

KENYATTA UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

KUSP/7/1986/87

STAFF SEMINAR

HISTORY ROOM 10

WEDNESDAY 29TH OCTOBER, 86

5.00 P.M.

TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF THE CONTRAVERSIAL
MIRAA, CATHAEDULIS, AMONG THE IGEMBE OF MERU, KENYA.

BY

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TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF THE CONTRAVERSIAL MIRAA,

CATHAEDULIS, AMONG THE IGEMBE OF MERU, KENYA

This brief paper is intended to give short notes on miraa. The notes are not based on a thorough scholarly study of miraa but a few oral interviews and observation of the writer in Igembe (Iembe). Igembe is both an ethnic/group (one of the nine major Meru sections) and a geographical administrative area (about 963000 acres) administered as Igembe division of Meru district. Maua town is the headquarters of the division. Igembe is separated from Tigania by the famous Nyambeni (Nyambene) range that houses the historic micii mikuru (deserted ancient homesteads of the first Bantu - migrators in Mt. Kenya zone). To the East Igembe contains a section of the Meru National Park that contains the famous Meru Mulika Lodge, and finally shares a common border with the Boran. To the South east and a section of South West, the Igembe border the Tharaka rather indistinctly.

Most of Igembe is covered by rather recent volcanic soils spread with plenty of rocks. Leaching makes soils rather unfertile and unproductive. These soils make travel by vehicles rather difficult because during rainy periods they become terribly wet and muddy, while during dry weather, most areas turn into deep pools of very fine blackish dust. The volcanic rocks make it difficult to travel all the time. The region bordering with the Nyambeni range becomes extremely wet during rainy times - fetching over 40 inches of rainfall in November! Mist and fog are common in the zone, forcing a concentration of population further away in drier areas like around Kangeta. The Thaicu part of Igembe, a type of scrubland, which neighbours the national park is basically a black cotton soil zone and can make life difficult during wet periods. However, whereas miraa are grown in most other areas of Igembe, Thaicu is excluded.

Miraa are the demanded edible buds of the Catha Edulis forsk., popularly called "the bane of the Yemen" in some non-Kenyan societies. One bud is known as muraa or karaa while the parent plant is kiraa or kilaa. This plant begins producing the edible buds while it is a small shrub of about three feet in height. It grows rather reluctantly and takes tens of years to become a large shrub of ten or so feet in

height before becoming branched and a crude umbrella - like shape. It can become a large tree after attaining an age of over forty years. It is said that the plant outlives its planter. Hence the very old plants in some Igembe shamba which are said to have been planted by the great grandfathers' generations. Some farmers do not even know who planted some of their miraa since they inherited them from those who also had inherited.

WHERE MIRAA ARE GROWN

One does not find miraa in many parts of the Republic of Kenya although the eating or chewing of the same is done in major urban area like Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Marsabit, Wajir, Isiolo and Garissa. In actual fact, even in Meru which is the most famous district in miraa production, it is only Igembe which produces. From the mid 1950s a few Mbeere began growing a little miraa for "home consumption" around Siakago market, on Makunguru hill. About the early 1970s or there about, the Mwimbi of Meru introduced miraa plants by the kiera of Kiamwimbi hill zone, spreading to Igoji area. It was at the same time some Imenti tried some miraa on some type of ornamental basis, the Chuka were not also left behind. It appears as if the Tigania neighbouring the Igembe by the Nyambeni range had began trying the planting of miraa before all the above, perhaps in early 1950s. However, one can safely conclude that only the Igembe grow miraa on large and commercial scale while all the others are either beginning to take part in the lucrative miraa enterprise or merely growing domestic or even ornamental miraa.

