

EAST AFRICAN STUDIES 35

The traditional political  
system of the Embu  
of Central Kenya



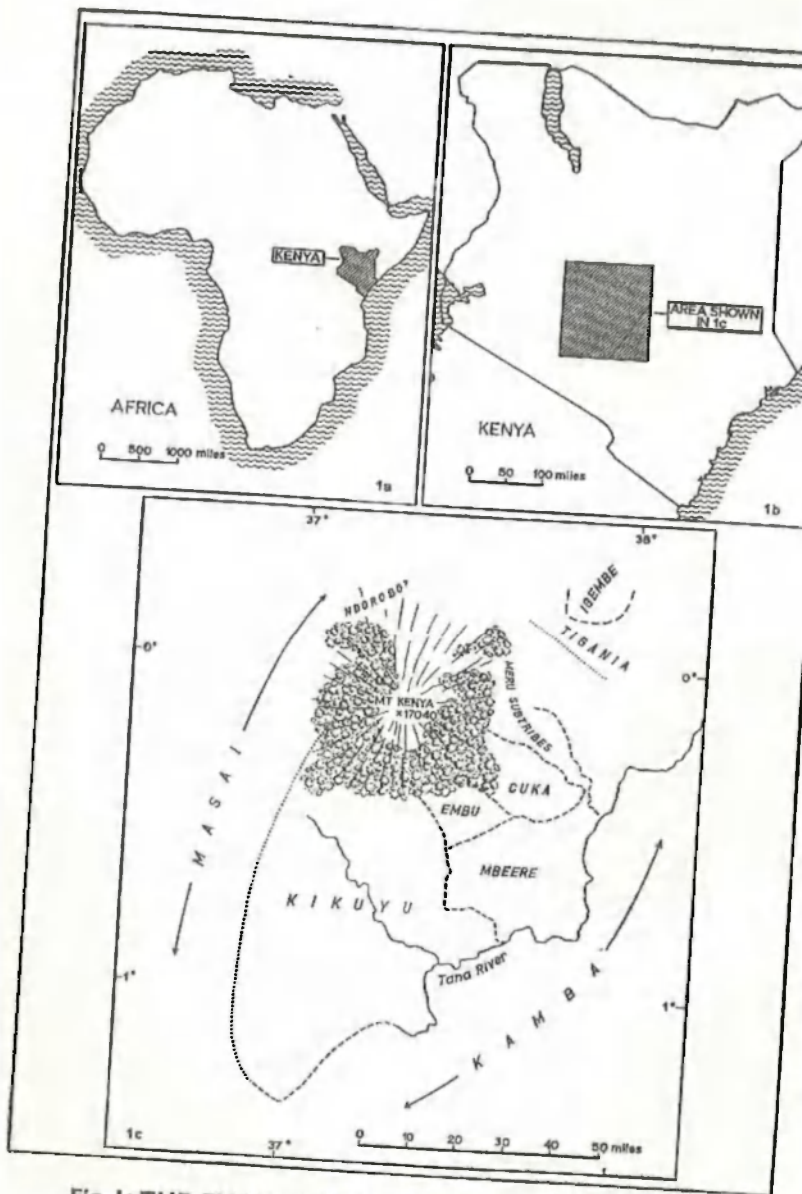


Fig. 1: THE EMBU AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS, ca. 1880

# **The traditional political system of the Embu of Central Kenya**

**SATISH SABERWAL**

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May 14, 1968*

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## PREFACE

The snowy peaks of Mt. Kenya, lying just south of the Equator, are a notable landmark close to Kenya's geographical centre. Much of the surrounding land, between 9,000 and 5,000 feet, has been and continues to be forested. Beyond the forest edge to the east, south, and west live the Meru, the Embu, and the Kikuyu, all speakers of Bantu languages, mutually understood with varying ease. Though the volume of the literature concerning the Kikuyu has been large (Schapera 1949), its quality has been uneven, and an adequate statement about their pre-contact social structure has become available only very recently (Middleton 1953; Edel 1957; Middleton and Kershaw 1965). Excepting an account of a religious functionary among the Meru (Bernardi 1959), the Meru sub-tribes have received little attention; and before my fieldwork, no anthropologist had worked among the Embu. This volume offers a reconstruction of the principal structures of the pre-colonial Embu political system. During the six decades since then, they have undergone a thorough social, economic, and political transformation, analyzed in Saberwal 1969a, 1969b and other forthcoming publications.

The social context of my fieldwork has been examined at length previously (Saberwal 1969c; see also S. xv-xviii)<sup>1</sup>, and here only a brief consideration is necessary. In 1963-64, when I made my enquiries, the Embu social structure showed very little institutional continuity with its pre-colonial past. An acephalous society, which had known only transient and situational leadership, had to accept the authoritarian, and effective, colonial rule. The Anglican missionaries first arrived in 1910; by 1964 the Embu had long chains of churches and schools run by the Anglicans, the Catholics, and a couple of smaller denominations. The Mau Mau uprising, which reached a peak in 1954, with the attendant violence and the concentration of population in villages, severely disrupted the Embu social order. The allocation of land rights in the subsequent Land Consolidation (1958-61) was such that the population was thoroughly scrambled, with little correlation with the pre-Mau Mau neighbourhoods (Saberwal 1969b). Finally, the Embu have grown steadily increasing amounts of coffee since 1933. Co-operatives help growers with supplies and marketing: in 1962-63, one co-op with about 4,000 members sold over four million shillings worth of coffee beans (Saberwal 1969a).

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1. Citations beginning with S, B, and DG refer to three frequently cited items, explained at the beginning of the bibliography.



In this situation, an attempt to understand the traditional Embu society necessarily had to rely much more on the recall of old men than on observation of contemporary events, although the latter were not excluded from my research or analysis. I have previously described the broad strategy of my fieldwork (S. xviii-xxiii), and here I need attend only to the sources of data used in this book and the validity of my procedures.

The bulk of my argument derives from a series of 18 cases drawn from six informants (32 additional cases were presented in *Saberwal 1967c*; these had to be dropped here owing to limitations of space). Wherever possible, these pertain to the pre-contact period. I have supplemented these with later cases whenever necessary, and one case was observed by me during fieldwork. This recent evidence is analyzed into its traditional and acculturational components, and the traditional component utilized to strengthen the basis for reconstruction. This general procedure is well established in the ethnological literature (Homans 1941:5; Watson 1952:130; Maquet 1961).

About two-thirds of the cases come from two informants, Mbogo wa Ngicuru and Kibariki wa Ndarathi. (For biographical sketches, see S. 279-82.) Both of them gave me their genealogies in some depth and the membership of their homesteads at the turn of the century (for Kibariki, see Fig. 3). As the interviews with each informant accumulated, I checked new information for internal consistency with earlier statements and for external validation through comparison with other informants or, occasionally, with written records. A few cases were omitted as clearly redundant, adding no information against the evidence presented. For two or three cases I had multiple accounts. In one (Case 18) I have presented both the versions because these were significantly different; in others I have indicated the minor variations in the course of presenting the most complete account. One lengthy set of interviews with a highly recommended old man was rejected completely because his repeat reliability was very low: I began to feel that he adapted his statements to agree with what he thought my view of the situation was.

In evaluating the evidence, I have benefited from Jan Vansina's criteria for assessing the oral tradition, that is, "all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past" (1965:19). These refer primarily to material learned by one's informants from their ancestors, and since an overwhelming portion of my data refer to a

period no earlier than the year 1900, my reliance on the oral tradition of the Embu is small. However, Vansina's criteria are valuable for scrutinizing the validity and trustworthiness of eyewitness accounts also.

During the past three decades the Embu have been engaged in extensive litigation, in a variety of forms, on the matter of land ownership. These contests have undoubtedly influenced the content of many of my sources, especially those on the immigration of groups and the land rights. Land ownership, in the twentieth century and no doubt even earlier, has been one of the "functions and purposes" that would serve, in Embu society, to make the informants' testimonies "a mirage of reality". (Vansina 1965:76-113.) It is my hope that the reader will find that testimonies have been interpreted in this volume with due caution. Where I have no reason to suspect such distortion, I follow Vansina's advice:

Sometimes . . . [the historian] may be unable to find any definite indications of distortion, in which case he must apply a methodological rule that is valid for all historical sources: In the absence of any indications of distortion, he must accept the text as being reliable. In point of fact, a historian can never arrive at a full knowledge of the past, but only at an approximation to the facts, and this approximation can only be based on whatever data are available. Therefore, in the absence of any indication of falsification, he must not postulate it *a priori*, or he will falsify his whole approach to his work. (1965:95.)

Since approximation to the facts is the only attainable goal, I accept my informants' statements as true when I cannot show them to be untrue.

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that all interviews were done through English-Kiembu interpreters and recorded by me in long-hand more or less verbatim. Needless to say, faulty translation can introduce distortions in data. Before beginning fieldwork, I had one term's instruction in Kikuyu at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. This facilitated a measure of control over the interpreters' work, but it would have cost me a year to attain fluency in the language. Given an eighteen months' limit on fieldwork, I decided to limit the time invested in learning the language and to work through interpreters.

## INTRODUCTION

The Embu live in east-central Kenya, on the south-eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, between the altitudes of roughly 6,900 feet and 4,000 feet.<sup>1</sup> Administratively, today their lands constitute the Embu Division in the Embu District. On a map the divisional boundaries approximate a scalene triangle, drawn with an unsteady hand. Its apex is thrust into the Mt. Kenya forest, the Kiye and Ruringazi streams on its west separate it from the Kikuyu country, the Thuci stream in the east borders the Cuka country, and its base runs through a hot, dry, lowland plain. Beyond this base live the Mbeere people in the Division which carries their name.

In 1962 about 90,000 people lived in about 200 square miles covered by Embu Division.<sup>2</sup> The imaginary triangle inclines moderately from the apex to the base, dropping from 6,500 feet to 4,200 feet over a distance of about fourteen miles. Within this overall slope one meets dozens of streams making deep cuts in the land, especially in the northern parts. Within about 500 yards one drops 300 feet to a stream. Lower down, small streams converge into large ones, and the ridges are broader. All the streams make their way into the Tana River, which drains this area into the Indian Ocean. The ridges between streams as well as some valleys offer long stretches of more or less level land.

### Subsistence Base

Nearly all the Embu land lies on "the rich chocolate loams derived from the lavas and tuffs of the foothills of Mount Kenya" (Maher 1938:part 1, p. 3), and they have been very proud of the fertility of their land compared with that of some of their neighbours. Their women cultivated a variety of crops at the time of colonial arrival: maize, several sorts of peas and beans, two or three kinds of millet, sorghum, arrowroot, yams, bananas, cassava, and sweet potatoes. The digging stick and a small iron blade (*kivio*) were used in cultivation, and rainfall was the only source of moisture for the crops: even fields in the valleys were not irrigated.

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1. This chapter summarizes material presented in S.1-107.

2. Administrative estimates placed the Embu population in 1917 at 51,000; a similar estimate in 1933 arrived at 35,680. The validity of these estimates and the apparently slow rate of population increase in Embu country are discussed in S.3-5 and Saberwal 1969b.

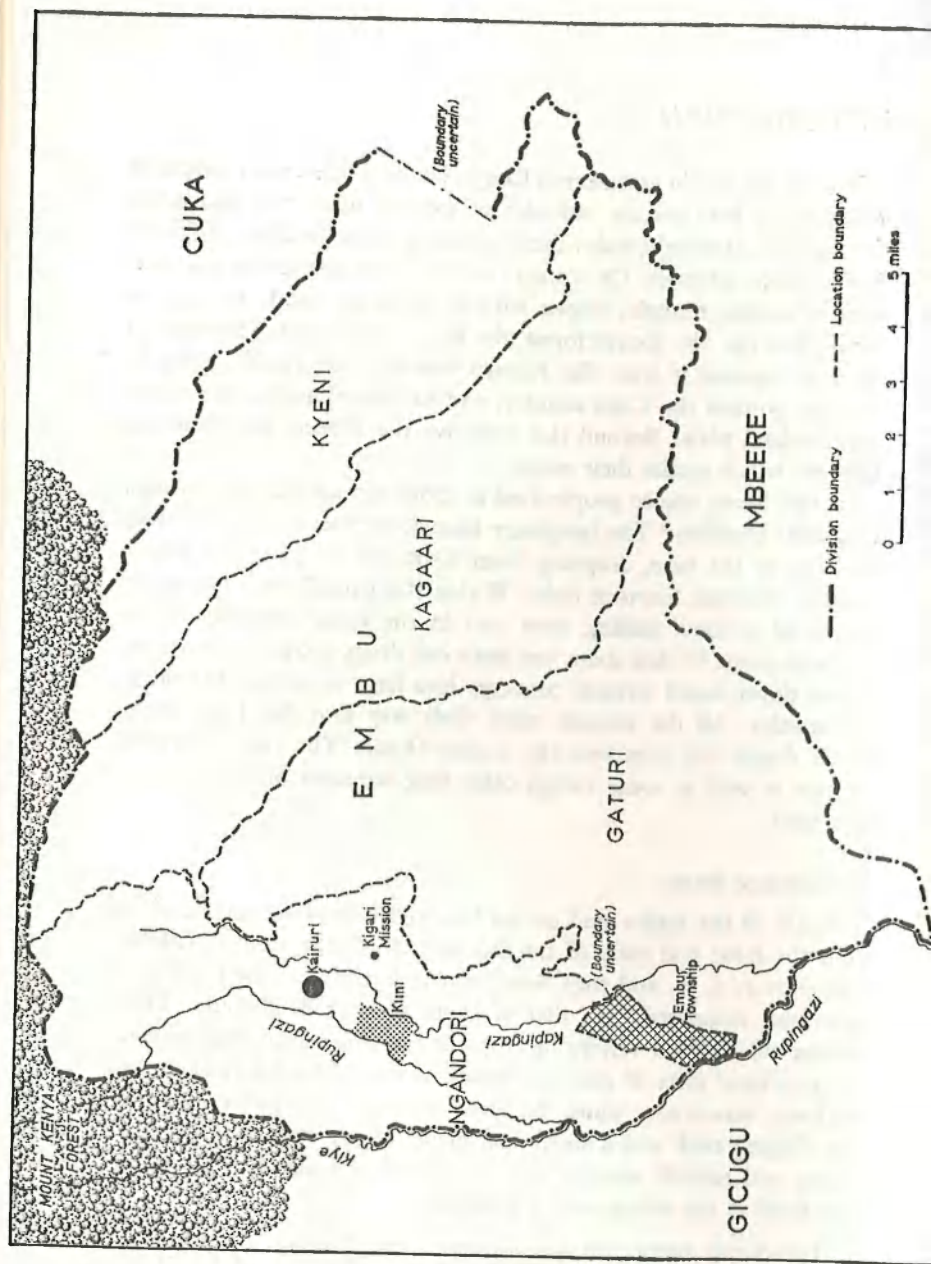


Fig. 2: EMBU DIVISION, 1964

Management of herds of cattle, sheep, and goats was a male responsibility, with the animals belonging to all men in the homestead of a small patrilineage being taken periodically to lower altitudes for pasturage. The Embu had no system of stock-associateships such as reported for the Jie and other peoples (Gulliver 1955:216). Livestock represented accumulated capital and was used for transactions concerning bridewealth, bloodwealth, and various life-cycle ceremonies and dispute settlement procedures. Livestock was also the last resort for food during famines.

