

## The Chuka: Struggle for Survival in the Traditional Days to 1908

H.S.K. Mwaniki

Location: The land of the Chuka people, Chuka, is separated to the south from that of the Embu Mbeere by the river Thuci and to the north from that of the Muthambi by the river Nithi. To the west, Chuka has a common border with the Tharaka which is not as clear as the rest. To the west is the Mt. Kenya Forest continuing upwards to the peak. A small section of their land becomes a plain as it approaches Tharaka country, but the rest is greatly dissected by fast-flowing deeply entrenched streams flowing from the Mt. Kenya slopes to empty themselves into the Thuci, Ruguti, and Mutonga which in turn flow into the Kiluluma - the river Tana - on its way to the Indian Ocean. The terrain is difficult to negotiate, as shown by the long zigzag road that enters Chuka from Embu. Up to now, the land has retained most of its natural vegetation, which is woodland or forest (or thick bush, especially on the valley sides). The soils are the good, deep and fertile volcanic type found on most of the Mt. Kenya slopes.

According to tradition, the Chuka are newcomers to their modern land (though a number of informants claim that the people have been there from time immemorial). They came with the Embu and the Tharaka. The informants say that the Chuka are the children of CiaNgori, the Tharaka those of CiaMbandi and the Embu those of CiaNthiga. These three mothers were sisters, and so the three groups are brothers. However, on arrival they settled in their modern three places and the Embu, being envious of their brothers' prosperity, turned enemy to the Chuka. Most informants agree that on arrival, the Chuka settled where the Tharaka are today, but then left the present Tharaka area, and gradually moved up the Mt. Kenya slopes, following wild game. They were hunters. They penetrated the forest to an altitude of over 8,000 feet. After settling here and remaining for some time pressure by certain enemies forced them to retreat and settle in their modern area. Even there they were not safe and found that they had to lead a very precarious life. Consequently, their



population remained very small up to 1908, which was the beginning of the colonial period. For instance, as late as 1948, the population census put them at 18,480. In 1929, the annual report put them between 10,000 and 11,500. Earlier on, they were probably just slightly fewer, though some early colonial observers like Lambert<sup>1</sup> think they might have been more, but that they had earlier been devastated by disease, famines and wars. As important was the factor that boys were circumcised when relatively old - in their 20's - and the long period as a warrior or dancing girl before marriage. Children were strictly spaced; a mother would always avoid conceiving again until her last child was able to escape danger from an enemy on its own. Lastly, soon after the mother's first child was circumcised, she would stop bearing children by custom.

### The enemies of Chuka

The Chuka and their neighbours unanimously agree that the Chuka were hated and had many enemies. Informants in Gikuyuland (Kirinyaga) agree that "except the Maasai, everyone hated the Chuka. Everyone fought them; the Embu, although they were neighbours, the Muthambi, the Mbeere and we Gikuyu. The other Meru also hated them. People wanted to attack them and deprive them of their livestock and to exterminate them. It looks as if they were not 'of here' - everyone hated them."<sup>2</sup> The Chuka themselves, the Mbeere and the Embu, the Muthambi, Katheri and Igoji also give similar evidence of this hatred of the Chuka. Many invasions are recalled by the Chuka, mostly those that were launched against Chuka by the above individual groups. These groups also relate their ventures into Chuka country. As agreed by both the invaders and the invaded, the Embu used to ally themselves with the Mbeere or Gikuyu and launch attacks on the Chuka. But the Chuka defended themselves and survived despite their numerical inferiority and the various enemies' attempts to annihilate them, and they did so very successfully. Below is an attempt to show how and why the Chuka survived.

### Defence of the Chuka

The Chuka took two main steps to defend themselves: first, preparation, and then the actual defence.