ORIGIN OF IGEMBE MIRAA

Asked where they got the miraa plants from, the Igembe informants give varied answers ranging from their local forested hill called Kiraro¹ through i ya kiwithire, "they are traditional" or "we just found them"² to "from mboa"³, their mythical place of origin. Informants agree that the miraa are as old as the Igembe society - or older, and that nobody can pin-point the person who planted miraa first. They also agree that once planted, miraa survived thereafter to the present. Apart from the normal care, Kiriambia told how even diseased stems of miraa are partially removed and either normal healing or grafting is done. In other words, there are expert horticulturalists dealing with miraa mainly.

THE PLANTING OF MIRAA.

The normal method is to clear the area chosen and then plant seedlings 'like tea or coffee' according to M'Ituiri. Seedlings can even be stimulated to grow by exposing roots of mature miraa plants and letting the shoots develop their roots. These shoots are then carried to the new shamba and planted. Care is required for young seedlings till they mature. Guarding of mature miraa plants is much required, otherwise, thieves will steal the mature miraa. The guarding forces the farmers to build guard huts or "banda" in every shamba. Warriors are mainly deployed for this task.

FUNCTIONS OF MIRAA

Miraa were extremely essential in the lives of the Igembe people. Many argue that the traditional uses for miraa are still current in many parts of Igembe and hence they cannot do without the miraa. The conviction that miraa made and makes the society is so strong that one is forced to accept the Igembe view unconditionally. One gets frequent and unanimous statements on miraa such as

"Anyone you see in Iembe, man or woman,
is born by miraa" (M'Ethiria). "Without miraa
there would be no Iembe" (Kiriambia) or "Iembe
is miraa".

Although miraa use was both essential and widespread, not everyone was allowed by the Igembe traditions to chew them. The actual chewing and use was prescribed for only a few members or cadres of the society. The two main cadres that used miraa were rituals and normal purposes. When rituals called, everyone affected despite his/her age or status could chew miraa. Under normal circumstances, only elders and certain classes of warriors chewed miraa.

Below are some of the uses into which miraa were put to illustrate the above convictions.

1. Casual uses. Elders could chew miraa to keep their mouths busy or to act as a "cover up" of eating small things like pieces of yams in front of children who should not know that elders get hungry and eat small things. The elder would chew this pretending that he was chewing miraa. If an elder was going to the tubu, market, he could carry miraa and chew as he went, sharing with friends on the way. When one arranged for a "harambee" shamba work, one provided miraa for those who would come to help.

2. Naming ceremonies. Plenty of miraa were provided whenever there was a ceremony for giving a new born child a name.
3. Ear piercing rituals. These could not be done before providing bundles of miraa.
4. Circumcision for boys forced much use of miraa. The circumcisional candidates took four bundles of miraa through their leaders to break the news that they were mature enough and were therefore seeking permission for the initiation ritual. The seeking of permission could take a number of days or seasons if the warriors to whom the miraa were sent did not approve quickly: When the permission was finally granted, each boy sent miraa to whoever he chose as his circumcisional god father - mukuati. To be allowed to begin the nkunyi initiation dance, the boys had to take miraa to the warriors.
5. Marriage negotiations began with miraa. Hence conviction that "miraa built marriages, not cattle". The miraa could be sent to a girl's father either by a warrior's nthaka, father even before the man knew or by the would-be-bridegroom himself. In the first case, the elder would have had an eye on the girl as a suitable wife for his son and the traditions allowed the elders to 'break ground' for their son's sake. In the second case the nthaka himself would have taken a fancy of the girl whether already initiated or not but marriageable. Whether it was the nthaka or his father, the initiating of the negotiations took two bundles of miraa, difference being the sty of tying.

Not everyone was capable of tying miraa for initiating marriage negotiations but only a few elders. The miraa were tied technically in a way that the father of the girl will understand the message carried on opening the bundle. Four strands of miraa were / are tied 'technically' together as one small bundle, a second is done the same and the two are finally tied together with other untied miraa placed in between the two. A banana leaf is finally placed around the final bundle and secured with a yam creeper.