Hunting and gathering contributed very little to the Embu larders. They caught fish, not for themselves but for visiting coastal traders in the late nineteenth century; to supply their ivory needs, the Embu also killed elephants, but they turned over the elephant meat to the Ndorobo hunters and gatherers who were often with them. The Embu were and continue to be ardent bee-keepers, enjoying both larvae and honey-beer.

The high fertility of the land in Embu country is dependent on the rains, highly erratic in this part of Kenya. The annual rainfall for Embu township (4,900 feet) between 1958 and 1963 varied between 29.16 and 76.94 inches, averaging 47.9 inches; the lowest and the highest in this range approach drought and flood conditions. (S. 6-7.) At higher altitudes the precipitation is greater. Rainfall distribution within a year is, in the main, bimodal, with concentrations in March-May ("long rains") and October-November ("short rains"), but a third, brief peak in July-August is often reached. Within a year, the distribution over the months is highly variable; thus 49 inches of rain fell in October-November 1961 and 7.7 inches in the same period the next year. This variability was an important part of the ecological context, leading to famines every 5-10 years, and to major population movements to and from Embu country. This unpredictability caused grave anxiety to the Embu, and in association with the generational system (Chapter 3), they practised elaborate ceremonies aimed at influencing the rains.

### Traditions of Origin

The matter of the origin of the Embu people as a whole excited no great interest among my informants, but some of them said that Ngai (God) created the Embu people (or a man, their common ancestor, Muembu) when he created the rest of mankind; or that the man Muembu and his close kinsmen migrated into Embu country from the Meru area. Lambert (1950:19) mentions a tradition for the Embu in which they derive themselves from an ancestor of that name and his

sister, whom he took to wife. This tradition was not mentioned to me.

Specific descent groups explain their presence in Embu country in terms of immigration myths which usually indicate that the immigrating ancestors came to Embuland during a famine. These myths include the names of the immigrating ancestors, the area they came from, the places where the party camped on the way, and sometimes statements concerning the family's growth, its split, and the sons' move into different neighbourhoods in Embuland. Occasionally genealogies linking the original immigrant with the living members of the descent groups can also be obtained. The accounts are generally brief, and the longest can be accommodated in one printed page. (Saberwal 1967a, S. 15-18.) While the details of these accounts must be treated with reserve (Saberwal 1967b), it is reasonable to accept their testimony that rainfall in this area fluctuated widely, that the famines were frequent, and that numerous waves of immigrants reached Embuland during the decades before the establishment of the colonial government. These immigrants came from the Meru area in the north-east, Mbeereland in the south, and Kikuyuland in the west, and took only a generation or two to be fairly well assimilated into the indigenous society.

It is appropriate to note here that for several decades prior to the establishment of the administrative station in Embuland, parties of Zanzibari traders had been visiting the Embu in search primarily of ivory and occasionally of slaves, bought in exchange for the standard East African trade goods of the time (cloth, metal rings, etc.). Two or three European-led trading expeditions and, just before the final conquest, a couple of punitive parties from the colonial administration located in Fort Hall some forty miles away, had also visited the Embu. These intimations from the outer world were followed in 1906 by the more enduring arrival of a massive governmental expedition which overwhelmed Embu resistance, established the administrative station, and set the stage for a thorough social, economic and political transformation (Saberwal 1969b).

## Descent Groups

### *Terminology*

The Embu used three terms, *mucii*, *nyomba*, and *muwiriga* to designate residential as well as descent groups. *Mucii* (pl. *micii*) referred to a house or homestead, including its patrilineal core. (B. 58 for Kikuyu usage.) *Nyomba* (sing. and pl.) had a much wider range of meanings. It referred to a woman's hut within the homestead. It also

indicated one wife's sons and their descendants as against another wife's; but when fission came to a homestead, it was individual sons who founded new homesteads and not a group of full brothers: this group did not persist corporately. Over the years one of these men would clear new land or buy land from others in a new neighbourhood, thus enabling his descendants and perhaps his peers to cultivate and build homesteads there. Later he would be known as the founder of a new *nyomba*. The term also denoted a still larger group, a maximal lineage or a sub-clan depending on one's informant's ability to show his link with the apical ancestor. For example, the five components of Kithami clan, Kirugi, Mbugi, Marema, Mbogo, and Mirori would each be called a *nyomba*. At this level the terms *nyomba* and *muviriga* were interchangeable. (B. 354 for Kikuyu usage.)

*Muviriga* (pl. *muviriga*) means a door or an entrance to a homestead. It also refers to a descent group of any size, with members living in more than one homestead: the people who have come out of the door of one homestead. Next, it denotes a group of elders assembled in a moot. Informants often suggested that this group was drawn from one descent group, but this is incorrect. Concerning Case 16 below, the son, who had sued his father for a bridewealth contribution, told me that the elders of his *muviriga*, that is, his clan, would hear the case. In fact the elders were nearly evenly distributed between the two moieties. Further, when the arguments were being assessed and a verdict prepared, the litigants' clan-mates had to leave the others lest they influence the others one way or another. In sum, then, *muviriga* may mean a moiety, a clan, a sub-clan, or an elders' council gathered to bear a family dispute. (B. 158 for Kikuyu usage.)

The use of the terms *nyomba* and *muviriga* shows one consistency: in the context of descent groups, *muviriga* invariably refers to a group larger than a *nyomba*. Even more helpful is the phrase "*andu a—*", that is, "people of—". *Andu a Kithami* means the descendants of Kithami, *andu a Kirugi* the descendants of Kirugi: the ancestral name identifies the intended group adequately.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Named Groups*

The Embu recognize their descent groups as belonging to two moieties, one known as Ngua or Thagana, the other as Gatavi or Irumbi: things commonly have several names in Embuland, and this characteristic for the moieties was not remarkable for the Embu. This was one of the several mildly significant cleavages in Embu society, and its relationship to the generational system will be ex-

3. *Mbari*, a recent loan word from Kikuyu, is used by the Embu variously and inconsistently. For a full discussion see S.80-82.

amined later. Through assiduous enquiry one can compile a list of clans and sub-clans in these moieties. I counted twenty-five clans, four of them with important subdivisions (S. 97). Their contemporary distribution is the consequence of several historical processes: famines, we have noted above, led to the emigration of substantial numbers, probably drawn from various descent groups; famines in other lands brought waves of immigrants into Embu country. How these immigrants fitted into Embu society depended on individual decisions to adopt, to take into one's own homestead, one or more immigrant families. If the adoptee and his descendants stayed on, they would become a lineage within the adopter's descent group. (S. 99-100.) Land was plentiful yet, able to accommodate immigrants and also to offer new areas to anyone wishing to leave his natal homestead and clear new land: growing tensions in a crowded homestead or conflict with neighbours might induce one to move. Consequently, the patterns of land ownership and residence showed no simple arrangement of descent groups.<sup>4</sup>

For the individual Embu, the important descent groups were his own, his neighbours', and his affinal kin's; beyond these were other descent groups whose existence became salient only through migration, marriage, and other specific situations. For particular descent groups, some neighbourhoods had two or more closely related homesteads; residential proximity no doubt kept the bonds and memories of kinship alive. Beyond the neighbourhood, some near, some far, lived others with whom genealogical links might be demonstrated, but it was rarely necessary to do so. These links were gradually forgotten. Consequently, the depth of genealogical recall among the Embu has always been low (Orde-Browne 1925:29); during my fieldwork I found that the repeat reliability of genealogies, given by middle-aged informants, was low beyond two or three generations.

#### *Corporate Activities of Descent Groups*

Descent groups are said to have acted corporately, in various contexts, sometimes through imposing discipline within the group and sometimes through collective action in relation to non-members. If a man behaved improperly or his wife gave him cause for complaint, if a dispute between a father or a son grew in a family, or if someone in a homestead, perhaps an old woman, attempted suicide, my informants said that the clan would meet, enquire into the source of

4. Following the Mau Mau Emergency the colonial government launched a thorough-going programme of land consolidation, directing descent groups to allocate their lands to their members in freehold titles. This operation and its consequences are explored in Saberwal 1969b.



disturbance, and provide the requisite advice, mediation, or punishment. Also mentioned were the common ownership of lands and the obligation to provide compensation if a clan-mate had killed another Embu or if he had been taken captive by another tribe; and if a non-member killed a man in one's own kin-group, and bloodwealth failed to materialize, the warriors in the aggrieved group were expected to prepare for revenge.

This is the Embu folk view of their descent groups, but a close scrutiny of case material (see S. 83ff) suggests that, beyond the homestead, it was infrequent for the descent groups to act corporately. I shall consider in turn the situation for homicide, land ownership, and intra-clan discipline.

In case of homicide the common procedure for the victim's kinsmen was to try to immediately seize livestock for bloodwealth from the killer's homestead's herd. This was provisional; the final settlement would follow later (Chapter 4). Should the final settlement require additional payment, this too would come from the killer's own homestead: there is no evidence for donations from other homesteads of the same descent group. If the victim belonged to the killer's own descent group, bloodwealth would still be payable, though the quantity might be reduced in view of the relationship. The bloodwealth received would, correspondingly, be retained by the victim's homestead: it would not be distributed to others in the descent group. In case of homicide within a homestead, no compensation was payable, nor would revenge be planned. Thus, a persistent offender was likely to meet punishment within his homestead, and occasionally it would be death. Outside the homestead, it was generally agreed, no matter what the provocation, a homicide called for revenge, unless this was prevented by paying or promising to pay adequate bloodwealth.

This norm had an important consequence. When the victim's kinsmen sought revenge, they knew that they needed no more strength than necessary to overpower the killer himself. Had his kinsmen wished to save him, they would have sent an offer of compensation; its absence meant that they did not wish to protect him, possibly because he had brought them trouble earlier. This left no room for feuds; revenge would restore the balance. Therefore, the victim's family did not have to mobilize a large body of kinsmen; indeed the effective revenge-taking group appears usually to have been limited to the co-residents of a homestead.

The situation concerning land ownership is rather less clear. Partly this is due to the extensive, indeed pervasive, litigation concerning land since the thirties, which probably influences the accounts given

today, but even in the pre-contact period there was probably considerable variation in the distribution of land rights, and their exercise by descent groups, from one neighbourhood to another. The following case illustrates one possibility.

*Case 1: The Unauthorized Land Sale*

In about 1900 a man of Kithami-Kirugi sub-clan initiated the sale of a piece of land in Kiini neighbourhood to a man of Igamuturi clan. Kithami clan owned the land, and the seller should have consulted his clan's elders and received their consent, but apparently he did not. He had already received part of the payment when men of other Kithami lineages protested. The argument probably went on for months, possibly years, but ultimately Ritho, a lineage-mate of the seller, volunteered to redeem the land by refunding the goats. A large number of Kithami men assembled then. From their many neighbourhoods they brought pieces of firewood and threw them into a common fire and said, "Let anyone trying to sell Kithami land be burned like this". People said that Kithami himself had prohibited his descendants from selling any land to outsiders.

It is necessary to note that this case was in fact somewhat unusual: selling land, with elaborate ceremonial, was customary in the pre-contact period, and no other curse on land sales by a clan ancestor was mentioned to me. Available evidence suggests that: (1) members of a clan living in a clan-owned area could cultivate any virgin or fallow land available there; (2) these resident clansmen would also decide whether or not a stranger should be permitted to live and cultivate there; (3) clansmen living elsewhere had the right to move into—or cultivate in—the neighbourhood if uncultivated land was available; and (4) for some localities, possibly those occupied by the descent group for several generations, a residual capacity to intervene in the clan's name under indeterminate circumstances may have been vested in the non-resident clansmen also. For the exercise of this right, however, there was no formally established rôle within the descent group; its exercise seems to have followed on the voluntary initiative of some clansmen. A similar procedure is apparent in the following case of intra-clan discipline.

*Case 2: The Negligent Parents (Before 1900)*

Kibariki described a case showing how his grandfather, Muniyiri (Fig. 3), had let one of his daughters grow to a point when she had well-developed breasts but had not yet been clitoridectomized, and how his clan-mate, Muinga, probably a second or third cousin, decided to chastise him. Muinga went to him and asked why he broke Embu

laws thus. He replied, "It is not I but my wife who is delaying". Muinga told him, "I shall come very early tomorrow morning and shall call your wife in order to tie her up. If you hear me calling you early in the morning, do come out, but I shall tie up only your wife, not you". Then Muinga went to Munyiri's wife Kiari. She laid the failure to the fact that Munyiri was not the head of the homestead yet and could not himself initiate things. Muinga told her, "Tomorrow if you hear my voice calling you, do get up; then your husband will come out, and I shall get a chance to tie him up".

Next morning Muinga took some ants and some strings to Munyiri's homestead and called him, "Wake up, I want to tie you up". When Munyiri came, Muinga persuaded him to let his hands and feet be tied up. Next he called Kiari, and when she came out, he tied her up too. He let some black ants loose over them until they began to scream; then he went over to their hut, lit a fire, and sat down warming himself. The screams attracted the neighbours, and when they found Muinga in the hut, he asked them to stay calm and explained why he had done this. They asked him to release the couple, told Munyiri to produce a bull at once, and warned him of sterner punishment if his daughter failed to get the operation within three days. They also asked Kiari to make five gourds of beer for Munyiri. They killed the bull, ate its meat, and went home.

In chastising Munyiri for deviating from Embu norms, his close agnate Muinga employed not the authority inherent in a descent group rôle but his capacity to outwit the couple and his knowledge that the community would support him. In fact he was acting at two levels: enforcing the cultural norms, and ensuring simultaneously that his action would bring him and his neighbours meat, and probably beer, received in penalty. Here and in other social contexts, deviant behaviour by an ego called for corrective action by an alter, but his identity as well as his plans were somewhat unpredictable. One out of many possible alters might select himself and determine his course of action to suit the particular situation.<sup>5</sup>

5. Professor Victor Turner has called my attention to another aspect of this case. In sharp contrast to the permissiveness in so many other cases, Muinga planned rather severe treatment for this couple. Although relying primarily on his own wits, he appears to have counted on wide social support. In illustrating the importance attached by the Embu to clitoridectomy-on-time Kibariki said that if a girl's operation were to follow and not precede her menarche, the bridewealth that would be received for her later would go to her mother's brother and not her father. No doubt such situations would be rare, and I have no such case. Anyway, if clitoridectomy-on-time did indeed command uncommonly high support, this may explain why the Embu, as well as the Kikuyu, have strongly, often fiercely, resisted manifold pressures against this operation from the Anglican Church and the British administration.

