditional society of his forefathers without apologies; he is proud of his cultural heritage inured in societal values and ideals.

Mwaniki's analysis and explanations of the pre-literate eras of the Embu is as delightful to the ear and insightful to the identity-inclined reader largely because of extensive oral and archival research; a truly scholarly work done with disinterested passion. He does us proud: he brings to light multifarious information—be that geographic, cultural, anthropologic or linguistic—so masterly that it cannot but fascinate the prepared mind.

Yet, with the humility of a self-driven scholar and historian, the author is unafraid to point out some gaps in our recorded history, some unexplained aspects or hazy areas of our history, areas that many of our mainstream historians either shun or are uncomfortable to elucidate on, thereby calling for extended and deeper research. Such elements include the origins of male and female circumcision and the age-set system as practised by the Embu and Kikuyu, as well as the need for archaeologically verified routes and transit points of the migration of the "Mt. Kenya people" and its connectivity with the history of "Thaisu" and to Akamba "in-laws". Without a doubt, this work on Mt. Kenya region should create a model for other regions. That the author is fully cognizant of the difficulties encountered in analysing and interpreting material sourced from communal memory and oral history is a real credit to him and can only add to the credibility of his studies and conclusions. It also shows that the author is open-minded and ready to continue scholarship.

Even as some scholars would want to question some of the author's postulation on some topics, at least he bravely lays bare his own reasoned conclusions. Let he who questions or faults Mwaniki's objectivity or the veracity of this work bring forth his or her own data and extrapolate on fault lines detected – that way we shall have more than one book, and our society and historiography will be the richer. Let other scholars similarly enrich us on other regions of Kenya, and, if found fitting, use this work as a model.

For example, a discerning reader cannot but glean the underlying jurisprudence or social justice of the a-Embu, and, to some extent, of their immediate neighbours, the Mbeere, Chuka, Tharaka, Meru and a-Gikuyu—and maybe a-Kamba, something that popular colonial writers inadvertently or otherwise denied these communities. That Mwalimu Mwaniki is bold enough to calculate dates of events and movement of people using folklore and the a-Embu's lifespan is challenge enough for the rest of us to advance what he has started.

Mwalimu Mutu wa Gethoi

25 December 2008

Lavington, NAIROBI

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

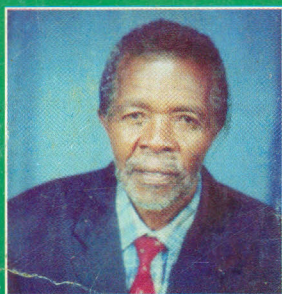
D.C.	District Commissioner
C.I.D.	Criminal Investigation Department
C.M.S.	Church Missionary Society.
D.O.	District Officer
E.A.L.B.	East African Literature Bureau
E.A.P.H.	East African Publishing House
K.A.R.	King's African Rifles
K.C.A.	Kikuyu Central Association
O.U.P.	Oxford University Press

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This work is an examination of the Embu people's history from their roots or origins mainly in Ethiopia around 1400s through the struggles in migration to the conquest by the British in 1906.

The migration from Ethiopia took them to the Lorrian Swamp, South to modern Tigania, Igembe lands, and Tharaka. Crossing river Thuci from Igambang'ombe the main group of Embu moved to, and settled at the Mwenendega grove. Another section of the Embu went farther south to settle at Kiambeere Hill as the Mbeere and continued to move along the Mbeere plains to settle finally at Ithanga Hills which became the final dispersal station much later, forming the Kikuyu, Mbeere and strengthening the Embu.

The Mt. Kenya zone is inhabited by Bantu speakers such as the Meru, Embu, Mbeere and the Gikuyu. They are closely related ethnically and have very similar histories and cultures. The Kamba ('Athaisu') neighbour them on the opposite side of River Thagana. However, many fundamental differences also occur.

The struggles of the Embu against colonial intruders are reminiscent of the other mount Kenya peoples. Kirinyaga Kikuyu had been subdued in 1904. The Chuka, 'the gateway to Meru', having learnt a lesson from the disastrous defeat of the Embu, surrendered to the British voluntarily in 1908 and an administrative centre was built at Gatumbi (Modern Chuka Municipality).

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