Preparation: In preparing to counter-attack their enemies, the Chuka used four main methods: the Mugwe, the Alliance, the Warrior System, and the Environment (or the Chuka's "silent warriors"):

(i) The Mugwe: Before performing important acts such as going to war, 'hand-over' ceremonies or ntuiko of generation age-sets, planting, and the like, the Chuka always consulted the Mugwe. Thus the Mugwe became a politico-religious leader to whom the whole country rallied. This helped to create a type of centralisation and maximum channelling of the country's means of defence.



(ii) The Alliance: The Chuka took to befriending those who were not actually their enemies. Here Tharaka, the 'brothers' ranked first, followed by Tigania (Kiriene) and Miutini. The last two were 'blood-brothers' or giciaro. They had taken oaths to behave like 'brothers' of the Chuka. No one group would harm any of the others. Each group would act as watchdogs or scouts for the others and would help the others in any way they could. The groups, even domestically, behaved like blood-brothers. For instance, when the Miutini people came to Chuka, they did not beg food, for they were 'in their own home'. They simply opened huts and took food and drinks freely; when satisfied they left the gourds covered, with the lids upside down. The Chuka did likewise in Miutini. When called to help, the 'brothers' came in full force and fought on the Chuka side. For instance, when the Chuka were going to trade with the Tharaka, the Miutini warriors who were not enemies of the Mwimbi (as the Chuka were) would come to meet the Chuka at the border of their land and escort them till the Chuka were safe in Tharakaland. At the time of return, the Chuka would be escorted back to their own land.

The Chuka were clever on this issue of blood-brotherhood. Even with the Mbeere or Embu, with whom they were always at loggerheads, they made giciaro with those nearby. These would act as the Chuka scouts and would warn the Chuka of any coming attack long before it was launched, so the Chuka would be prepared and a surprise attack was not easily achieved.

(iii) The Warrior System: Like all her neighbours, the Chuka tried to keep a very strong and effective warrior system. But unlike the Embu, Mbeere and Gikuyu, who would not let their uncircumcised boys, physically big and mature as they were, participate in wars, the Chuka did allow their uncircumcised boys to fight. This was because the Chuka warriors were numerically inferior and also because they were 'apprenticing' the boys so that at the time of their initiation to adulthood, they would already be familiar with warfare. A boy was given full honour if he killed an enemy, just like a warrior, and performed the rites connected with the deed together with the warriors who had killed. This was a great achievement.. The only exception being that when warriors climbed up to the warrior hut, gaaru, the boys remained on the ground.

To make the warrior action more effective in time of need, the Chuka, unlike Embu, Mbeere or Gikuyu, had a kind of 'barracks' for their warriors. Instead of the warriors living in groups of twos or threes in various places, the Chuka warriors of a particular locality lived in one huge hut that housed anything from fifty warriors to several hundreds. This hut was called gaaru (sing. and plur.). The gaaru also acted as the local administrative headquarters for all purposes. The gaaru had its own government and rulers. One of the rules was that every circumcised young man, with all his fighting gear, could not, unless with express permission from the gaaru leader, spend a night outside the gaaru. If for instance he went to woo a potential wife so far away that



it would not be safe to come back by night, he would be permitted to go but would have to spend the night in the local gaaru near his wooing place.

The gaaru had no door: the rule was to have it open all the time for warriors to go in and out. In it lived not only all the uncircumcised unmarried men but also the married, and the fathers of boys that could fight. They would leave the gaaru after the circumcision of their sons. In addition, a number of elders lived there as the rulers and advisors of the gaaru. The fire of the gaaru was always alight. If it was extinguished accidentally, the relighting cost a goat. This lit fire was a symbol to the warriors of being alert and like the fire.

The whole of Chuka had such gaaru in every locality ranging from the plains to the forest. Examples were at Rubati, Iveti, Kaboni and Muiru. Built roughly in lines, they were located in places and at such distances as to make it easy to hear a sound signal from adjacent ones. This made it easy to summon all the gaaru warriors at a signal.