In the next section we shall notice that although the Embu norms specified clan exogamy, there were frequent exceptions to the rule. To explain these, informants often suggested that one of the lineages concerned had been adopted after immigration and, therefore, the couple had not really been related. The relations between the segments of a clan may then be summarized thus: whether or not the members of sub-clan A1 behaved towards sub-clan A2 as if both were parts of one clan A seems to have been situationally determined, being influenced by such criteria as the segments' size, their history, and the physical and genealogical distances between them. This behavioural indeterminacy was consistent with the terminological ambiguity discussed earlier.

### Homesteads

The previous section has noted the important place of Embu homesteads in social control, including several forms of collective action. The homesteads were also important in relation to child socialization and animal husbandry. Orde-Browne, who was the District Commissioner for several years between 1909 and 1916, described the homestead as:

. . . haphazard in arrangement, and there seems to be no rule at all for the position of the huts. There are usually from three to ten or more living houses, with another two or three used for goats, and some four or five food-stores . . . Round the whole group is a hedge, not as a rule in very good condition, with one or two paths leading through the gaps. . . . (1925:116)

The homestead residents were linked through a 3-4 generation patrilineal core. Polygyny was an ideal, often realized in a man's later years. A man's wives were not formally ranked. The huts of married women, living virilocally,<sup>6</sup> accounted for most members of a homestead. These features were exemplified in the composition of Kibariki's grandfather's homestead, in about 1904, when Kibariki was a young boy (about 6-10 years old). (Figs. 3 & 4.) In the seven mother-child huts in this homestead lived Munyiri's two wives (2B and 2C) and

6. Occasionally, other arrangements were made to suit special conditions. Thus, if a girl bore a child or two without a man initiating bridewealth payment, sooner or later her father would build her a hut in his own homestead; this was likely even though the man might acknowledge being the genitor. Or a divorcee might return to her father's homestead and raise her children there. Yet again, it might be discovered that there was a curse, an ancestral injunction against a woman, say of a certain clan, staying in the homestead of a particular clan. In these situations, the future affiliation of the children was somewhat indeterminate, giving them the option to assess the relative advantages and to choose.

Fig. 3: KIBARIKI'S GRANDFATHER'S HOMESTEAD

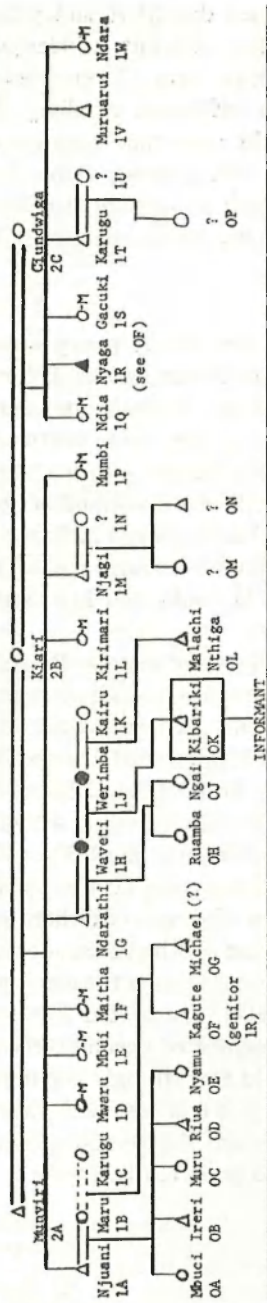


Fig. 4: MEMBERSHIP OF HUTS IN THE HOMESTEAD

Occupants	Mother	Child	Hut Number
Husband's hut, if any	2A	(2A)	1A (1A) 1G 1M 1T
Mo-Ch hut	2B	2C	1B 1C 1K 1N 1U
	3A	3B	1D 1E 1F 1H 1J 1L 1O 1P 1Q 1R 1S
Boy's hut, if any	1V(?)	OB	1V(?)

CODE FOR FIGURES 3 AND 4

- Symbols
- Δ Male
  - Female
  - M Female, married out
  - M Male, female dead.
  - == Marriage
  - | ↓ Descent
  - Inheritance

Person Identification

- 1 ↑ Person's place within generation
- 1 ↓ Generation number, with informant's Generation 0.

the wives of Muniyiri's four sons. Unmarried daughters and young sons lived in the hut of their mother or her substitute. Older unmarried boys lived in separate huts of their own. Twenty-seven persons lived in this homestead. Another informant recalling the homestead of his own childhood at about the same time enumerated about forty persons. As we shall see below, this probably came close to the upper limit for the size of a homestead; an immigrant couple, setting up a separate homestead of their own, would constitute the lower limit.

### *Marriage*

Among the Embu, decisions concerning who would marry whom were taken primarily by the individuals involved for themselves. Following circumcision or clitoridectomy, one became available for courtship, and it could begin almost anywhere. It was likely to be continued during dances as well as in the girl's mother's kitchen (*ngucu*). Fairly early in this process, a serious suitor would take a calabash full of beer to the girl's father; and if the father knew of his daughter's inclinations and the boy's ability to muster the customary bridewealth payments, he would let the boy know that henceforth he could visit her in the kitchen.

But the father might also say no for a variety of reasons. Broadly, the Embu held the view that marriage between close kinsmen was likely to be barren and hence undesirable. This was expressed in the widely held idea that marriage within a clan was prohibited. On specific enquiry one informant indicated further that prohibitions also applied to marrying a woman of one's wife's natal lineage (hence no sororate or sororal polygyny), mother's natal clan, father's mother's natal lineage, or mother's mother's natal lineage. Concerning clan exogamy, case material clearly indicates that the rule was often waived: where one of the parties was descended from an immigrant who had been adopted into the clan, the Embu saw no great value in preventing the marriage. Given the large number of such immigrants, assimilated lineages, and the fact that genealogies were rarely remembered beyond three or four generations, it is clear that they would feel strongly about the matter only if the couple happened to belong to a lineage with clearly shared recent ancestors. Likewise marriages into the several affinally related lineages were probably not prevented consistently.<sup>7</sup>

7. Besides these general prohibitions, however, a girl's father might remember a curse, with supernatural sanctions, concerning marriage into a particular, unrelated clan. The curse may have been inflicted by an ancestor in a moment of anger at his own affines (for example, Case 15): the Embu carried a substantial accumulation of such curses, however, and probably only the most recent would be remembered and be considered salient

If the girl's father gave his permission, some time during the next few weeks the boy's father would go to the girl's father's homestead with more beer, in order to discuss the size of the bridewealth. The core bridewealth (*ruraio*) appears to have been fairly well standardized at 1-3 cows, 4-15 goats, two bulls, one or two he-goats, and a ram. The two fathers might narrow down this range somewhat, and the boy's father might plead for delayed payments if his herd stood depleted. In any case these payments were spread over many years, sometimes over two or three generations. The boy was expected to send beer to the girl's homestead before, during, and after the wedding; the beer drinks would bring together the girl's kinsmen, neighbours, and friends. One informant listed some twenty calabashes, sent in eight instalments.

Ideally, the relationship between the two homesteads was one of cordiality and goodwill but, over time, it might come to reflect the strains in the husband-wife relationship. These strains arose in various ways: after the permissive pre-marital years, the girl might resent the restrictions and responsibilities of marriage; in a polygynous situation, an earlier wife may be excessively hostile, or, in later years, the older wife may resent her husband marrying another girl; and at the husband's death, his wife might choose to leave his homestead rather than be inherited by an agnate of his. If the woman left her affinal homestead, her affines were entitled to the return of most of the core bridewealth, but the enforcement of this right was an uncertain affair. One of her brothers, or possibly her father, had probably used the animals already in bridewealth payments of his own, and they would be most reluctant to refund anything. They would use their influence to have the marriage continue. Where the necessity for divorce was generally granted, the matter would go to an elders' council for an oath of separation, wherein the kinsmen involved would take an oath denying any covert, hostile intentions (poisoning or sorcery) in relation to the erstwhile affines. This would also be the time for determining the quantity of bridewealth to be refunded, an issue on which an absence of records made for disagreement. The elders might give a verdict, possibly on the basis of quantities affirmed by the parties on oath but, as we shall see later, the outcome of such litigation could not be predicted with much confidence.

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enough to prevent a marriage; as for the others, their potency might be revealed by a diviner diagnosing the cause of a barrenness, a sickness, or the death of a child. In such a situation, the new couple would take appropriate measures under the diviner's guidance. (Later chapters will note that marrying an age-mate's or generation-mate's daughter, too, was prohibited.)

*Authority within Homestead*

In Case 2 we noted that Kiari, the mother of a girl who had not been clitoridectomized on time, tried to explain this failure by saying that her husband was not the head of the homestead yet and could not himself initiate things. Nevertheless, Muinga proceeded with his plans for punishing her and her husband: the excuse was unacceptable and rightly so, for the Embu homestead was marked with a complete absence of clear and specific authority relationships between adult males. They were bound by the ties of agnatic kinship and co-residence, by the advantages of joint herding of livestock and frequent interaction in beer parties and other activities around the homestead. But they were also rivals in controlling and using livestock and, occasionally, women. When the interests of the men in a homestead clashed, the procedures for resolving conflict were often strained.

A father and his son had more of a superordinate-subordinate relationship than any other dyad, but even the father's authority appears to have been negotiable. Kibariki said:

If a son was persistently rude to his father, the father simply had to give up. Later, the son might get sick. The father would wait for a couple of days, then visit his son to see how he was faring; if he was still sick, the father would go for a medicine man. After recovery, the father would show the son a lot of work to do. If the son failed to do it, the father kept quiet until the son might fall sick again. After a few days, the father visited the son and said, 'That time I needed your help, and you did not give it. Now you are sick, and I cannot help you'. If the son apologized, the father called the medicine man again. After the recovery the father would test his son's willingness to work hard again by giving him work to do.

In the next chapter we shall examine the rôle of the warrior, which required young Embu men to be courageous, self-reliant, and assertive. The Embu encouraged such behaviour, even though it might lead to difficulties within the homestead, as illustrated in a case Muruambui recounted to me.

*Case 3: The Aggressive Son (ca. 1910)*

When about fifteen years old, Muruambui had a fight with his father and father's brother. They had a cow which Muruambui alone could control for milking. One day he went to dances and didn't return until after dusk. His father, trying to milk this cow, broke four



gourds one after another. When Muruambui came home, his father was angry and gave him a lash of the whip. Muruambui gave his father a sword and a stick and confronted him likewise, ready for a fight; his father ran away. Later his father's brother asked him why he had challenged his father and, with a spear, gave him a long cut on his arm; the mark is still there. Muruambui hit back with a sword, cut his uncle on the shoulder, and chopped off a couple of fingers; his uncle then ran away. Later his father's father acknowledged that Muruambui was brave and could keep his herd under control even if a raiding party was attacking. To assuage his uncle's humiliation, he later gave him a ram to eat.<sup>8</sup>

This egalitarianism extended also to property, largely livestock, the *only* form of capital accumulation in Embuland. Concerning a man's right to any livestock he might own or claim, Kibariki said, "A married man was free to take his portion of the herd wherever he pleased, and he could sue his father before an elders' council—right down to the last goat". However, the operation of this ideal was tempered by the fact that the elders would have little authority to compel the father to accept their verdict (Case 16); in any case, an aroused father could lay a curse and prevent his son from inheriting his livestock altogether. This would not be in the son's interest to invite.

The egalitarianism characteristic of the Embu homestead prevailed also in Embu society at large and was associated with the absence of legitimized economic inequalities. Through assiduous care a man might build up his herd but he was likely to use his animals to seek additional wives, and all his sons would normally inherit more or less equal shares of the paternal livestock. Rarely would a son inherit a large herd. Besides, the raiding patterns of the Embu and the neighbouring peoples also contributed to this egalitarian situation. As we shall see shortly, a raid was aimed at a large herd, which would be depleted or decimated if the raid succeeded; but the raiders were likely to take only one or two animals each. Since a warrior participated in a raid primarily for his own gain, on balance inter-tribal raids too led to a dispersal of capital.

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8. Muruambui emerged here as a clear victor, and in any case only honour was at stake. As the size of the homestead grew with collateral lineages living together and the effectiveness of paternal influence declined, disputes concerning conflicting claims to livestock within the homestead were likely to arise (S.56-58). Failing clear procedures for resolving the argument, it might linger in the form of accusations—possibly the reality—of use of poison against adversaries. Were adequate observational data available, one could ascertain an "optimum" size, not much above forty persons, when the tensions generated by conflict would make the homestead's fission imminent. Then, new homesteads would re-create a setting essential for societal continuity.

### **Territorial Organization**

The social geography of Embuland included streams which cut deep valleys through the land, sacred groves for ceremonies performed by generational elders, warriors' dancing grounds, and other well-known places used for litigation and other public purposes. These landmarks provided the framework for the Embu neighbourhood: with two or three hundred people it was the primary locus for interaction at births and deaths, circumcisions and marriages, house-building and harvesting. (S. 103-4) Membership in a neighbourhood was influenced, but not determined, by ties of descent. Neighbourhoods had names but no corporate identity; consequently, although one's neighbours might support the assertion of one's rights in a particular dispute, possibly through self-help, persistent hostilities between neighbourhoods were not an Embu characteristic.

Nor did the Embu warriors raid distant parts of Embuland for live-stock; such raids were limited to non-Embu peoples. One informant said that once, when warriors from Ngandori were returning from a raid on the Cuka (Fig. 2), some Kyeni residents wrested a part of the booty from them. Later, people from Ngandori went and beat up these fellows and recovered the goats. Minor incidents apart, the Embu were fairly secure while moving through any part of Embuland. Ideally, the same would apply to any outsiders formally adopted into an Embu homestead or sponsored by a group of Embu elders, but this may not have been practised always.

My attempts to draw maps that would reflect the Embu views of their wider territorial organization remained a will-o'-the-wisp; consistent usage is difficult to see in accounts from individual informants, let alone different informants. Looking beyond his neighbourhood, the Embu man appears to have perceived not sharply delimited territorial units but rather long stretches of ridges and streams where-in the importance of membership in particular neighbourhoods was diluted by such cross-cutting ties as those of descent, age-set, and elderhood.

## WARRIORS AND WAR COUNCILLORS

The experiences of warriorhood during adolescence helped in transforming an Embu boy into an Embu man. When he was about fifteen years old, the boy would be circumcised, thus receiving the warrior's primary diacritical mark. The tradition of raiding for livestock was strong in the cluster of societies in the area, and the Embu trained their young men both to protect their own herds from enemies and also to raid the neighbouring peoples. Besides, during his years as a warrior he would be concerned with dances and courtship and the thoughts of getting a bride and becoming an elder. Embu warriors were members of age-sets, but recruitment into them did not begin or end with the kind of tribe-wide ceremonial characteristic of the Masai, the Tiriki, and other peoples; correspondingly, their corporate activities were modest. One by one, the warriors withdrew gradually from the activities of warriorhood; the age-set did not retire as a corporate group. Its members would remember their set's name, but in later life they would rarely, if ever, act as a corporate group. The following pages survey the Embu procedures for inducting individuals into warriorhood, the principal experiences in that realm, and the major rôles in the related set of activities. The chapter will conclude with a review of the external relations of the Embu.

