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BEEKEEPING IN EMBU DISTRICT, KENYA

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Introduction

For many people all over rural Africa, honey and beekeeping still have considerable economic, social and ritual significance. What follows is an account of beekeeping in Embu, a district of central Kenya (Fig. 1).

Embu district, located a few degrees south of the Equator and east of Mount Kenya, is divided into two administrative divisions, Embu and Mbere. The divisions are occupied by the Embu and Mbeere* people who, together with their more numerous neighbours the Gikuyu, Meru and Kamba, form what have been called the Bantu of Central Kenya. Although the Embu and Mbeere are closely related, culturally and linguistically, there is a great economic differential between the two divisions, which is reflected in their respective beekeeping practices: in Embu division beekeeping has been virtually a dead industry since about 1940, while in Mbere division honey has retained its importance.

The reason for this difference is basically physical: Embu division has 65% of the total population of 140 000 on 20% of the inhabited area of 2700 sq km; it is at a higher altitude, which is more favoured in terms of rainfall and soils, and it has consequently become economically more advanced. All the land—with the exception of significant areas of forest reserve where honey collecting is prohibited—has been demarcated into individually owned plots, where peasant farmers grow tea (above 2000 m), coffee (above 1200 m) and other cash-crops. By contrast, Mbere division is relatively undeveloped economically, with a low population density and large, nearly empty *Acacia-Commiphora* dry savanna (near the Tana River, at about 600 m altitude), which is eminently suitable for beekeeping.

Embu division presents a picture of neat rectangular houses (mostly roofed with corrugated iron) where water is readily available. There are many churches and schools, both primary and secondary, and a good road network. Although now there is enormous pressure on the land—as indicated by the cultivation of even the road verges—there is relative prosperity. To drive the one-hour journey from the poorer southern parts of Mbere division to the rich high Embu division is almost like leaving a desert and reaching Switzerland. Most of Mbere division is quite sparsely populated, with indifferent soil, erratic rainfall, and recurrent famines. The Mbeere are, nevertheless, attached to

* Although the administrative division is spelt *Mbere*, the people are referred to as *Mbeere*, as this more closely approximates to pronunciation.

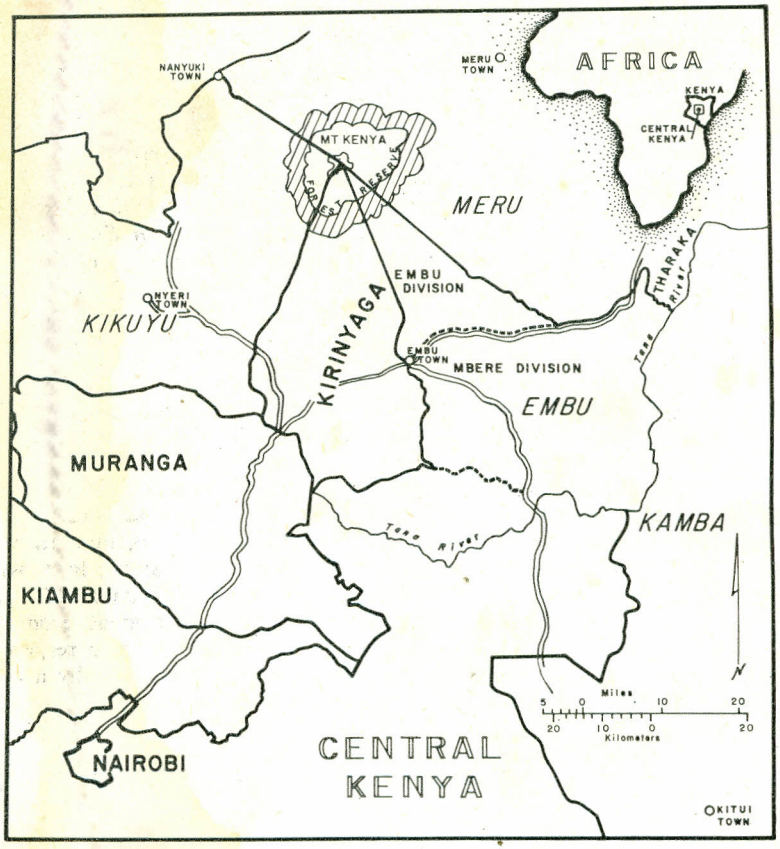

Fig. 1. *Map showing the Embu and Mbere Divisions in Kenya. The Equator is just north of the summit of Mt. Kenya.*

their lands, and in 1915 resolutely rejected a colonial government proposal to move them to more hospitable areas. Significantly, one of the main reasons for their refusal was the lack of adequate beekeeping opportunities in the new area.