To be even more prepared for any trouble, each gaaru kept very strict watch on the area around it: the whole of Chuka was watched. The watch was even more strict in those areas where extensive cultivation was practised. Such an area was called a rware. In these, people went to work almost at the same time and did their farming close to each other for defence from human and animal enemies. Then they left at almost the same time. For safety, before the people went to work there, the warriors had to make sure all was well, and that no enemy was prowling around. To facilitate this, it was the practice for the warriors on duty to be in the vicinity, in their hiding places, before the people left for home; they spent the night watching in these places and would leave for home the next day after the workers had come and resumed their work. If they saw danger, they would not let the people work there next morning. Instead, they would call upon the warriors in the gaaru to come and fight the intruder. This was an intensive form of the Embu and Mbeere athigani.

After circumcision, the young warriors were given a circumcision age-group name by their seniors. But they could not yet use this name. It was a secret and only known to them. However, an age-group name was a great pride, so they would be very eager to be known by it. The name could only be used and publicized after they had fought and defeated an enemy. The young warriors would therefore be on the alert and eager to fight. At the time of encounter, they would fight hard to 'win their name'. In connection with this was the kuya kirugu, the equivalent of the Embu/Mbeere gutema nguru. This was the warriors' action of cutting themselves off from normal lives and swearing never to go back to normal life before killing an enemy. It was a type of 'Nazarite Vow'. The difference between the Chuka and Embu/Mbeere here was that after taking the vow, the Embu/Mbeere would move out and attack if no enemy came, but the Chuka would wait until an invader came. During such a period in both places, the warriors



would live in the bush like wild animals. They never had their hair dressed, never met a girl, never participated in traditional dances, festive occasions and the like. They simply ate and practised warfare and 'living wild'. In Chuka (unlike Embu/Mbeere where the warriors initiated the move) the elders would initiate preparations for war after any short period of peace, as they knew an enemy would probably be near, and the warriors had to be ready.

#### The Chuka's "silent warriors".

Being fewer than most of their enemy, the Chuka used their intelligence greatly. Elders will often tell you:

"Finding that the Chuka enemies came mostly for cattle, we stopped rearing them right from the time they drove us from the forest. Only 'counted' cattle were left, which were always hidden in tunnels and holes so that they would not be detected. We buried salt-lick drinking places ritually. We knew that we would be annihilated if we kept them any longer. So we concentrated on our defence and cultivation. The nthaka (warriors) were ordered to dig holes with sharp spikes which were concealed. If any one did not dig, he was fined one goat. A careful watch was kept on these holes. If we found a swine there, she died, and we ate her; if we found ~~a hyena there~~, he died; if we found a leopard, he died; a buffalo, a buck, an antelope, they died. When the enemy came, they fell in and died. The hole, the spikes, were Chuka's warriors. We others waited for the remnants with our miro (sharp sticks)."<sup>3</sup>

Elders in Chuka and those of the Chuka neighbours will relate with much fear and respect the effectiveness of these Chuka's 'silent warriors'.

To the treacherous deep holes and trenches which killed anything from small animals to human beings to elephants, they added sharp spikes planted along suspected enemy routes. The effectiveness of the spikes was that they would kill or seriously injure an enemy (and probably the leader). According to custom, an army meeting with such a misfortune would retreat. This would save the Chuka at least for that day, and a period would elapse before the enemy prepared a second attack.

To these 'silent warriors', informants add the nkando and Mabiriga. Nkando was the system of felling large trees and piling them one on top of the other, thereby forming an impenetrable barricade so high that the enemy could not jump it, and so wide that climbing over was difficult. The Nkando surrounded a large area within which people lived, or blocked a large stretch of land vulnerable to the enemy. Together with the nkando, thorny hedges and fences were set up. To enter the area of the nkando, one had to use gates which were called ibiriga (sing.) or mabiriga (pl.). These were heavily guarded during the day and guarded and closed during the night. The guards had a small hut in which they stayed nearby. The warrior guards took turns. Mrs. Crawford, visiting Chuka in 1911, wrote:



"Until recently the frontiers of the Chuka territory were enclosed by a thorny hedge entered only by gateways which were barricaded at night and guarded by sentinels by day... To still further protect themselves from enemies this people dig pitfalls near the villages, lined with sharp pointed stakes, and skilfully covered with sticks and greenery so as to escape detection."<sup>4</sup>

After penetrating the nkando, paths leading to individual homes could not easily be found by a stranger. They were so winding and left uncleared, as if no way existed. Hence they attracted little or no attention. In these homes the people lived on agricultural produce (after the people had retired from cattle-rearing). The animals kept were mainly seni. Yet the enemy worked on the legendary story that preached that the Chuka were so rich that they built huts using cattle cords instead of vegetable fibre. This story had actually arisen from the fact that the Chuka used mirinda fibres which looked like cattle thongs.

### Actual defence

The above were precautionary measures. All we need know ~~to~~ to complete the picture is that they kept themselves ready to fight with spears, swords, shields, clubs, and bows and arrows. The actual fighting arose whenever an enemy came either as individuals or a group, simply to steal what they could - the Katheri and Mwimbi were notorious for ~~that~~ - or as a large army of one or several tribes. The Gikuyu, Embu and Ma were practised this latter method.

To combat the individuals, the men, even the non-warriors went armed and did a lot of reconnaissance. For instance, when going to make hives, two as the minimum normally went. They would inspect the rubbish and chippings left out from the previous day. During the work, they would keep a keen watch. If one saw an enemy lurking among the chippings as they worked, he used a cryptic way of telling his friend to be ready (such as "do you know that bushes come closer?"). Other places where the enemy hid as individuals were inside empty beehives near a shamba or under the rubbish-heaps kept in shambas. These, on discovery that they were enemy hiding-places, were burnt, or men would thrust their spears into them to make sure that no enemy was concealed there.

When invasion was conducted by a large army, the Chuka summoned all the gaaru warriors by means of kurekia muragu. This was the system of beating a drum from one gaaru in the traditional way that spelt danger and told that the warriors were required quickly at the place the drum sounded from. The gaaru would pick up this message and relay it to the next gaaru which in turn would relay the message till the last gaaru received it. The warriors would then obey the drum by going to the gaaru whose drum they heard, only to be redirected to the next and next till they all got to the original gaaru that drummed first. The army would be dispersed from here to the scene of trouble.



Messages could be passed without a drum. If a scout noticed danger, he could tap on a tree-trunk in a certain way. This would carry the required message to the next scout who would relay it to the next till the message got to a gaaru, which, if necessary, could relay it to the whole of Chuka. If, for instance, it was a message that spelt danger tomorrow, only one loud 'bang' was given to the tree. If the day after, two 'bangs', and three the day after that, and so on. These messages made their way across the whole country unbelievably fast. If the enemy was such as to force the Chuka to seek the help of their friends, as in the Burugu invasion where they required the help of the Tharaka, the summoning message was sent in the evening. It was customary for Chuka's friends to sit by high rocks in the evenings and warm themselves. The Chuka used to pick up a piece of wood of the murangare tree and raise it up in such a way that the watching Tharaka could see it. With this, they could summon the Tharaka's help on precisely the day they were wanted by the Chuka without wasting time travelling to Tharaka. To other places or under circumstances that required an explanation that could not be carried out by the above method, a runner would be sent.

At the time of physical fighting, the Chuka met their enemies by the fords or by the plains called Mbogoni, when the enemy came from Mbeere, Embu and Gikuyu. This land was not inhabited and was therefore a good battleground (since fighting there did not interfere with the rest of the Chuka people who lived higher up by the woodland). If they found the enemy too strong, the Chuka would advise 'retreat'. The enemy would then be allowed to roam the country unmolested but watched. After the enemy had passed, the Chuka would block all the retreat routes leaving only those which led to dangerous precipices, falls, deep sections of river or other dangerous spots. The Chuka would then ambush the enemy along these routes. When they had judged that the enemy had exhausted themselves, the Chuka would attack strongly and direct the enemy along the more dangerous routes. Or else, the Chuka would molest the enemy as the latter went back with their loot and push them towards the dangerous spots.