### Becoming a Warrior

A boy's circumcision marked his transition from the culturally disvalued rôle of a boy (*kavici*, pl. *twici*) to the culturally valued rôle of a warrior (*mwanake*, pl. *aanake*). The warriors held the boys in some contempt and, thanks to their superiority with weapons as well as their corporate strength, the warriors exacted a measure of deference from the boys. In this part I examine first the rôle of the uncircumcised boy and then the sequence of ceremonies surrounding his circumcision which moved him into warriorhood.

#### *The Uncircumcised Boy*

As a boy moved away from his mother's hut into his father's wider world, he was expected to take an increasing interest in maintaining the family herd. At times he spent the nights in his father's cattle enclosure, occasionally several miles from his homestead. Whether

at home or at the cattle enclosure he found an increasing number of uncircumcised boys to play with, but this play group was not corporate in any sense (Cf. Lambert 1956:32ff, 73ff). During these years he improved his skill in livestock husbandry.<sup>1</sup>

The uncircumcised boy went to the dances but was allowed only to observe, not to dance. He was also prohibited sexual access to *airitu*;<sup>2</sup> one informant reported the penalty to be death at the hands of the warriors but, as we shall see shortly, this appears to be an exaggerated view. Sexual relations with pre-pubescent girls were also said to be prohibited, but may have been treated rather casually (owing perhaps to adolescent sterility).

The Embu believed that no girl should reach menarche before her clitoridectomy (Case 2), and she could not have the operation if she had an uncircumcised elder brother. Usually, this would set a time limit for a boy's circumcision, but a boy without a younger sister could be in difficulty, as Mbogo's case shows.

*Case 4: Courtship before Circumcision (ca. 1900)*

Mbogo's father, probably like other fathers, wanted to prolong the use of Mbogo's services as a shepherd, services which would be lost when the circumcision made him a warrior. The father was able to do so apparently because Mbogo had no younger full sister, and he may have turned twenty, yet uncircumcised. This combination of physical adulthood and social boyhood was anomalous, but probably not unique, and he described how he came to establish a liaison.

Having been driven away from eastern Embuland by his neighbours, Kabogo had come to the neighbourhood of Mbogo's father (Ngicuru) and had asked Ngicuru for a place to live. Ngicuru allowed him to build at a few hundred yards from his own homestead. (In another interview Mbogo said that Kabogo had come from Meru country; he may have lived in eastern Embuland previously.)

One day, upon returning home, Mbogo found Kabogo's daughter Ruguru in his mother's hut. Ruguru asked Mbogo to escort her half-way home. On the way she yelled, said there was an animal, and caught hold of Mbogo. Mbogo asked her why she was holding him,

1. Following circumcision, as a warrior, his interest in livestock husbandry declined, and that in mounting out-raids (for getting livestock from neighbouring tribes) and in meeting in-raids (to protect his family's and his people's livestock) increased. These two interests, in the management of the family herd and in protecting and expanding the family herd, would coalesce in later years, when the man would need to focus on the needs of his family of procreation.
2. In Embu society a *mairitu* (pl. *airitu*) was a clitoridectomized, unmarried woman, free to go to dances and to welcome suitors into her mother's kitchen for a night.

"I'm fearing you because you are circumcised and I am not". Ruguru replied, "You shouldn't be worried about that because everyone will get circumcised before he dies". Mbogo thought that she must be thinking about something and he'd show her what. A few steps later she again yelled about an animal and got hold of Mbogo. Then Mbogo lifted her up, took her to the bush, and had intercourse with her. Ruguru asked Mbogo not to tell about this to any other uncircumcised boy [lest they think she was available to all]. Later Mbogo often found Ruguru at his mother's house, waiting for him to take her half-way; they would have intercourse on the way.

A European attacking party came some time after this, and they all moved west across the Rupingazi stream, to Ngicuru's cattle enclosure. As his temporary hut there was crowded to overflowing, Ruguru asked Mbogo to come and sleep in her father's hut which she shared with two sisters. Later Mbogo heard rumours that she had conceived. Her girl friends teased and taunted her for having conceived from an uncircumcised boy, and one day she had a fight with an elder sister over this. When the rumours reached Mbogo's father, he quickly arranged the circumcision. Mbogo paid some bridewealth even before the operation had healed and Ruguru moved to his home-*stead* soon after.

Although my informants said that the punishment for such deviance would be directed against the boy, apparently in this case only informal sanctions were directed against Ruguru, while Mbogo was rewarded with circumcision and marriage. For having delayed his son's circumcision unduly, Mbogo's father may also have met disapproval, hence perhaps his prompt response. Note may also be taken of the possibility that the warriors in the area felt kindly towards Mbogo, a local boy, about this relationship with the daughter of an immigrant, Kabogo.<sup>3</sup>

For an uncircumcised boy, then, the circumcision ceremony and the entry into warriorhood were major concerns, and the next section describes this transition.

### *The Circumcision Ceremony*

Although the circumcision ceremony was the most dramatic event

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3. Other evidence suggests that Kabogo's family was under considerable pressure. For example, just about the time of Mbogo's affair, one of Kabogo's huts was burnt down, and rumour ascribed this to Kabogo having bought "poison" and stored it in the hut's roof. I have previously shown that individual immigrants, even when formally adopted, often were the targets of hostility, and they may have sought security in charms and protective treatments, requiring the use of "poison". (See S.256-58; S.112n.)

in a man's life, it was only one of a series. When Kibariki was some eight years old, his father had given a goat<sup>4</sup> to the elders of their neighbourhood. (Case 11. Whether the goat marked a boy's emergence from childhood or his father's advance in elderhood or both is not entirely clear.) Later, the warriors had pierced Kibariki's ears, an operation required before a boy's circumcision.<sup>5</sup> These two ceremonies and others surrounding circumcision and life-cycle events generally, were individually and collectively known as *maambura*. (Cf. B. 9.)

Boys' circumcision and girls' clitoridectomy were very important for the Embu who held the parents of a circumcised child in high prestige. Throughout the initiand's<sup>6</sup> neighbourhood, this was a time for feasting. Visitors would be welcomed into every homestead in the neighbourhood and given food; as the saying goes, *mwana ti wa mundu umwe*, "a child doesn't belong to one person alone". The whole neighbourhood celebrated a circumcision.

Circumcisions could be held any time in the year, excepting a month or two preceding the long rains when homicide compensations were usually discussed and paid.

#### *Case 5: Kibariki's Circumcision*

Kibariki's circumcision took place in about 1911-12. His father had died a few years earlier leaving him some livestock. When he decided to get circumcised, he spoke to his father's elder brother and asked him to take charge of his herd for the period of his recovery. His account of the subsequent ceremonies, with only minor editorial attention, follows:

*Celebrations before circumcision.* The evening before the circumcision day, Kibariki went to a man who lived a mile or so away and borrowed a horn. Returning home, he started blowing it. Hearing the horn the neighbouring warriors and *avitu* came over to his homestead, and he gave them the "goat of circumcision" (*mburi ya urigu*), the fee for the ceremony next day.

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4. *Mburi ya nduo*, 'the goat of *nduo*', but I was unable to get a translation for the word *nduo*. In Kikuyu, *ruo*, "pain, ache"; and *ruo ruu mwana*, "paternal concern for a child, pain of childbirth." (B.411.)
  5. In the context of the generational system (Chapter 3) I note that a man was required to go to Kyeni, the eastern fringe of Embuland, to learn the tribal customs before his first child's circumcision. My informants did not mention this trip in connection with their own circumcisions, possibly because none of them was his father's first child.
  6. I borrow the term *initiand* from Dyson-Hudson (1963:400) to refer to "persons in the process of being initiated".

The warriors removed a withe<sup>7</sup> from the granary of Kibariki's father's younger wife (who was acting as his mother, since the latter was dead), stripped its bark revealing a white core, and laid it aside. When they were ready to leave his homestead, they gave him this white stick. To hold the stick was the mark of an initiand. Once a boy held this stick in this ceremony, he could not be prevented from going through the circumcision; and sometimes this served to force a reluctant father's hand, making him pay the goat for his son that night.

Three other initiands similarly produced goats that evening, so there were four initiands in all. They danced around the neighbourhood, while Kibariki's mother made millet mush (*ngima*). When they returned to his homestead, his mother served the mush to Kibariki and gruel (*ucuru*) to the warriors. No *airitu* came, for to be seen eating by the warriors was believed to render them uninviting as wives.

Earlier the initiand or his father would have decided who would be the supporter<sup>8</sup> for the initiand during the operation. Kibariki's father had previously named his sister's son to be the supporter.

The supporter was a circumcised, older man, a friend or a relative, selected for the operation by the initiand, his father, or someone acting for the father. He received a portion of the goat of circumcision and had a particularistic relationship with the initiand, physically supporting him during the operation and offering some general social support later.

The singing-and-dancing party went to visit the supporters' homesteads. When they arrived at Kibariki's supporter's homestead, they sang and danced there, and the supporter's wife gave Kibariki some more millet mush to eat. Later the party visited the initiands' kinsmen's homesteads in several neighbourhoods. Since the warriors were anxious to prevent people of other neighbourhoods from partaking of the goats' meat, they tried to mislead the warriors of the neighbourhoods through which they passed, as follows. The party split into two. One, including the initiands and a few warriors, moved quietly avoiding notice; and the other, including most of the warriors and the *airitu*, sang and danced, but none of its members held a white

7. In this context informants mentioned three kinds of twigs or sticks: *mwondoo* (*Abutilon longicuspe*, B. 360, DG. 260), *mugere* (*Hibiscus* species, B. 108), and *mukeyu* (*Dombeya goetzei*, B. 216, DG. 545). Each of them had a white core in a fibrous cover and was easily available.

8. *mutirani*, pl. *atirani*. Cf. for the Kikuyu, *tiira* (v.) "prop up, support (a pot, a leaning house, heavy fruiting tree, etc.); lift to an upright position" and *mutirani*, "candidate's supporter and sponsor at circumcision" (B.447-48).

stick, so the observers could not be sure of an imminent circumcision.<sup>9</sup>

They did not go to the circumciser's homestead because he would soon inflict pain on the initiands who were therefore temporarily afraid of him. The circumciser, always an Embu man, was a part-time, non-hereditary specialist, learning the skill from older circumcisers. In return for his part in the ceremonies, he received the goat's head as customary payment. This rôle did not disqualify him from full participation in any other Embu institution. He was not generally disliked.

By the time they had visited the supporters' and the kinsmen's homesteads, it was well past sundown. They looked for a banana grove to provide shelter for the night. The warriors killed all the goats from the initiands and, saving only four parts, proceeded to eat the meat. They had no other food that night. While eating, they sang. The saved parts were: for each initiand one foreleg (either left or right), the liver for the father, the ribs and the skin for the supporter, and the head for the circumciser.

The *airitu* did not spend the night with the warriors, but stayed elsewhere in the groves singing. At daybreak the girls and the warriors reassembled and danced until the initiands were led down to the stream late in the morning.

*The circumcision.* The initiands were carrying the white withes when the warriors escorted them down to the Kapingazi stream. A warrior led the initiands into the stream and made them stand in a row across its flow. Ritual cleansing<sup>10</sup> followed: at the warrior's bidding, the initiands sat down and stood up twice, the water touching their waists each time: this would wash away all the sins and dirt of uncircumcised boyhood. Throwing the white withes down the stream, the initiands said, 'Let all the uncircumcised boys be drowned like that'.

The warrior still leading, the initiands emerged from the stream and followed the narrow path to the circumcision ground. Warriors, sticks in hand, stood on both sides of the path and hit the passing initiands with the sticks from behind. They were asked not to look back, only ahead. This was believed to prepare them for the pain of the imminent operation.

A crowd was sitting in a circle in the circumcision ground. Women sat in an outer circle behind the men and could see only the initiands' heads. The initiands reached the ground, led by the warrior who

9. This diversional tactic could be effective only if such parties were numerous on occasions besides circumcisions. Whether or not such was the case I do not know.

10. *kuthambira*, "to be ritually cleansed" (Cf. B.490-91).



carried a whip; with it he indicated a point in the circle, and the crowd there moved to let the initiands pass. Following him, they reached the centre of the circle, and he indicated the place for them to sit in a row. The warriors gave the initiands *mugumo*<sup>11</sup> leaves, and the initiands held five in each hand. The supporters came and held the initiands firmly behind their backs. The initiands were ordered to look at the sky, so they would not see the approaching circumciser.

The circumciser (*mutani* or *muruihia*) came, pulled the initiand's foreskin, and cut it with one stroke of the blade (*kavio*). As soon as this was done, the initiand's supporter stood up and pulled him up, while the circumciser worked on the others. Then the circumciser returned and, with the initiand standing, removed the foreskin entirely with further strokes of the blade.<sup>12</sup> Wrapping the initiands with leather, so the women would not see their penises, the warriors and spectators escorted them to their parental homesteads.

There, a specially erected hut awaited each initiand. Due care was taken for his physical welfare, but no special instruction appears to have been provided. He would be segregated from others, especially women, provided with the company of the supporter first and other warriors later during his recovery, and released to warriorhood with a hair-cutting ceremony. During his recovery he associated primarily with other warriors, a pattern continuing through his years as a warrior.

*Recovery from the operation.* Later on the circumcision day a medicine man (Chapter 4) came to his home, armed with the leaves and branches of *mukengeria* weed and castor oil.<sup>13</sup> He brushed Kibariki's penis with the branches, wet with the oil, saying "Let this wound not grow beyond its present size". He treated the circumcision blade likewise.<sup>14</sup>

The supporter's wife and Kibariki's mother both brought more millet mush and he ate some from both. A warrior then took him to a nearby banana grove, cut the middle stem off a banana leaf, split the stem laterally, and put Kibariki's penis through the hole in the stem. The stem then stayed along the thighs and held up the penis

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11. *Ficus hochstetteri*, a wild fig tree, whose parts are used for ritual purposes in Kikuyu country (B.122, Middleton & Kershaw 1965:61).
  12. My informants mentioned the "Meru style" of circumcision wherein only a part of the foreskin is removed; both the Meru and the Embu styles were used in Embuland. This contrast appears to have been unrelated to cleavages concerning moieties, generational divisions, or territory, and its existence may point to nothing more than the fact that large numbers of Meru came to Embu during the nineteenth century.
  13. The *mukengeria* weed belongs to the *Commeline* species and is used in post-circumcision treatment by the Kikuyu too (B.214); the castor oil is locally called *maguta ma mbariki* (B.25).
  14. *Kuwororia*, "to play magic"; not found in Benson 1964.

in order to prevent its touching other parts of the body. The warriors also brought green banana leaves and made him a bed inside the hut; should his cut bleed much, these leaves with the blood could be thrown away.