Although we write about both divisions, the remarks apply to the Embu division of over thirty years ago, but to the Mbere division as it is today.

The participants

Although men and women join in many economic activities, such as farming, beekeeping is solely for men; women are alleged to be unable to endure the hazardous journeys and tree-climbing. Men from all clans can and do participate. The Embu apparently used to recognize certain sections of the forest as belonging to clans; the Mbeere regard all parts of the "bush" as part of one clan's land, but there is usually no difficulty in finding good beekeeping sites, on one's own or another clan's land. Traditionally, men in all the age-grades—

Fig. 2. *Making a wooden hive by chipping away the inside of a log (Nkondi, Tharaka).* *Photograph:* E. Crane

from young warriors to the senior elders—took part, but nowadays there is a preponderance of men in their forties. The Embu collectors were divided into "amateurs" and "professionals", the latter working under recognized leaders, and concentrating in the Mount Kenya forests, which they knew as well as their own home areas.

Honey-collectors see themselves as a special group, taking pride in their skill, bravery and experience, and in their knowledge of the ways of bees. Because of the ritual importance of honey-beer, collectors are much respected in their society.

Preparation of hives

New hives are constructed in the slack time of the agricultural cycle, after the harvest and before the next rains. People then carefully select trees from which to choose branches for cutting hives. The Embu used to journey far from their homes into the forest, but the Mbeere can usually find suitable trees close to their homes. Hives are made from logs, cut to a length of 90–150 cm with a diameter of 30–60 cm. Various axes, chisels and adzes are used in the

construction (Fig. 2). The preferred timber for hives is muringa (*Cordia abyssinica*) which is quite scarce nowadays, and mukau (*Melia volkensii* Gurke). The ends of the hives are closed with specially made round wooden covers, muvuru (*Vitex doniana*) being valued for this purpose as it can easily be split into appropriate sizes. A good hive, made from suitable and seasoned timber, can last twenty or thirty years: as one old man said, "you can die and leave your good hives to your son". Sometimes an old man, too frail to collect honey himself, will pass on his hives to his son.

In our enquiries, we were impressed with the detailed knowledge that beekeepers had of their environment, including a comprehensive awareness of all species of indigenous (and several exotic) trees, and of their uses. While carving out the hives, the men sing songs about the honey that they will later enjoy: indeed, honey-songs accompany all stages of beekeeping. One of the authors (D.B.) is currently preparing a list, with translation and notes, of some fifty honey-songs; these are musically interesting and sociologically illuminating, but were often condemned by church groups, because of their ribald humour and their connection with honey-beer.

Perfuming and placing the hives

Various methods are used to make a hive exude a "pollen smell" that would quickly attract bees to settle in it. Basically, the inside of the hive is smeared with aromatic shrubs, sometimes mixed with an old honey comb, or even with burnt goat bones. Sometimes, in addition to being smeared, the hive is smoked near a fire of charcoal and honey combs. Whatever is used is thought to be effective, as the bees are usually soon attracted to a new hive.

By about November, the (Embu) parties would enter deep into the forest to hang the hives, ready for the bees to settle in and make honey. Not every tree, nor every section of the forest, was suitable. Relatively short, tough branchy trees are the best.

Whereas the Embu people searched their forests for sites to hang their hives, the Mbeere prefer isolated areas near the Tana River. One "bee-valley" is famous for an area in it known as Kauriro, where the bees and honey are so abundant that some collectors are said to have "got lost" from drinking too much honey-beer. Hives in such isolated areas are unlikely to be disturbed by other people, and suitable trees are plentiful, but against this the beekeeper must reckon the inconvenience or even danger of the long journey, perhaps 15 km each way.