On receipt the girl's father would untie and give the girl one bundle of four plus loose ones which she was supposed to chew sharing with her lover. The father would chew the rest four plus loose ones sharing with the girl's mother. The father would also invite the whole family and village to share in the chewing of "the miraa of the child" as a way of "opening up" the secret love affair and seeking blessings for the same. However, this was done after the girl gave

permission for chewing the miraa to her father either verbally or by ritually chewing her share. If she did not love the nthaka and so refused, the matter ended there although the miraa could be eaten like any normal miraa. Some elders say that eight miraa or the double of the above were the ones tied together instead of four but the other details are the same.

6. Initiation to all socio-political groups or organisations needed miraa. These began with the Lamare Kiama or Council. Lamare was for mature warriors who actually formed the country's leadership of the military wing. Each had to pay a fee of miraa to their seniors and elders for admission. It is unanimously agreed that to be initiated into any of the Igembe biana (plural of Kiama), Councils one had to pay miraa first. These are termed Kiama Kinene, the big or senior council, the famous Njuri nceke and the Aariki that is allowed only those extremely gifted custodians of the traditions aged over 60 years.⁴

7. Trade. Among the many functions informants will give the miraa is trade, exchange or "substituting with other items" as is said by various people. If one had a miraa shamba, he could fetch goats from those who had none but needed to either consume or perform rituals where the miraa were required. A goat gave the owner authority over a number of miraa plants which the same plucked for sometime. After exhausting those which were ready at the time of the deal, the right of the plants ended. In the same way, axes, beehives, spears, goat skins, shields among other commodities were exchanged with miraa. Hence the contention "a miraa planter was a rich person, he got all from bartering the miraa." This is a form of internal trade that was operative from the time the Igembe settled to about 1890s when evidence shows that the miraa was crossing the borders especially towards Boran and Somalilands besides Tigania.

After 1910, the miraa took part in what can be termed external trade by taking advantage of the forced union of many ethnic groups after "pacification". Consequently, the other parts of Meru including Imenti and mwimbi/Muthambi took to much chewing of miraa. One of the early administrators in 1920s known simply as 'kaumbuthu' ordered the uprooting of all miraa to stop the laziness and "drug effect" he had observed. There was much opposition and one friend of his, a builder from Igembe called M'Munki convinced the administrator to

withdraw the directive.

FURTHER PROBLEMS OVER MIRAA.

When the widespread consumption of miraa took root, the Igembe control over it weakened or was non-existent outside Igembeland. The Nthaka who used to chew only sparingly and only when looking after cattle in the wilderness now ate openly and excessively. In general, youths chewed miraa in an unrestricted manner. Other people, for instance, Somali, in places like Isiolo, Wajir, Mandera also chewed miraa widely. Sugar was introduced as an ingredient in miraa chewing with a negative effect on the Chewers' teeth, as elders claim. In short, matters tended to get out of hand. Protests were raised with a climax, to one that got to the then Governor of the Kenya Colony, Sir Philip (Mitchell?) with miraa being equated to bangi or marijuana. It is said that the issue was driven by Isiolo women who complain that miraa had 'de-maned' their malefolk. The males would chew miraa all day sitted down on mats and forget going home until after two or more days. When they got home, they were accused of simply sleeping and having no interest in their women, only to wake up the next day to go to the miraa chewing groups - or were they clubs?

The governor found it necessary to ban miraa growing and chewing. The Igembe sent a delegation to defend the industry. In the delegation were "toothless" elders who carried small traditional mortars used for pounding miraa by the toothless. The governor was told that those elders had chewed miraa since their Lamare stage, about 35-40 years of age and were still eating even when they were over eighty years old. They were successful people in their society. They were sober and still contributive into their ethnic lives. Why had miraa not ruined them? It was concluded that the miraa were not to blame and so the industry forged ahead!

The controversies over miraa during Kenyatta's government and the banning and lifting are a familiar story and needs not detain us here. Newspaper reports, letters to the editor and their many views for and against miraa are also current issues.

SCIENTIFIC VIEWS ON MIRAA.