The next two days provided almost complete seclusion for Kibariki, only his supporter staying with him. (During winter, a small fire would warm the hut.) Normally, after two days, some beer would have been distributed and the supporter would have made way for other warriors; but in this case, on the second night, Kibariki had a dream and a nocturnal emission (*ndi*; not found in Benson 1964): in the post-circumcision period this was believed to foreshadow some unspecified danger, and therefore the beer and other things which had been prepared could not be used for the ceremony. The supporter had to stay two more days; then the supporter and Kibariki washed their hands and faces ceremonially.<sup>15</sup> During this period of four days, called *ndindyo*, Kibariki left his hut only to urinate or defecate. Since he was not dressed, only men came to visit him. After the ceremonial washing, the warriors brought him some fresh banana leaves for a better bed. His mother had prepared beer, and she gave one gourd to the supporter, two small gourds to the warriors, and several gourds of gruel to other visitors including women.

Later that afternoon the warriors took him for a walk around the neighbourhood. Thereafter they kept him company in turns until he had got into the habit of sleeping on his back: this ensured that the wound would heal properly. During this period, which lasted about a month (or, sometimes, two or three months), Kibariki's rôle was that of a *giciere*, one circumcised but not cured.<sup>16</sup> His emergence from this rôle was marked by a major sequence surrounding a hair-cutting ceremony.

*The hair-cutting ceremony.* My informants referred to the following hair-cutting ceremony also as one of the life-cycle ceremonies (*maambura*) mentioned earlier. It was probably seen as an integral part of the ceremonies marking a boy's circumcision. Especially in its later parts, the following account acquires a dreamlike, make-believe character; an adequate interpretation seems to need rather more contextual data than are available.

The ceremonial hair-cutting was to be done by a woman (unfortunately I have no data on her relationship with the initiand). The

15. The term for this ceremonial washing, *methambo*, appears to be derived from the root *thamba*, meaning ritual cleansing (B.490).

16. May be derived from the root *ciara*, "give birth, have a child." (B.55.)

day before the ceremony she brought a gourd of honey to Kibariki's homestead, and his mother provided sugar-cane for the warriors to make beer. They made the beer in the circumcision hut and left it there overnight, near the embers to accelerate fermentation as usual.<sup>17</sup> The barber woman asked Kibariki not to touch either of the gourds during the night.

Next morning the barber woman came into the hut and asked him to go out. A few minutes later she asked him to return, and he lay down on his bed. His mother had asked a group of neighbourhood women to come and help in the ceremony. Now they entered the hut, looked into the gourds, and found that one of these had liquor but no fermenting pods. The women surmised that Kibariki had removed these from the gourd, contrary to instructions; therefore the ceremony had to be postponed for a day, and new liquor prepared. (Kibariki said that the barber woman, while alone in the hut, had removed the pods in order that, laying the blame on him, they might demand a goat in penalty from him. Only unmarried mothers (*ndigwa*), he thought, would resort to such a ruse.)

In any case, that day they made the beer again and left it next to the fire overnight. The barber woman came again the next morning, asked him to go out, and removed the pods again. This time, his father's sister accompanied the same group of women. Having heard of the previous day's events, and finding the pods missing again, she realized that the women really wanted a goat. She knew Kibariki was poor, so she poured some honey into the fire, told the women to get on with drinking the beer, and asked him to go over to his bed.

Just a little later his father's sister asked him to get up and go out of the hut: there the barber woman shaved his head completely using a blade (*kienji*, sing.; *cienji*, pl.). Previously the women had prepared a hat (*nthumbi*) from banana tree bark (*ngoto*); now they put it on his head. The barber woman then drew five white lines<sup>18</sup> on his forehead. From her palm she would take some white powder, draw one line from the middle of his upper lip, over the nose, and up through the forehead, then get more white powder from the palm. She did this five times. The other women sang songs. The barber woman then

17. The Embu, like the Kikuyu, use yeast sponge from sausage- or loafah-tree (*Kigelia aethiopia* or *Kigelia moosa*), *muratina*, pl. *miratina*, in fermenting beer.

18. Normally, the initiand's father drew these lines; but Kibariki's father was dead, and the barber woman may have been taking his rôle here. Note that the numbers five and four in several Embu contexts concern the male and the female respectively; in a parallel ceremony following a girl's clitoridectomy, four lines were drawn on her forehead.

called a warrior who happened to be around and asked him to escort Kibariki to an old man, Njoya. About this time it was customary to send a new warrior to an old man's hut, and Njoya filled the bill.

Pretending that it was night time and that they would have to sleep at Njoya's, Kibariki and the escort plucked a couple of banana leaves on the way, put one leaf on each side in Njoya's hut, and 'went to sleep' on the leaves. A little later the escort woke up Kibariki, saying it was morning now. They went out, threw away the leaves, cut a fresh banana tree bark, squeezed it until its juice came out, and mixed the juice with the ochre (*munyu*) that the escort had brought with him. The escort smeared Kibariki with this paste on the calf of his right leg and on the right cheek.

They pretended that now they had really passed a whole day and were in the day following the ceremony, having 'spent the night' in Njoya's hut. They started walking towards Kibariki's homestead. He entered his hut and 'went to sleep', pretending it was the next night. His escort went away, but the old women were still around. A little later, the women said that it was morning again and woke him up. The women asked him to light a fire and burn down his circumcision hut. This was the end of the ceremony. Henceforth he could go wherever he liked.

At the beginning of this section I mentioned this sequence as being only one amongst a series of life-cycle ceremonies. Here are two more, apparently linked with the conclusion of this sequence:

First, when a woman's eldest son or eldest daughter had the hair-cutting ceremony following circumcision, both the parents acquired a right to put a metal bangle on their wrists.<sup>19</sup> Thus a woman could wear two bangles at most, and a man two per wife. To a stranger these bangles presumably indicated a man's stature as an elder, an arm heavy with bangles probably denoting a man of substance with wives, daughters, sons, and livestock (Chapter 4, Elderhood).

Second, some time after the hair-cutting ceremony, the warriors gave their new member a new name. Another informant, Moko (son of Gacurai), described the proceedings: two or three months after his circumcision (*ca.* 1915), in consultation with his mother, Moko made a big pot of gruel and invited the warriors of his neighbourhood. While they feasted on the gruel, they sent him away to a place within shouting distance. They discussed possible names for him and called out several names one after another: of these he responded to one,

19. Whether or not there was a preference or prescription for left or right hand, I do not know.

Moko, and henceforth this became one of his names, in addition to the ones his mother had given him at birth.<sup>20</sup>

The new warrior may have paid yet another goat to the senior warriors a few months, perhaps a year or two, following his circumcision. It is somewhat unclear when the goats of warriorhood ended and those of elderhood, discussed in Chapter 4, began. In any case, the payment of these goats at circumcision ensured a warrior a small but continuing supply of meat from younger initiands' goats in his later years. In addition to the raids, the dancing, and the sharing of secrets about their relations with girls, this matrix of rights and obligations concerning meat feasts also cemented the bonds of warriorhood in Embuland.

### Being a Warrior

Though the warrior continued to have a base in his father's homestead, perhaps in the very structure he had used before circumcision, his major interests were now directed outwards. Dancing was one such (as in Case 6 below), courtship another, and the two were inter-related. In principle, my informants were unanimous concerning the prohibition on premarital sexual activity, even for the warriors; but in practice the culture specifically gave a girl the right to receive her warrior-friends in her mother's kitchen at night: without exercising this right, an informant said, she would "grow old and die there, which wouldn't be any good". Her father was likely to disapprove of the exercise of this right only if the warrior-friend's ability to pay an adequate bridewealth happened to be in doubt.

A variety of other events engaged the warriors' attention. Some of these were linked directly with their own rôle, for example, the feasts

20. While a new warrior received his new name in a formal ceremony, the name-giving at birth was without ceremony, though regulated by inter-caste rules. Briefly, the first child's name depended upon the time of its conception: if this was *before* its parent's marriage, that is, the payment of adequate core bridewealth, its name followed its *mother's* parent (of the same sex), and if the child was conceived *after* the marriage, it followed its *father's* parent's name. The child might get one or more of the older person's names directly, or, out of respect to the older person, the child might be given a name bearing some reference to the older person. If the *old* woman happened to be fond of beer (*nyovi*), a girl might be called Warjovi; if the old woman had been born into Mbogo lineage, the child might be called Wamboyo. If an elder brother or a senior kinsman other than his own father had helped a man pay a major part of the bridewealth, he might acknowledge this by naming his first son after the man who had helped. Later children would follow other kinsmen and friends, the choice being made largely by the child's mother, drawing evenly from her natal and her affinal kin. The relationship between the child and the person followed was cordial but free from any specified rights or duties.

and other activities surrounding circumcisions (which created more warriors) and clitoridectomies (which brought more girls into the dancing fields and into candidacy for bridehood). Disputes between people often came to a head at these ceremonies, and fights followed wherein the warriors would excel. When homicide occurred, perhaps a fifth of the cases led to homicide in revenge, and the warriors of the aggrieved homestead or lineage would constitute the striking force. Or, the warriors would go to elders' councils where disputes of all sorts might be discussed; in these meetings they would observe and learn the ways of their elders.

But a warrior legitimized his warriorhood by participating in raids upon neighbouring tribes. He expected to capture livestock or, with good luck, a woman of the raided tribe.<sup>21</sup> When the enemy raiders descended upon Embuland, the local warriors sought to defend their own livestock—and women. A description of raids is given in Case 8.

*Case 6: The Kivata Dance (ca. 1900)*<sup>22</sup>

Over the warriors' dances the war councillors appear to have exercised some supervision and control. Mbogo said that the war councillors sponsored the Kivata dance described below in order to announce the beginning of a new age-set.

The day before the dance the warriors went towards the Njukini forest, some five miles south, to get white lime. This trip took them into an area lying between the Embu and the Gicugu country and, if the opportunity offered itself, they raided an enemy herd as they would have done on a specially organized raid (Case 8 below).

After getting the lime, the warriors returned and went to high ground some three hundred yards from a large, flat dancing arena, in order to attire themselves appropriately: lime paint, leather pieces, shields in their left hands, spears or warclubs in their right hands, and swords hanging down their waists. Three pairs of the best dancers were selected to go, one pair at a time, and to dance in the arena: there the women and old men—and possibly young boys—had assembled to watch them. The women in the audience ululated to greet their arrival. The two warriors entered the circle together, one going clockwise, the other anti-clockwise. Each would run for several yards,

21. Since captured livestock could be paid in bridewealth for getting an Embu bride, a captured woman was in this sense equivalent to captured livestock.

22. Bugeau (1943:192-93) has described the "Kebata" dance for the Kikuyu, and his account is recognizably similar to the one here. Though we do not know his sources of information, his accounts of the warriors' behaviour, the raids between the Kikuyu and the Masai, and the diviner's influence on the warriors appear to be authentic.

then jump and bow, and then run again. To cheer this performance, the audience, particularly the *airitu*, ululated. When a pair completed its round of the circle, it left the arena and returned to the high ground. The second pair then went into the arena and gave a similar performance; then the third pair. When their dance ended, women took gruel to the leading dancers and then returned to the arena.

The remaining warriors divided into several groups, each with a leader, and went single file into the arena where the war councillors spoke to them indicating various offences and their penalties. For example, if any warrior were to fail to respond to an alarm (presumably concerning an in-raid), he would be fined a bull. Then the groups began to dance around and through the arena, jumping and bounding as they went. They continued until sundown, when the old men and women went home, leaving the warriors and the girls who feasted there on the food brought by all the women.

Then the warriors and the war councillors went into a banana grove. If the warriors had captured some livestock during the previous night's trip, they brought the customary gift of goats or sheep, food, and beer to the war councillors, who shared these in the customary manner. The war councillors supervised the warriors and *airitu* while they danced, ensuring that they did not engage in sexual activity. (One informant said that the councillors ascertained from each girl the name of the boy she was attached to; just in case she got pregnant through their relationship elsewhere, the elders would know whom to look for.) A man was prevented from joining a dance only if a daughter of one of his age-mates were dancing in it, and this practice would seem to have set the time for a man's retirement from dancing.

The dancing continued until daybreak; then the war councillors asked the warriors to take the girls home. The assembly dispersed.

Mbogo Ngicuru, who described this sequence to me, said that while the warriors were dancing in the arena, one war councillor rose and announced that the circumcisions for a new age-set would now begin. The process of age-set formation was a complex one, and this announcement would appear to have marked a "point of transition" within the age-set sequence; its significance will be evaluated when discussing age-set formation in the next section.

#### *Case 7: An Age-Set's First Raid*

Raiding enemy tribes for livestock (and women), and in the process achieving fame in fighting, were dominant concerns of warriorhood in Embuland. The first raid was important for a young man, contributing to the legitimization of his new rôle. Kibariki described the

procedure whereby new warriors put pressures upon their elders for organizing a raid:

The members of a new age-set had no experience of raids, but they knew and discussed the importance of going on raids. Before they could really organize a raid, their intent had to be announced to the public. They would choose one of their members, perhaps bolder than the rest, to make this announcement at a dance (no special Embu term for him). At a dance assembly one evening, this spokesman would say, "Now I have stopped this dancing from today". In the bustle of the dance, although the message would be heard and understood, it would be ignored. The spokesman then would go to get a branch from a *mutura*<sup>23</sup> tree and would plant it in a hole in the middle of the dancing field. This signal could no longer be ignored, and it served effectively to disperse the dance; the girls especially knew that they were not wanted in the dancing field any more and would run off to their homes. All members of the new age-set now hastened to put necklaces<sup>24</sup> round their necks; after this, they could not dance or have anything to do with girls until they had gone on a raid. Unmarried warriors of older age-sets were expected to follow suit; failure to do so brought charges of cowardice. Even some considerably older men put on the necklace. News of the event would spread throughout Embu country, and one saw warriors wearing necklaces everywhere. Then the war councillors had to think about meeting and deciding when and where the warriors would go on a raid.

New warriors, then, were not mere passive recipients of their seniors' instructions. Knowing the cultural emphasis on the importance of raiding, they could force the war councillors to organize a raid so that they could gain the necessary experience. Following an examination of age-sets as corporate groups, I shall survey the pattern of raiding, the rewards awaiting a conspicuous warrior, and the structure of authority in raiding parties.

### *The Age-Set*

Some weeks or months after his circumcision a warrior learned the name of his age-set. For a new and inexperienced member, his age-set was probably important and largely determined his inter-

23. "Small, sturdy, multi-branched, thorny tree (*Solanum aculeastrum*) (used for surrounding cattle enclosures)." B.481, DG.538.

24. *Nthage* (not found in Benson 1964) refers to this necklace as well as to the beads in it. Uninitiated girls wore these necklaces as ornaments, and the new warriors needed only to borrow these from their younger sisters. My informant believed that the Kikuyu warriors, too, used these necklaces in a similar context.



actional patterns, but the members of an age-set would not move as a corporate group through later warriorhood, let alone elderhood. Individual paths were divergent. At the moment, however, I am interested in the corporate group: How was an age-set formed, and how did age-sets follow one another? Structurally, age-sets could be said to be named corporate groups, arranged serially in time, but the phenomenal reality was rather more complex.