The most favoured trees are easy to climb, as well as providing, ideally, a natural platform on which a man can stand while placing or inspecting his hive. Especially suitable trees, in the lower areas, include species of *Acacia* and *Ficus*. Beekeepers not only look for suitable hanging trees, but also watch out for nectar-yielding trees, which may coincide (but not necessarily) with the hanging tree. Good nectar trees include: mungaa (*Acacia seyal* Del); mukami (*Newtonia hildebrandtii* Torre); murama (*Combretum* spp.); muringa (*Cordia abyssinica*); muthigiriri (*Lonchocarpus eriocalyx* Harms); mukuu (*Commiphora* spp.); mutoo (*Dombeya goetzenii* K. Schum); mwanjati (*Faurea saligna*). In addition, the seasonal flowering vegetation includes many species that are attractive to bees.

As well as trees that produce palatable honey, some types of vegetation that are attractive to bees yield objectionable honeys; *Euphorbia* and "dead sea

fruit" trees are in this category. Again, thickets of *Lannea stuhlmannii* Engl., when in flower, repel nectar-gathering bees, so hives are not placed nearby. Beekeepers recognize the relevant fine details of the ecological association: density of hive distribution is intimately connected with the flowering cycles of the many semi-deciduous trees. "Semi-deciduous" refers to neighbouring individual members of a single genus (or even species) that are bare, or in full leaf, flowering or fruiting, on any particular day, for they obey no obvious seasonal rhythm.

Hives are securely placed on the forks of the trees; one tree might have several hives. Sometimes, when there is no suitable fork, or where there is a danger from wild animals—especially honey badgers and genets—hives are suspended by stout cattle-hide cords. Hives are usually placed horizontally, wedged in the branches if possible, and secured by sturdy fibres; sometimes a sharpened short stick is used to peg the hive against a branch (Fig. 3).

The men take precautions against animals by suspending the hives, or by using an old large tin container, flattened and sharpened, as a guard around the trunk. Squirrels may also be a nuisance; if they find the hive before the bees do, they might use it as a home, and the bees would then be deterred by the mess made by the squirrels. Ashes may be placed at the foot of the trunk to repel insects, such as small black garden ants.

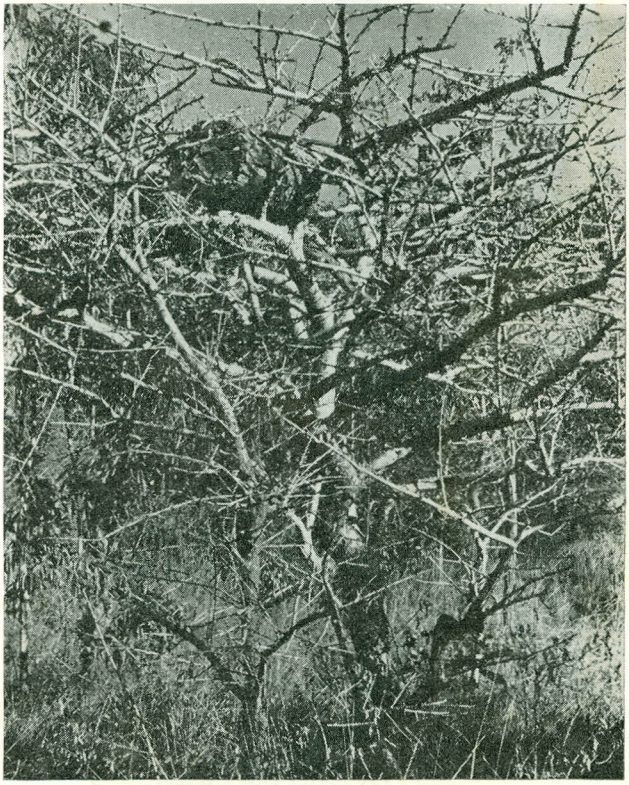

Fig. 3. *Hive wedged in the fork of a tree, probably muringa* (Cordia abyssinica).

More than one hive is often placed in a single tree; it is not uncommon to see as many as five hives in one tree, but they would all belong to the same man. One man in Tharaka, which is the area north of Mbere division, across the Tana River, claimed that he had over three hundred hives. This seems unlikely, even though he was one of the richest men in the area, and employed paid assistants as well as his sons. Other informants say that one man, if old, might have forty to sixty hives to look after. The Tharaka people suspend their hives from high branches, using a pole with a portion of a branch left on, as a hook.