Miraa seems to have bothered the British government for three decades before they put it to a scientific test. Put to this test - apparently in the then Corydon Memorial Museum (present National Museum), miraa were condemned as "harmful and dangerous", and producing grave symptoms in the addict. The "harmful" effects were due to alkaloids like cathine, cathinine and cathidine. Also, large quantities of tannin, plus other "uninvestigated" chemicals. Cathine is said to have stimulant - narcotic action similar to that of cocaine and no analgesic or anaesthetic properties. It also has cardio-toxic effect similar to caffeine. But cathine, cathinine and cathidine are said to produce stimulant - narcotic action, as do cocaine and caffeine. No wonder then the following was the conclusion of the test.

Although scientific investigations on cathaedulis have not yet proved conclusively to which of the many constituents of the drug its deteriorating effect on the human organism can be traced, there seems sufficient evidence to show that its continued ingestion is harmful.⁵

The same report states that the natural distribution of cathaedulis extends from Abyssinia to the Cape - thereby confirming, to an extent, the origin of the plant that the Igembe domesticated.

COMMERCIALISING THE MIRAA.

What can be termed a commercial trade with miraa is said to have been the initiative of the Lubetaa age group of the Igembe of the mid 1940s. Before this time, miraa was sold relatively cheaply, about 100 pieces bundle for only ten cents. Later it was sold for two rupees. One kila plant could be exchanged (or hired for) with between 50 cents and one shilling, fifty cents.

When Lubetaa took over, they boosted the price immediately to KSh. 5.00 per bundle which soon jumped to KSh. 10.00. This went further to KSh. 50 and 60. An upward progress was gradually made to KSh. 100, KSh. 200, KSh. 300, KSh. 500 and then KSh. 1,000. These prices naturally brought about more planting and commercial harvesting so that by mid 1950s the colonial government could write:

Most of the district's (Meru's) production (of miraa) comes from this location. This item is very important revenue earner for the people of Igembu (sic). It is estimated that they received in 1954 a return of £40,000 on this crop and in 1955 a return of £136,000.⁶

To be noted here is the fact that these lucrative returns were coming during the period of emergency due to the Mau Mau revolt. This should also be taken as a conservative estimate.

The commercial trade with miraa, with the already mentioned ups and downs, has not gone down. Instead demand has increased and production has gone up also. Miraa currently sells very well in most urban areas led by Nairobi. One simply needs visit areas inhabited by Africans like Eastleigh, Karriokor, Kibera and even the city centre to be caught by banana leaves hanging near either sale or chewing cadres. Mombasa is another great centre of miraa demand. Miraa is also exported to the overseas world, Arabia leading, an activity that needs air services to prevent drying or fermenting before the miraa get to the consumers. In Igembe, miraa growing has now turned a vigorous industry with a large labour gang that picks the shrub from before 6.00 a.m., sorts out their harvest - or is it grades? - bundles these in collecting centres to wait for buying agents who visit all the collecting centres in vehicles. The agents use landrovers, landcruisers, range rovers and even troopers. When the miraa are bugged and finally processed, they are loaded in pick up vehicles and driven at dangerous speeds - worse than the notorious matatu - to the semi-destinations, especially Nairobi, for either consumption or travel to the final destinations.

SOME IMPACT OF THE MIRAA INDUSTRY IN IGEMBE.

It is pointless to belabour the point that the miraa industry has really affected Igembe, and now most of the rest of Meru and the consumers outside Meru district. Only a few comments will be made about Igembe in particular. Igembe has turned into a beehive of miraa activity, this time, more of commercial nature than the earlier, almost whole traditional. Most land has been taken by the miraa industry at the expense of subsistence crops. Hence the trouble the people faced in the recent famine of 1984. The Igembe are now moving their grain farms into the Lowland Thaicu zone, which is unpredictable in produce. Indeed some of the informants are already lamenting, such as M'Ikiome, "we might be forced to go for maize in the Rift Valley since miraa, coffee and tea have taken most of the land".