### *The Formation of Age-Sets*

Circumcision made individuals available for warriorhood, and the warriors would be grouped into named age-sets. The Embu gave little formal notice to the grouping of individuals into age-sets, but it can be analyzed into three steps:

—Potential “points of transition” between the age-sets were established, possibly one every year;

—Following some memorable local events, an age-set would be given a name X in one area and another name Y in another area without any co-ordination;

—During later months and years these names would show a tendency towards standardization over larger areas and longer time-spans, but uniformity throughout Embuland would rarely be achieved.

Now I consider the process more closely.

*Separation of age-sets.* In Case 6 I quoted Mbogo as saying that “while the warriors were dancing in the arena, one war councillor rose and announced that the circumcisions for a new age-set would now begin”. Every year, circumcisions were closed during a month or two of the hot, dry summer, and the Kivata dance (and this announcement) probably marked the reopening of circumcisions. Were the initiands during each “circumcision year” to constitute a corporate group, it could be called an *annual set*, but there is no evidence for it. The Embu did refer to a “large age-set” and a “small age-set”,<sup>25</sup> and it is likely that small age-sets were formed every two or three years, later being merged into larger age-sets; I return to this question below.

*The naming of age-sets.* This was an unorganized, casual affair in Embuland. To illustrate, I describe the manner in which the age-sets of my two major informants received names.

Mbogo gave the following account for the origin of his age-set’s name, *Gatego*. Some time after his circumcision, the war councillors of the Embu and the Gicugu (that is, the Kikuyu district immediately west of Embuland) took an oath of mutual co-operation, thus sus-

25. Large age-set: *irua*, pl. *marua*; small age set: *karua*, pl. *turua*. Cf. B.406-7 for contrasted usage among the Kikuyu.

pending hostilities (see Case 9). They organized a joint Embu-Gicugu dance on an uncultivated ridge, Ngiinda, between their respective territories. Warriors and *airitu* from both sides came to the dance, and the war councillors supervised the proceedings. They explained to the Embu warriors the Kikuyu custom of interfemural intercourse (*ngwiko*; penetration was specifically prohibited); the warriors and *airitu* then retired to huts in order to engage in *ngwiko*. Mbogo and a friend of his had Kikuyu girls with them, and they thought they would try intercourse with penetration. When they tried to remove the girls' leather aprons, the girls got up and started making noises. Mbogo's friend's girl began saying "Oo-oo-ii, I have done *ngwiko* with *gatego*".<sup>26</sup> The disorder led the war councillors to summon all who were present there, and Mbogo had to pay a goat in fine for misbehaviour. Mbogo could not explain why the girl should have used the word *gatego* here, but he was positive that his age-set's name originated in this encounter.

Kibariki's age-set's name *Kiamate* is derived from the Kiambu verb *amata*, meaning "seize". Dr. Crawford, an early missionary from the Church Missionary Society, about 1911, gathered a group of young boys and, it is said, circumcised them himself; people disapproved of this, and in order to prevent the doctor from repeating his action, they seized many boys—some under-age—and circumcised them in one lot. Kibariki had been circumcised before Dr. Crawford did the operation, but he learned his age-set's name—*Kiamate*—later on: one had to get healed, have his hair shaved, and so forth, before the age-set name was given. *Kiamatama*, the preceding age-set, gave them this name, Kibariki said; age-set names are mocking in nature generally, and the senior warriors used to ridicule them before the girls, 'these boys were seized for circumcision'.<sup>27</sup>

While the senior age-set members around the Mission Station were calling the new warriors *Kiamate*, it is almost certain that those who lived ten or fifteen miles away were using other names. In course of time one name might prove to be generally popular, and then it would displace the others.

*Diffusion of names and aggregation of age-sets.* Although the details are obscure, one may sum up the above discussion thus. A few weeks or months after his circumcision, a warrior knew who his fellow

26. *Gatego* means syphilis in Kiambu and Kikuyu (B.437). News about the new disease may well have spread to the Gicugu but not to the Embu by the time of this event.

27. Petero (1959:8), writing a local history of the Anglican Church in Kiambu, provides tangential support for this version of the missionary's rôle in boys' circumcision.

age-set members would be. Senior warriors used derogatory terms of reference for the new warriors, and these terms served in lieu of an age-set name for a while. Every few years an unusual, dramatic event occurred, and it provided a name for a new age-set.<sup>28</sup> What part the senior warriors played in selecting these more enduring names is not entirely clear. As the years passed, it is likely that the name of an especially notable age-set would be applied to several temporally adjacent age-sets too; but this would follow many separate, dispersed choices, not a single tribe-wide decision. (Cf. Gulliver 1958:905-9 for a parallel among the Turkana.) Reciprocally, age-set names implied not sharply defined periods of initiation but, instead, broad categories of time which one could compare with the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the post-war period, the Korean War and so forth.

#### *The Age-Set as a Corporate Group*

An age-set had a mild sort of corporate identity, manifested in a variety of situations. When a particular dancer received praise, it is said, his age-set would be mentioned too, and thus the whole age-set would be honoured. Kibariki said that raiding parties were organized in terms of age-sets, and the warriors of an age-set were responsible for protecting any war councillors who might be guiding them during a raid; neglect in this responsibility would bring them a bad reputation. During the generational succession ceremonies the age-sets sat in separate lines. If a man were visiting a strange neighbourhood, some of my informants said, he could seek out company amongst his age-mates there.

Presumably to strengthen age-set solidarity, men were prohibited from dancing with or marrying age-mates' daughters (see a parallel in the generational system); if a man did in fact marry an age-mate's daughter, the penalty was probably variable, separation being required in some of the cases.

Towards members of a senior age-set, my informants generally agreed, the members of a new age-set had to be respectful. At least

28. On the basis of information recorded in the early thirties, Lambert (1956:24) has published a table of thirteen 'circumcision sets' and three 'regiments' (corresponding with my 'small age-sets' and 'large age-sets') between about 1883 and 1935—when the age-set formation faded away. His first age-set during this period is Mwatham (Mwatham in my records) and the last one is Njanduru (Njanduru in my records).

I secured a list of 48 age-sets. In this list, Mwatham appears as No. 27 and Njanduru as No. 48, giving me 22 age-sets where Lambert recorded thirteen (all Lambert's names appear in my list of twenty-two, in roughly the same order). My evidence does not support Mr. Lambert's statement that a new regiment would be formed every thirteen years: it should be clear that the situation did not permit such regularity.

in the earlier stages of an age-set's formation, its members faced some mockery and ridicule; but this could not last long, for soon the members of the new age-set would be strong enough—and, especially, one would think, cohesive enough—to be able to protest against any high-handedness on the part of their seniors.<sup>29</sup>

A more enduring sort of respectfulness was apparently expected towards the war councillors and other elders. One informant maintained that a warrior who interrupted a war councillor during a meeting would be beaten up with war clubs. In any case, the war councillors provided the warriors with some guidance and control, especially in matters concerning dancing and raids.

### Raids, War Heroes, and War Councillors

The warriors, then, legitimized their new membership in this rôle through participation in raids upon neighbouring peoples. Here I turn to the organization and conduct of raids, the rewards for outstanding performances and the punishment for poor ones, and the nature of leadership among Embu warriors.

#### *The Pattern of Out-raids*

Before describing a specific raid wherein Mbogo (son of Ngicuru) participated, I present Kibariki's account of the general organization of raids. He told me that the "governing *riika*"<sup>30</sup> used to make itself a fire near the place where the warriors danced. During these dances they discussed the desirability of raids on other tribes, especially the Cuka and the Kikuyu (see Fig. 1).

Early in planning a raid, the war councillors went to the diviner.<sup>31</sup> (They sought to ensure that aliens, that is, members of other tribes resident in Embuland, did not learn of the deliberations at the diviner's.) The diviner advised them about the time and about any misfortunes that needed anticipation, but he did not accompany a raiding party.

Shortly before or after this consultation, some war councillors went into enemy country and sought to ascertain the location of sizable

29. One informant said that the elders appointed a senior warrior to instruct a new age-set, but this rôle appears to have carried no Embu name. It may have been an informal, occasional arrangement. Here it may be mentioned that training in the use of weapons took place primarily within the homestead, a boy learning from his father or other senior agnate.

30. *Riika* generally refers to a (genealogical) generation; but I suspect that he was using this word here in a diffuse sense to refer to elders, especially the elders who had opted for membership in the war council.

31. The Embu use the term *mundu mugo* (see Chapter 4) to refer to the rôle that combined the abilities to divine the cause of a sickness or other misfortune and to prescribe and administer the necessary cure. I use the terms 'diviner' and 'medicine man' to refer to this single rôle.

herds of livestock. Upon return they met the other councillors and decided the time and place of the raid and the size of the raiding party. The war councillors then went to their neighbourhoods, told the local warriors of the decisions, and asked them to get ready. The warriors went home and asked their mothers or wives to make a thick millet food for the raid.

Before leaving on the raid, if the diviner had forecast misfortune, the raiding party performed a ceremony to purify their weapons in a field west of the Rupingazi stream, called Riamiringa, on the way to the Kikuyu, and in other fields when raiding other peoples. Kibariki had not seen this ceremony and could give no details, but he said that a leader might seek the help of God (Ngai) even in the absence of adverse divination. The Embu believed that a man's herd became vulnerable to raiders or disease if he refused to give milk to his uterine kin (MoBr's, MoSi's, MoPa's and others, collectively called *mwivua*). While leading a raid, then, a man would say, "May we go to a place where someone has refused to give milk to his *mwivua*!" and each follower would hold his hands open, low in front, in a stance that might be used for receiving things, and then would raise the hands, saying in assent, "*Caai, caai!*"

The war councillors (presumably the ones who had gone spying earlier) then led the raiders into enemy country. Their target would be just the herd previously sighted, and they expected to catch the enemy unawares. Each warrior reached for as many cattle as he could control and a woman, if possible. Whatever he acquired and succeeded in herding back would be his. One of the raiders sounded the horn, signalling the time to return. The party's rear was protected by war councillors held in reserve to fight off enemy warriors who might try to recoup their livestock being driven away.

*Purification of weapons.* If, during the raid, a warrior had killed an enemy and captured his weapons, these weapons had to be purified. First, the elders (the war councillors and others) held a ceremony at Riamiringa. Whatever the number of enemy killed, one goat was sacrificed.<sup>32</sup> The elders killed the goat and ate its meat. Its blood was

32. This sacrifice has several equivalent names, for example, *mburi ya gutunga matumu*, "the goat to go and meet the spears". The goat was provided by the father or other senior agnate (designated "father" in the text) of one of the warriors who had killed an enemy. This senior agnate would engage in the ritual intercourse mentioned later. He had to be a man whose wife was (1) alive, and (2) not menstruating or otherwise taboo for copulation. One informant said that the copulation had to take place in a hut "where no blood was flowing"—where there was no *maambura*, such as childbirth, or a son or a daughter's circumcision.

smear on the weapons to be cleansed, and the weapons were wrapped in the leaves of *maririma* and *mionge* trees (not identified). Some of the blood and lime were spread on the warriors' path home; they would step on these, contributing to their own cleansing.

The warrior who had killed an enemy then took the (enemy's?) weapons to his father. In the evening the father put the weapons horizontally under his hut's eaves and during the night copulated with his wife. This would purify the weapons, for "they thought that the weapons had death, and this death could be washed (cleansed) by the sex act". The next morning the father unwrapped the weapons. That day, the heads of the warriors who had killed enemies would be shaved—another way of cleansing them and giving them recognition—and then they danced and were very happy.

*The war councillors' share of the booty.* Their role had prevented most war councillors from capturing livestock for themselves. Upon return every warrior who had captured a cow or a woman contributed a sheep or a goat to a pool for his neighbourhood. This collection went to *one* of the war councillors from this neighbourhood; each war councillor received the collection in rotation. Any war councillor who had captured livestock during the raid retained his booty and contributed appropriately to this pool.

My informants likened a war captive to a slave, entirely at his captor's mercy. However, a woman was likely to become her captor's wife fairly quickly and would make little or no attempt to escape to her natal country. Male captives were more of a problem. From the captor's viewpoint, the best thing was for the captive's kin to bring in livestock in compensation for the release of the captive. Failing such an offer through war councillors (see next section), the captive might ask the captor to adopt him. As we shall see later, however, such adoptees continued to feel the pull of their native land, and they escaped often.

An Embu person killed in battle would be called a *njamba*,<sup>33</sup> a hero; but mourning for him would be the same as for other deaths. If an enemy raiding party were to lose any warriors or weapons during a raid into Embu country, the Embu would proceed with the cleansing described above.

The following account of an Embu raid upon the eastern Kikuyu draws upon the memory of Mbogo.

33. *Njamba* (s. and pl.), "1. redoubtable warrior, man of prowess, fierce character, hero. 2. male animal, uncastrated bull or he-goat (not a ram); (of poultry) cock." (B.331).

*Case 8: A Raid on the Gicugu (ca. 1905)*

The Gicugu are a part of the Kikuyu tribe and live beyond the western border of the Embu. The Kiye, the Ruingazi, and several minor streams flowed through the intermittently cultivated land between the two peoples. Mbogo said that he went on this raid upon the Gicugu as a war councillor, having already paid the necessary goat to the other war councillors.

The war councillors planned a raid with the diviner's advice. Following a raid, he might suggest another immediately or one after three or four moons. In the war council discussions, one councillor would stand up and give his opinion; others would listen. Then another councillor gave his opinion. In this setting, those who had gone to many battles and had helped achieve victory were the most respected because of their experience. The war councillors would break the news about an impending raid at a dance, telling the warriors to be ready in two or three days and not to engage in excessive sexual activity, for that would weaken them.

Before this particular raid, following a Kivata dance (Case 6), the warriors, the *airitu*, and the war councillors moved into the banana groves for further dances. There the war councillors gave the warriors details about the planned raid on the Gicugu and told them to paint their shields and to prepare for the raid. Next day the warriors began painting the shields<sup>34</sup> and told their mothers to make them food for the raid. They also selected distinctively marked pieces of rope for capturing livestock.

All healthy young men were expected to participate in raids; reluctance was ridiculed and, possibly, penalized. One exception to this rule was the man whose homestead had *maambura*, that is, whose wife (first, if he had several) was menstruating or whose daughter was recovering from clitoridectomy: "It would not be proper to go and shed other people's blood when there was blood in his own house; . . . if he were to go on a raid under these conditions, he was liable to be killed in battle."

Next day, they left home with their shields and other equipment and went to a dance. After dancing a great deal, the warriors took the

34. The Embu shields were made by part-time specialists (*s. mwara*, pl. *aara*) from the thick hide of large wild animals like the buffalo. (According to Orde-Browne (1925:119, 240) the tribes of this area made shields using ox-hide, although herds of wild buffalo also roamed there.) The hide was dressed, stretched over a wooden frame, and held in position with thin skin ropes. White, red, and black paint would decorate the shield. This decoration, one's headgear, and one's feathers, Kibariki said, "frighten your enemy with your power . . . leave an impression of ferociousness on your enemy".