Inspecting the hives

From time to time beekeepers inspect their hives to make sure they are still in position, clean out any squirrels, replace hives knocked down by badgers, tighten ropes and, if necessary, perfume the hives again. Usually a man goes alone, unless his hives are located far away, in which case he will go in a group, for company and for protection against wild animals. There are still many potentially dangerous animals—rhinoceros, buffalo and elephant—in the Tana River Area. In 1971 the Game Warden of the Eastern Province estimated that there were as many as 1500 elephants there.

Collecting honey

The Embu used to organize themselves in large groups, under recognized leaders, to go to the forest to collect honey from their hives. Preparations included the provision of ample food, seeing that all the men had weapons for defence, and that adequate goat-skin bags were taken for honey storage. Embu honey parties were summoned by the blowing of horns, both the large and small ones. In the forest, the party settled in caves, named after ancestors who were supposed to live there before their people moved out of the forest. The collectors moved out each morning to inspect their hives, coming back in the evening to share their meal (cassava, bananas, sweet potatoes, yams or millet-paste) and to enjoy the fire for warmth and security.

The Mbeere do most collecting in April or May, although honey is collected at other times, because of irregular blossoming of nectar trees. In a bad year—such as 1971, with very poor rains—hardly any honey is collected. Collecting is done at night, as "bees are easier to handle"; moonless nights are preferred "as bees cannot see us then".

To indicate the material culture that is involved, here are some of the items commonly used in honey-collecting:

(*a*) goat-skin bag for collecting honey;

(*b*) a light, wooden, cylindrical container, reinforced by cow-hide rings, with skin covers, also used for storage (Fig. 4);

(*c*) brands, often tied with sisal twine, used as torches—both for illumination and to smoke out bees;

(*d*) a whistle carried to scare wild animals, or indicate one's location in the bush to one's friends, or to call for help if attacked by wild bees, if stranded on a tree, or if a man gets so much honey that he could not carry it unaided (formerly a horn was used);

(*e*) weapons—bows and arrows, spears;

(*f*) tools—especially the sharp knife used for extracting honey, and a *panga* (cutlass) to clear paths;

(*g*) fibre rope for raising and lowering hives (Fig. 4).

Collection from each hive takes one or two hours, depending on the mood of the bees, the amount of honey and the accessibility of the hive. Collectors expect to be stung, though some claim to be immune, and others say that if one shows no fear, one will seldom be stung. Old men say that in former days they used to abandon a hive when the cover of a bee-hive was stuck to the comb, but that now they would prise it open. On the return journey, the men (if they have had a successful collection) carry heavy loads, an unusual occurrence in societies where women do most of the carrying of wood, water, grain and other burdens. In fact, the only occasion when we have seen adult (i.e. circumcised) Mbeere men carrying a load, slung by a temp-line round their foreheads, was when we met returning honey-collectors with their full containers.

Fig. 4. *Honey hunter from Tharaka plains with sisal rope and honey barrel, made by his grandfather; similar equipment is now in the B.R.A. Collection*
[*see* Bee Wld *51*(*3*) *: 152* (*1970*)].

Photograph: E. Crane

Honey-beer

Returning collectors would be pleased with themselves, and celebrate their return by brewing a special honey-beer for their own consumption. This applies to large groups of men who have gone far afield: in fact, much honey is collected by one, two or three men, near their homes, without ceremony of any sort. Honey-beer is the most highly appreciated of indigenous alcoholic drinks. It is made by placing the comb in water and rubbing it by hand. After rubbing, the comb is set aside to be used in perfuming a hive. The solution is placed in a gourd, one with a wide mouth and a short neck, to which is added fruit from the sausage tree, muratina (*Kigelia aethiopium*), as a fermenting agent. Gourds are allowed to stand in the sun, or near a fire, for twelve hours, and the liquid is ready to drink.

It is an offence to brew beer without a permit, which may be obtained from the chief for ten shillings for eight large gourds; many drinkers, especially in isolated southern areas, do not bother to get a permit, and are seldom charged. Both colonial and national governments (Kenya became independent in 1963) have tried to regulate the sale of indigenous liquor. In traditional society, it was only elders and old women who were allowed to drink beer. It was said that young women would behave improperly if they drank, so restrictions were imposed. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Embu Native Local Council, under the chairmanship of the British District Commissioner, often discussed problems caused by drinking. Attempts were made to limit drinking to men of the senior age-grades, and to make public drunkenness an offence, but with little success. Today, young people may drink, though older men, and some women, are the heaviest drinkers; it is not an uncommon sight to see a man tipsily staggering home, or some women singing merrily after a work-party. However, honey-beer is too precious to be used for large parties, and for these beer made from sugar or sugar-cane is substituted.