Many people really have money and can be considered rich. School children have realised this and either do have much interest

in schooling or even refuse to go to school, concentrating on the miraa sales. Chiefs have used their orders to force the children go to school in vain. The children's attitude to education and the educated who are not as rich as the miraa growers or traders. This is an impact which should cause concern to all development conscious leaders.

The present nthaka have invaded the miraa chewing heartily, to the annoyance of elders, but they call themselves athoni or those who have gone to school, simply the 'civilized' and so are not bound by the old Igembe rules over the chewing of miraa. They hardly do any constructive development work, but they have money from the miraa - another concern for the leaders.

The irony of it all is that much money as there is in Igembe from miraa, there is hardly any development stirred by the money. Over what was said earlier of communication can be added the lack of presentable urban centres, residential buildings of permanent and modern nature, medical centres for health or institutions of socio-economic nature. One then wonders just what the Igembe do with all their money. Is it that they do not have the know-how of what to do with the money or just resist modernism? If so, for how long will they live in their closed world? They have managed to monopolise the miraa industry to date, but now that other people have began experimenting on, and growing the miraa should sound a danger alarm for the industry's future.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to make a definite and acceptable conclusion over the miraa issue with some many groups having taken sides. Some would like to see the industry really boost. Others would like to see it banned - like the colonial administrator "Kaumbuthu" who would have miraa uprooted. But from the above, some points are clear. Such are, that miraa served and serves very important socio-ritual aspects of the Igembe society. That the miraa are internationally accepted as a commercial item for whatever purposes a group wants to put to it. That its use has overtaken the Igembe traditional practises, to a large extent negatively. That it has been accused of causing some negative developments in its users. That it is the leading cash earner among the Igembe, and finally that developments in Igembe do not reflect the wealth got from the miraa. A point that is only implied in the text and should be amplified here is the menace caused by miraa carrying vehicles on

the highways, especially between Meru and Nairobi, Nairobi - Kisumu and Nairobi - Mombasa.

Perhaps the question to be answered for a reasonable conclusion is how best the miraa industry can be run to contribute to the economy of not only Igembe but Meru and Kenya. The traditional roles miraa still plays should be maintained, and even other peoples should adopt some of those which would be relevant in theirs. Ways and means for controlling both production and use of the miraa in relation to the other aspects of economy in Igembe should be explored. Otherwise, left alone, the miraa industry can be abused by the money hungry modern exploiters imprinting a permanent negative scar on the society and their land.

FOOTNOTES

1. Elderman Isaac M'Etheria, (66 years) Kitheo, Athiru, Maua Interview on 13/4/86 by the writer and Bernard Kiunga Kathata.
2. Elderman Stabano M'Ituiri (66 years old) Nkanda, "K - K.", Antuabui, Lare, interviewed by B.K. Kathata, on 30/4/86. He recalled that the miraa were kiasiri, traditional, "the great great, grandfathers had them."
3. M'Ikiome Kuciana told B.K. Kathata (April 1986), that miraa came from Mboa and that as the Igembe travelled through Kitui, they planted some there but the Kamba kept them for the Meru until recently when they began selling the miraa to Machakos. He added that the miraa also grows in Igembe as forest plants. One Usman Kirambia, Nthambito, Thaicu, 7/4/86 merely said that miraa has been in Igembe Kenya na Kenya, 'from time immemorial' or has been there all the time. This is because once planted, miraa outlived their planters and are still growing!
4. For initiation into the Aariki guild, see Wambua Ndambuki. "Aariki: the Meru Council that shines with grandeur" in Kenya Times, 26/6/85, p.11.
5. Mandera District Political Record Book, Vol.III Ref. MDA/43, a letter of HQs of the Officer-in-charge. N.F.D. Ph.10/5/4/175 dated 15/2/1943 in the Kenya National Archives.
6. Chuka Political Records referred to as MRU/31, Appendix "A" of Burke to Burgwin, 1955 in Kenya National Archives.