*airitu* to their homes. That night the war councillors told them to start for the raid. They camped *en route* at Nguvuiu, entered the forest the next morning, and moved towards Gicugu country. When they had crossed the Kiyé stream, the war councillors asked them to wait. The councillors went forward to scout where the cattle were, returned, and proceeded to plan the raid.

The raiding party was divided into two groups: one including Mbogo and the war councillors went west, beyond the location of the cattle, then south towards the herd. The shepherds, unprepared, ran away, leaving the cattle to the raiders. Each warrior put his rope round an animal, only one cow or bull (apparently to ensure mobility while returning), but one could capture as many goats and sheep as possible in the same way.

Mbogo's group drove the cattle to the Kiyé stream. There they met the second, smaller group, coming south along the stream, just in case Gicugu warriors were waiting there. There weren't any. They crossed the Kiyé near Kibugu. Having helped the cattle across, the war councillors returned to Gicugu country and met the enemy warriors. The latter retreated. The Embu did not pursue them; they returned to Kibugu, waited there until sundown for the enemy, and then went east across the Rupingazi.

Returning home, everyone who had captured a cow, a bull, or more than one goat gave one goat for the war councillors; anyone who had captured only one goat provided them with beer. These fees went to those war councillors, such as Mbogo on this trip, who had not captured anything on their own. None of these went to the warriors in the second party, for they might well have met the herd and captured animals themselves.

A raid upon the Gicugu took only a day. If the warriors of western Embu went to raid the Cuka, who bordered the eastern Embu, it might last three to five days.

Mbogo maintained that the war councillors ensured bravery on the part of the warriors by rewarding them with a goat if they fought well and killed an enemy, and imposing a fine of a goat if they had failed to participate in the fighting. The next section describes the recognition given for conspicuous bravery.

### *The War Heroes*

The Embu placed a high value on their warriors' personal bravery. Courage in battle was rewarded with praise and, in some cases, a goat. My informants indicated several degrees of bravery. At its simplest, a new warrior announced his decision to achieve membership in the



war council during a raid; and if he killed an enemy or otherwise demonstrated his abilities, he acquired the right to pay a goat and enter the war council.

More daring would be a decision to leave fellow-warriors driving the booty home, in order to join the war councillors defending the rear. Most dramatic, however, was the following kind of probe into enemy territory, described by Kibariki:

No honour was due a man who killed an enemy while large groups were lined up on both sides; he would be told it was just luck that he got an enemy. However, while they were herding their booty home, some brave people would say, 'Cuka are chasing us now; and if we aren't careful, we'll lose all these'. One or two of the warriors would then go back, passing the war councillors who were guarding the rear of the returning party, to the place where women and children could be heard screaming, 'They've taken our cattle away'. These brave men would hide themselves, waiting for the enemy warriors to set out for their livestock. These brave warriors then tried to kill any of the enemy warriors they could get; since the enemy warriors did not expect them there, these brave warriors might succeed in killing several enemies and capturing their weapons; they then returned to their party. This action would impress the bravery and fearlessness of the raiders upon the raided people, and they would think, 'Let them take the cattle, we shall at least save our lives'. These brave raiders would then be respected and honoured. They had captured cattle, then had gone back to kill more enemy warriors and had acted as war councillors.

### *The War Council*

Demonstration of talent in raiding enabled a warrior to claim admission into the war council; or its members, noticing his abilities, might invite him to pay the appropriate goats and join them. Most common was the man who, after marrying and starting a family, would begin to make the payments of elderhood: in his earlier years he might become a member of the war council; later on he might drop out of the war council with its strenuous responsibilities and appear increasingly among the elders assembled to hear and settle disputes. Or if he had persisted as a warrior, in later years he would feel the impropriety of his rôle as his sons approached circumcision and warriorhood themselves; he would then be expected to move on towards the elders' councils. He might encounter his father among them, but the elders were believed to behave with restraint and could associate with each other without raising difficulties. From warrior-

hood to the war council and other elderhood contexts, then, there were several passages. A man could choose a time over a ten or fifteen year period, and he could choose his destination: membership of war councils or particular elders' councils was not incumbent.

Informants thought that one out of ten warriors might have become war councillors, but the line between the war council and other contexts of elderhood appears to have been thin—and easily crossed. I shall discuss the elders' councils later. Here I am concerned with the implications of membership of a war council: internal control over the warriors; meeting in-raids and initiating out-raids; and establishing individual relations with elders of neighbouring tribes and forging inter-tribal raiding alliances.

*Internal control.* For several months every summer, it appears, the war councillors lived in special huts built in banana groves. Their wives brought them food and the warriors firewood. There they planned raids and dances; they also went to the dances and other events in order to exercise some control, maintain some order, and to supervise the warrior-*airitu* contacts, at least to the extent of learning who was going with whom.<sup>35</sup>

*Raids.* Besides taking the lead in meeting in-raids, the war councillors helped organize out-raids. As we have seen, they scouted enemy territory for the target herd, took decisions about the time and tactics of raiding, led the raiding party, helped the tired warriors in the later stages of fighting, and protected the rear as the younger warriors drove the captured booty home. In return, the war councillors received a share of the booty.

*External relations.* We have noted that fairly large numbers of people from every adjacent tribe had come to Embu country for various reasons. These immigrant-adoptees appear to have served as go-betweens in establishing relations of cordiality between the Embu, as represented by war councillors, and the leaders in their natal tribe. I heard particularly about (i) mutual adoptions to promote trade and (ii) alliances between neighbouring peoples for raiding a third tribe. Cordiality relationships appear to have been most frequent between the Embu and the Kikuyu. The most frequent trade items were probably weapons and tools from the Kikuyu to the Embu, in return

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35. One informant mentioned another intra-tribal function for them: supervising the taking of the oath required from everyone accused of possessing or using poison. This appears to be rather more likely to have been associated with the general elders' council, the *kiama*.

for livestock; and the raiding alliances were usually directed against the Cuka to the east.

### **The External Relations of the Embu**

The peoples living on the south-eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya (Fig. 1), namely the Kikuyu, the Embu, the Mbeere, the Cuka, and the Meru were separated from each other by rather sharp natural boundaries. Streams of modest size lie between the Kikuyu and the Embu in the west and the Embu and the Cuka on the east, while the wet Embu highlands merge with the hot, dry, semi-arid southern Mbeere plain over a formerly uncertain zone of separation, several miles wide. The Embu have no shared traditions on the origin of these boundaries. As one informant said, "When I was growing up, I found the boundaries there". My informants suggested that the boundaries emerged at particular streams because these proved to be rather difficult barriers, but I did no surveys to judge whether the Kiye in the west and the Thuci in the east were in fact larger streams, flowing through steeper valleys, than other streams in the area. I proceed now to survey the inter-tribal relations across these boundaries.

#### *Hostile Relations*

The pattern of raids between the Embu and the Kikuyu has already been described. From the Embu viewpoint, their armed strength was about evenly matched with that of the Kikuyu, and their raiding techniques similar. The Cuka, in contrast, are believed to have been weaker and, in late nineteenth century, entirely defensive. The defensive posture of the Cuka is also mentioned by an early administrator: . . . an attack by the Embu . . . took place under a capable '*muthamaki*' or warleader named Njeru Karuku; there were possibly two raids by the Embu, another being under Muntua Ikuru, in about 1870, while the first mentioned raid was about 1890. This raid, or these raids, left no permanent effect on the Cuka, and did not alter the boundaries; it did, however, have the effect of inducing the Cuka to take energetic measures for defence. They obliterated some roads; altered others to make them worse; and built long tunnels of boughs woven into growing trees, over the roads in suitable spots; on the inside there was a small clearing to enable the raiders to be killed one by one as they came through the narrow tunnel. The rocky gorges and precipitous hills which run the length of Cuka N.W. to S.E. materially assisted this method of defence; and it was so successful that the Cuka have not been seriously raided

since it was introduced. The name of the ingenious patriot who invented the system has unfortunately been forgotten . . . . To defend themselves from the prowling Meru (whose wish to 'blood their spears' made their young men gratuitously aggressive) coming through the Forest, the Cuka contrived to fell trees, dig pits, and encourage a tangled undergrowth so as to form a sort of barrier along the inside of the Forest, some two or three miles above the plantations; the remains of this barrier—still rather a difficult obstacle to cross—are to be seen still . . . . (Crampton, 1927 manuscript; cf. Orde-Browne 1925:30-33.)

These defences apparently protected the Embu as well as the Cuka from Meru attacks. Informants recalled one abortive Tigania attack through the Mt. Kenya forest, but it is unclear what arrangements they had to make with the Meru sub-tribes on the way.

The Embu warriors left the Mbeere alone most of the time, though an occasional raid cannot be ruled out. In any case, it was in aid of the Mbeere that they fought the Kamba in a battle, about 1900, recalled by several informants. (Cf. Michuki 1962:84.) Afflicted with a famine in their own land, a large party of Kamba men and women had raided the Mbeere, had captured their livestock in large numbers, and appear to have advanced close to the south-eastern tip of Embuland, south of the Kyeni-Mbeere border (Fig. 2), when the Embu responded to Mbeere pleas for help. Upon learning that the Embu warriors were approaching, the Kamba men are said to have turned back, driving captured livestock home, and leaving their women, dressed as warriors, to fight the Embu. Other informants say that rain fell during the battle, rendering the Kamba bows—and poisoned arrows—unusable; or they may have been too far from home to be truly effective. In any case, the Embu recall their pleasure at the large number of Kamba women, dressed as warriors, captured during that battle.

It remains only to recount the two or three brief, deep Masai thrusts into Embu country. Informants thought that the Masai came across Kikuyuland, possibly with Kikuyu collaboration, but they could as well have come south, through the forest, even though they made contact with the Embu in areas adjoining the Kikuyu. The Masai too came for livestock, a desire that my informants credited the Embu warriors with having frustrated.

### *Cordial Relations*

The raids and the hostility between tribes were tempered with the rewards for co-operation. The generational succession ceremonies in the next chapter will refer to the ritual interaction and co-operation

between the Embu, the Mbeere, and the Cuka; indeed one informant mentioned a sacred grove at Kathiga, south-west of Embu country, where Embu and Mbeere elders occasionally met their Kikuyu counterparts to discuss cessation of raids on each other and, possibly, raiding alliances against the Cuka. Adjacency, refuge from drought and famine, and trade provided other contexts for co-operation.

Mbogo describes below a gathering of Kikuyu and Embu elders in a no-man's land between the Rupingazi and the Kiye streams.

*Case 9: An Oath of Inter-tribal Co-operation (ca. 1900)*

At the time, the Ngiinda area (present-day Nguviu and Kibugu sub-locations, and a recent focus for intense land litigation, see Case 17) was covered with bush, for the Embu and the Gicugu peoples, afraid of each other's attacks, did not cultivate there. How the following ceremony was organized is not clear; some traders or adoptees may have helped. In any case a large number of Embu and Kikuyu men, warriors and elders, assembled in Ngiinda for the ceremony of *kuuna mburi* (to break a goat) in order to establish long-term peace.

In this ceremony a mature she-goat, which had already borne kids, was tied firmly to the ground inside a large circle of Embu and Kikuyu spectators. Elders of both tribes had brought with them a stick each, which their own older men and women had comminated with mystical power (*urogi*) and now proceeded to take the oath. An Embu elder would take a stick brought by the Kikuyu, hit the goat with the stick, and say, "If an Embu warrior attacks a Kikuyu cultivator in this area, he will die like this". After a number of Embu and Kikuyu elders had hit the goat in this manner, it died. Then the *athuri a ngome* (Senior Elders? see Chapter 4) from both sides ate the goat's meat. The warriors only watched the proceedings.

Embu participants in this ceremony came from the Ngandori area and the Kikuyu from adjacent Gicugu. Henceforth, the women from the two tribes would be able to cultivate right up to a third stream lying between the Rupingazi and Kiye streams, while their warriors kept a protective eye over them. It was soon after this ceremony that the elders of the two sides held a dance for their warriors and *airitu* in this area (pp. 31-32).

The peace and the co-operation so established were, at best, fragile. The difficulty lay partly in the fact that the participants in the ceremony came only from adjacent Embu and Gicugu country; also, the oath was designed to protect cultivators in only a limited area. When some years later the Gicugu warriors went to raid people in Kyeni, the Ngandori warriors, learning of the attack, went south to intercept the returning

metal tools who wanted to be adopted in Embu country. He agreed to adopt one of them, Mbutuimwe; the others would have to look for other adopters.<sup>36</sup> The following adoption ceremony took place in Mbogo's homestead; soon thereafter, much of it was repeated in the adoptee's homestead in Kikuyuland, with Mbogo as the adoptee. I refer to Mbogo and his adoptee jointly as the partners.

On the day of the ceremony all the elders of Mbogo's clan from his neighbourhood came to his homestead. Mbogo took a he-goat from his flock and gave it to Njugugua, a senior lineage-mate. Gaconde, a medicine man, had also come with some white lime (*ira*), a notched stick,<sup>37</sup> and some branches from *mukengeria* and *mukenia* trees, often used in ritual contexts. *Ira* lines were drawn from the goat's nose to its head, and the partners were asked to kill it. The adoptee held its hind legs; Mbogo held the front legs and strangled it. The medicine man pierced the blood artery in its neck, letting the blood fill a small container, wet the branches with the blood, and applied it to the partners' foreheads, hands, knees, and feet. Njugugua and the medicine man skinned the goat partially. The medicine man then asked Mbogo to sit on the goat's right-hand side, hold a notched stick and the knife used in skinning in one hand, hold the goat's head in the other hand, put the stick and the knife into the hole in the goat's neck, and keep these there; then he asked the adoptee to come and hold Mbogo's wrist while sitting on the goat's left-hand side. Then Mbogo said,

"This man, I am now adopting him as my brother, and if anything belonging to him gets lost in my house, let this oath kill me.

"This person is my real brother, and if he does not belong to my clan from now on, may this oath kill me.

"I shall help this man throughout my life in trading with his tools; if I don't, may this oath kill me."

The partners then exchanged places and the adoptee said that he was adopting Mbogo into his own clan, that if Mbogo or any other member of Mbogo's clan should get hurt in his house, the oath should kill him, and that he would bring four hoes for Mbogo every time he brought tools for trade in Embu country.

Then the medicine man removed the skin from the goat's right foreleg, cut two leather strips (about one foot long) from this skin,

36. The adopter in Embuland, when visiting his adoptee in Kikuyuland, would be the latter's adoptee there; this tie was designated as one of *muciarua* (Cf. B. 56 for Kikuyu), pl. *aciarua*, a term for both reference and address. (*Guciarua*, to adopt.) The ceremony of adoption was called *guciarua na rukuru*; *rukuru* refers to leather strips mentioned later.

37. *Rurindi*, pl. *nindi*. A stick 18-24" long, from *mugere* tree, stripped of bark about 2" at both ends, with seven notches on the unstripped part, and lime on each notch. Used in a variety of oaths.