Uses of honey

Apart from its use for brewing honey-beer for home consumption, honey is important in many ways in Embu. Honey is sold, the main outlet being the large bi-weekly Ishiara market; located on the main Embu-Meru road, this has for long been an important trade centre. The buyers are mainly bar-owners from the richer higher areas where the customers also appreciate honey-beer. The price varies from about 80 cents to 1 shilling 50 cents per pound, according to the supply. Honey has a long history as an important trade item, and still is economically important for the Mbeere, and also for other societies such as the semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, the Dorobo of Kenya[2], or the Majangir of Ethiopia[6]. Honey is not important as food, although it is to the Dorobo, whose adults eat much honey. Among the Mbeere only children and pregnant women eat honey. However, honey is used medicinally, especially as a basis for a cure for coughing.

Honey has many important ritual uses—in confirming or blessing transactions in land, initiation ceremonies, marriage arrangements or purchase of cattle. For example, honey or honey-beer accompanied circumcision ceremonies —the preparatory piercing of the initiand's ears, blessing the initiand before the operation, and after the hair-cutting ceremony, when wounds had been healed[1]. Again, honey-beer was an important part of the bridewealth and,

indeed, years after a marriage, the wife's father or other "in-laws" can—and frequently do, as honey-songs wryly attest—demand more beer from the son-in-law.

Some modern developments and prospects

Although the honey industry still thrives in Mbere division, it will probably die, as it has in Embu division, unless some adaptations are made. A serious threat is posed by the ongoing land adjudication, which will have completed the granting of individual title to all the land by 1975. Once this has happened, it is bound to restrict the free movement of honey-hunters to the lower areas. Also, as the old men become too weak to go honey-collecting, it is unlikely that their successors will be prepared to spend as much time and effort in getting honey, as they will not have the same emotional commitment to the whole process. They will more probably settle for the inferior but much more easily procurable *njohi*, the sugar-beer, or buy bottled beer when they are affluent. Not only will honey-beer lose its sentimental appeal, but also the ritual significance of honey will continue to decline.

Given this situation, what can be done? The most likely hope for a revival of the honey industry would be to modernize it, and indeed a current development plan[4] does emphasize beekeeping among the Mbeere. Beekeepers have been appointed, a visiting expert advises the project, and the Salvation Army is actively encouraging the training of beekeepers in modern methods, and the formation of co-operative societies. It is hoped to collect annually at least 20 tons of honey, to be processed in preliminary stages and sent to the central refinery at Thika. The main problem is to get beekeepers to adopt improved hives, such as the inexpensive variant of the "Greek hive", to facilitate the production of more honey—and to get clean honey, which has hitherto not been regarded as an important aim. Ironically, until recently, the only refined honey available in Embu District was an Australian brand, at 5 shillings a pound. The production and sale of beeswax will also be encouraged, as will the use of smokers, the separation of light from dark combs and increased production of first-grade honey. It is hoped to use Mbeere traditions and Mbeere beekeepers as a basis for a modern industry. Unfortunately, a new problem has arisen since the development programme was drawn up: insecticides that are being advocated for cotton, the major cash crop, pose a serious threat to the bees.

In the meantime, there are still many Mbeere men who say that "a person with honey feels rich at heart", and still a few who sing the old honey-songs, such as this melodic one which was traditionally sung by beekeepers as they placed their hives in a tree:

Netaita njuki mwaturi uu-uu-iii
Wana iria iri mwaturi wa baba – i uu – uu – iii
,, kirimari – i uu – uu – iii
,, maruari uu – uu – iii
,, weruri uria ungi-i-uu – uu-iii
Njuki uu-uu; Njuki uu-ii; Njuki uu – Mwaturi wakwa – ii

Translation:

I call all the bees to the bee-hive;

Even those in my father's bee-hive;
Even those on the hills;
Even those in the valleys;
And even those in the other plains.
Bees bzz; Bees bzz; Bees bzzz – in my bee-hive.

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