Tree Tops Earlier on, the Chuka warriors with arrows would climb up trees and shoot at the retreating enemy. Two, three or more would be up one tree. The enemy discovered that this was a very dangerous method of protection because so many of them could be killed while no Chuka could be reached. They began carrying axes with which they cut down such trees, under cover of their shields. The Chuka would mostly die as the tree fell down, or be killed by the enemy who surrounded the tree as it fell. The Chuka consequently devised a more effective method. They built large platforms on huge trees on which they constructed quite good shelters called 'treetop-huts'. At the time of trouble, the owner and a number of other warriors climbed up to it. The owner and warriors would haul up large stones and pile them up on the platform. Quivers full of arrows would be kept there also; children, women and those



who needed protection would climb up on the platform or be hauled up with ropes if they could not climb on their own. Household utensils would be taken there so that the women could cook and continue feeding the warriors and the occupants of the 'treetop-hut' if the invasion continued for a long time. Livestock could be tethered near or at the bottom of the tree.

From the platform, the Chuka would shoot any enemy within arrow range; the enemy would mostly not dare come near since they normally carried only spears, swords and shields. But some would be courageous enough and would form a cover of their shields so as to fell the tree with the platform. These would be allowed to come right to the bottom, whereupon their cover would be broken by one of the large stones being dropped. This method was very effective except that it was limited by the size of the tree and hence the platform and those it could carry. The fact that it was immobile also limited its area of operation. A number of trees that carried the 'treetop-huts' are still standing but the platforms have decayed away.

This method combined with the actual physical fighting of the ambushing Chuka and the closing of the normal routes and/or deflecting enemies to dangerous and ambushed areas mostly worked to the advantage of the Chuka. To confuse the enemy even more, they would shout that the enemy had discovered a 'ford' and pretend to prevent them from 'going across'. They used this trick with Mwimbi enemies and also with the Gikuyu at the deep Ngoko Pool of the River Ruguti, with tragic results to the enemy in both cases.

Conclusion: The Chuka lived a life of struggles against their enemies. No wonder that the elders believe "the Chuka were like the tongue between the jaws".<sup>5</sup> Other tribes also had to fight their enemies but most fought to enrich themselves or win territory; the Chuka fought simply to survive. That is why they had to cut themselves off from the outside world and kept themselves in almost total isolation. Mrs. Crawford observed:

"More richly wooded than Embu land, ... villages ... completely obscured by trees and bushes and plantations of bananas. The Chukas are a most exclusive tribe, and keep themselves almost entirely to their own territory, not intermarrying with other tribes, or going abroad in search of work. They have a reputation for being very wild and dangerous."<sup>6</sup>

Necessity forced them to be so, and consequently they remained in isolation economically, politically and socially. Small wonder either, that when the White man came (and had proved to have been invulnerable to their enemies the Embu and Gikuyu among others), they accepted him as a protector, very much as the Mbeere had done two years previously. And so the Chuka and their enemies were brought under the White man and 'equalised'. There was to be no more concentration on defensive methods; the White man offered to do this instead.



Consequently, the Chuka isolation ended, the forest and concealed paths were 'opened', the Nkando, the spiked tunnels and holes became decrepit and generally life changed, Probably for the better from the Chuka's point of view.

Footnotes:

1. H.E. Lambert: Private papers, University of Nairobi Library.
2. Jeremiah Kabui: Personal interview on 8.5.71 Also Ngari Mwocaita who once invaded Chuka. Both came from the Gicugu division of Kirinyaga District.
3. Mutwamuthuci and Mutua: Elders of Chuka, Mbogoni area. Interview on 26.4.71 and 27.4.71.
4. May Crawford(Mrs.), By the Equator's Snowy Peak, London C.M.S., 1913, p.142.
5. Riunga and Muratua, Chuka Elders of Ndagani Location, Mariami area? Interview on 29.4.71.
6. Crawford, op.cit., p.141.