## 2

### WARRIORS AND WAR COUNCILLORS

The experiences of warriorhood during adolescence helped in transforming an Embu boy into an Embu man. When he was about fifteen years old, the boy would be circumcised, thus receiving the warrior's primary diacritical mark. The tradition of raiding for live-stock was strong in the cluster of societies in the area, and the Embu trained their young men both to protect their own herds from enemies and also to raid the neighbouring peoples. Besides, during his years as a warrior he would be concerned with dances and courtship and the thoughts of getting a bride and becoming an elder. Embu warriors were members of age-sets, but recruitment into them did not begin or end with the kind of tribe-wide ceremonial characteristic of the Masai, the Tiriki, and other peoples; correspondingly, their corporate activities were modest. One by one, the warriors withdrew gradually from the activities of warriorhood; the age-set did not retire as a corporate group. Its members would remember their set's name, but in later life they would rarely, if ever, act as a corporate group. The following pages survey the Embu procedures for inducting individuals into warriorhood, the principal experiences in that realm, and the major rôles in the related set of activities. The chapter will conclude with a review of the external relations of the Embu.

#### **Becoming a Warrior**

A boy's circumcision marked his transition from the culturally disvalued rôle of a boy (*kavici*, pl. *tuvici*) to the culturally valued rôle of a warrior (*mwanake*, pl. *aanake*). The warriors held the boys in some contempt and, thanks to their superiority with weapons as well as their corporate strength, the warriors exacted a measure of deference from the boys. In this part I examine first the rôle of the uncircumcised boy and then the sequence of ceremonies surrounding his circumcision which moved him into warriorhood.

#### *The Uncircumcised Boy*

As a boy moved away from his mother's hut into his father's wider world, he was expected to take an increasing interest in maintaining the family herd. At times he spent the nights in his father's cattle enclosure, occasionally several miles from his homestead. Whether

raiders. The Embu warriors felt that Kagaari and Kyeni were part of Embu country and should not have been raided even though the people of those parts had not taken the oath. For some time after this both sides stopped cultivating the Ngiinda land, each fearing the other side. Indeed, the Ngandori warriors could also raid a neighbouring Gicugu area for livestock even while the oath was generally believed to be in effect. During the cattle-raid they tried not to spear a Gicugu warrior, but if a fight did develop, well, they fought, and if someone was killed in the fighting, they took the consequences of having sworn the oath.

Mbogo said that this cycle was repeated every few years in the Ngiinda area and, presumably, a similar cycle prevailed between the Kyeni and the Cuka to the east.

While *kuuma mburi* promoted peaceful relations between adjacent populations, a family seeking refuge from famine—or an individual trader—could seek affiliation with Embu society through adoption, forging bonds of fictive kinship and clanship. Thus, Kibariki recalled that, shortly before the colonial arrival, a Mbeere family had been adopted by his grandfather, Ndarathi. Ndarathi's mother had smeared castor oil around the neck of the father of the immigrant family and called him "my son". After the famine they returned to Mbeere country, but many other refugees used to stay behind following every famine, establishing new lineages within their adopter's clan. Ideally, they would henceforth be Embu, but in practice they suffered from several disabilities. The Embu were sharply conscious of the ways in which the neighbouring tribes differed from their own in matters of dress, food, sexual mores, circumcision styles, hospitality, behaviour in battle and so forth, nearly always evaluating their own practices as superior. An immigrant would continue to be perceived as inferior. His strongest handicap, probably, was the fact that he had few or no kin-by-birth who would, if and when necessary, fight or take revenge on his behalf; this made him vulnerable to other people's hostility. His economic position would also be weak: his claims to cultivable land appear to have been relatively uncertain, and he would also have difficulty in acquiring full rights over a locally married woman, normally available through bridewealth payments. A trader, wealthier than the refugees and with only specific interests, may have fared better.

*Case 10: Adopting a Kikuyu Trader (ca. 1905?)*

One day while guarding his crop in the Ngiinda area (see Case 9), Mbogo (son of Ngicuru) saw a group of Kikuyu visitors carrying



and made a hole at one end of each strip (*rukuru*, pl. *nguru*). He fitted one strip on each partner's right hand so that the middle finger came through the hole and the strip's other end was wound around the wrist. These strips were the visible symbols of the new relationship.

The medicine man and Njugugua then skinned the goat completely and butchered it. They gave seven meat pieces to each partner and divided the balance equally between them. Then the medicine man roasted the first fourteen pieces, gave one each to himself, Njugugua, the adoptee, and Mbogo, and the other pieces to the visitors. Each of the partners also gave a foreleg to the public. The medicine man and Njugugua shared the goat's skin, while the medicine man got the goat's head too. The partners took their portions of the meat to eat with their relatives later.

The next day Mbogo and his adoptee left for the latter's homestead, where the ceremony was repeated in large part.

Mbutuimwe lived in the Fort Hall area, some fifty miles west of Mbogo's home. Mbogo said that people from an area that far were not expected to raid the Embu, and therefore the Embu felt no enmity towards them. Mbutuimwe and other traders from that area brought tools, white lime, and pots and exchanged these for small stock. Mbogo believed that neither the traders nor their goods were ever in danger in Embu country. The two of them maintained a visiting relationship for many years. After the administration had been established, Mbogo would go to Fort Hall to buy blankets and would stay with his friend; he later became a chief in the new administration and their visits came to an end.

When Mbogo adopted this Kikuyu trader, about the time the colonial administration was established in 1906, the rôle of the alien trader was already well understood in Embuland. I have noted earlier that coastal traders covered Embuland for several decades prior to the colonial period, since before Mbogo's birth; it is also clear that a few Embu men also traded beyond their borders. Whether or not inter-tribal trade was significant before the coastal influences were felt in the mid-nineteenth century is impossible to tell, but these influences almost certainly strengthened the trader's resources and furthered the legitimacy of his rôle among the societies living on the south-eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya.

## THE GENERATIONAL SYSTEM

Besides the criterion of physical age, which brings coevals together into age-sets, the social structures of many East African peoples also reflect the use of the generation in the organization of corporate groups. A generation can be reckoned in various ways. Anyone born within, say, a 20-30 year period may be said to belong to it; if its opening and closure are marked with sharp cut-off points, possibly with ceremonial, we have a "physical generation". In this case a son cannot always be inducted into a generation-set junior to his father's; the Karimojong (Dyson-Hudson 1963) are an example. In contrast the determinant of membership may be not age but one's genealogical position, so that a son must enter the generation-set next to his father's, and we have a "genealogical generation". In this case some age-mates enter different corporate generations; the Jie (Gulliver 1953) and the Embu generational systems were of the latter sort.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the Embu generations were ordered in two co-existing, parallel "divisions". We shall note the conflicting opinions about the criteria for recruitment into these divisions but, by and large, sons entered the generation following their father's in the father's division. Prolonged, elaborate, co-ordinated, and widespread ceremonies, here called the "succession ceremonies",<sup>2</sup> marked the admission of each

1. Middleton & Kershaw (1965) have surveyed the literature on similar systems among the Kikuyu, Meru, and other neighbouring peoples. The most complete account of a generational system in East Africa is Dyson-Hudson's on the Karimojong of north-eastern Uganda, and I have borrowed his terms and concepts wherever profitable. However, as Ruel (1962:35) has previously noted, of all the age- and generation-systems of East Africa, the traditional Embu system appears to come closest to that of the Kuria.

2. The term *nthuke* (pl. same) refers to a genealogical generation and also to a generational division. (It may be related with the Kikuyu word *thuki* (pl. same), "set, fraternity, gang, section of society, grade", B.528.) What I call the genealogical generation, or the generation in brief, is called a generation-class by Ruel (1962) and a generation-set by Jacobs (1965: 240-42). Since I know of no way to choose between "class" and "set" in this context, I shall use the plain "generation".

The Embu appear not to have named generational grades, that is, the positions that a generation occupied before it was admitted into the groves, during its tenure there, and after its exit.

*Ndwiko* means the whole sequence of ceremonies attending a generational succession.

new generation into the numerous sacred groves, the loci of the generations' principal activities.

The generations controlling the sacred groves could frame new rules or laws for the Embu people, but the exercise of this power probably required that men from all parts of Embuland be assembled: this would occur every ten or twenty years during succession ceremonies in one or the other division. More often used was their presumed capacity to influence rainfall through appropriate ritual in the groves: I shall argue that the Embu placed high value on this mode of alleviating anxieties concerning rainfall. It should also be noted that the operation of what I call the "genealogical effect" permitted only a fraction of the theoretically eligible men to participate in the activities of each generation; consequently, when I mention a generation "moving into power" or "controlling the sacred groves", I am really thinking of those members of the generation who happened to be the right age and had paid their goats of elderhood.

The following pages discuss these aspects of the generational system. If the system appears to be weak, with elaborate ceremonial contrasting with sparse instrumental concerns, at least two explanations are possible. Although H. E. Lambert, a District Commissioner in Embuland, showed keen interest in it in the early thirties, from the Embu viewpoint the system had collapsed almost immediately after the establishment of the administration (for the contributory factors, see Saberwal 1969b). In 1963-64 its only traces were to be found in the minds of a few of my older informants, only one of whom had been admitted into the groves before the colonial arrival. This paucity of knowledgeable informants might explain the thinness of the description; an alternative explanation rooted in the system's developmental cycle will appear later.

### *Generations*

In discussing the corporate nature of the generation and the division and the pattern of succession of the generations, Lambert's list of generations (1956:45) will be a useful point of departure (Fig. 5).

If a man belonged to generation K<sub>2</sub>, all his sons had the right to be admitted to the generation K<sub>1</sub>, after they had paid the goats of elderhood indicated below, but no right of admission to any other generation in the Kimanthi division, whatever their physical age. Any of the sons might, if he or his father wished, seek admission into the other division, the Nyangi; the next section will return to this possibility. A woman's generation was determined by that of her husband, but I do not know how an unmarried mother, living in her father's homestead, would be placed.

Fig. 5: GENERATIONS IN EMBULAND

<i>Kimanthi division (K)</i>			<i>Nyangi division (N)</i>		
<i>Code<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Year<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Name(s)<sup>c, d</sup></i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Name(s)</i>
K6	1782	Maithi	N6	1768	Muranja
K5	1812	Iria	N5	1798	Nyangi
K4	1842	Kubai	N4	1828	Riiyu
K3	1872	Kinyare	N3	1858	Karara
K2	1902	Irungu (Ndure)	N2	1888	Muranja (Merambu)
K1	1932	Kimanthi (Ndiiriri)	N1	1925	Nyangi (Thume)
Ko		Kanyakamburi (Mwita)	No		Muranja (Riiyu)

(a) The code for each generation has two parts. The letter K or N identifies the 'division', and the number (0-6) indicates the generation's place in time, 0 being the most recent, in a manner analogous with contemporary kinship studies (for example, Epling 1961).

(b) These years indicate the time when the particular generation admitted the next generation into the sacred groves: thus, in 1932, K1 inducted Ko into the groves. It should be noted that only the year 1932 is definite; even for 1925 the Embu District Political Record is silent. The year 1888 for the induction of N1 by N2 is almost certainly in error; as Mbogo's account later will indicate, it probably came after 1900. In fact nearly all these dates are based on Lambert's assumption (1950:34-6) that the interval between succession ceremonies was some thirty years. (The 37-year gap between 1888 and 1925 is the only exception; Lambert (1956:42) ascribes the delay to the 1914-18 War and the government officials' opposition to the ceremonies.) This appears to stand entirely on similar assumptions for other East African generational systems and perhaps some assumptions regarding the Embu life-span and other demographic factors.

(c) The table lists two names for each recent generation. Lambert (1956: 63-4) and my informants agree that each generation received a new name at each status-change, and Lambert indicates five such names for each generation:

- (1) its name before admission,
- (2) its name at the beginning of its admission ceremonies,
- (3) its name at the close of its admission ceremonies,
- (4) its name when it admitted the succeeding generation into the groves, and
- (5) its name when the succeeding generation admitted the next generation into the groves.

Thus, when the following discussion labels a name K2.4, this indicates the K2 generation's presumed name during the fourth step above.

(d) Michuki (1962:68) identifies the following alternative names and additional generations: K5: Thathi, K6: Ndegenye, K7: Ibate; N5: Ngunga, N6: Ndamata, and N7: Ndoroma. In other aspects he follows Lambert's account of the generational system.

The goats of elderhood varied in number from four to six or more, and each carried a name; the next chapter will discuss these. Suffice it to say the elders would demand some or all of these before allowing a man to join his generation-mates in the sacred groves. Thus, Mbogo (son of Ngicuru) said that he had paid only two goats when his generation (N1) was admitted to the groves. As the ceremonies approached, his father called together his generation-mates, the N2 elders of their neighbourhood, and gave them two more goats on Mbogo's behalf. The younger N1 men, who may have been mere children when N1 was admitted, could pay their goats to the N1 elders later and join their generation-mates singly. In other words a generation's early

members would make payments to their fathers' generation's elders, and its later members would pay its own elders.

The generation's identity, though weak, was evident in a variety of contexts. At one point in the succession ceremonies, for example, all the members of the in-coming generation: "men and women, boys and girls, even sucking babies" had their heads shaved; everyone would then know who were or were not members of the generation that would control the groves henceforth. The distinctive rôles in the ceremonies for the men and women of the different generations will be made clear later.

In another context a man who married a generation-mate's daughter would have to pay a penalty—a ram or a bull or both—to his generation's elders, including presumably his father-in-law. Traditionally, the WiFa-DaHu relationship was characterized by respect, avoidance, and some strain over bridewealth negotiations and payment, and this expiatory offering may have been designed to ease the strain. One informant said that such a bridegroom would drop out of sacrifices in the grove, but his sons would retain their right to enter the next generation. (This penalty appears not to have been due to marriage with a "generational daughter", if the phrase be permitted, for there was no penalty for marrying a "generational mother". If a man of generation N<sub>1</sub> married a daughter of an N<sub>3</sub> man, the N<sub>1</sub> generation took no notice. We have also noted cases of inheriting one's father's wife who had presumably acquired membership in one's father's generation.)

The following case also illustrates the generation's identity, its separateness from adjacent generations.

*Case 11: Distributing a Goat's Meat Between Generations (ca. 1906)*

*Mburi ya nduo* refers to a goat killed by a father in his homestead when his son approached the age of about ten years. When this goat was killed for Kibariki, a member of the No generation, the goat's meat was divided into two parts. The lungs and the abdominal portion (*kiratu*) went to the men of Kibariki's father's N<sub>1</sub> generation, and the rest of the meat went to men of Kibariki's No generation and his FaFa's N<sub>2</sub> generation because, Kibariki said, these were both Muranja. (Note the alternate generations' identity implied here, to be discussed later.) Had the feast been given for an N<sub>1</sub> boy, the *kiratu* portion would have gone to the N<sub>2</sub> generation, and the balance to the N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>3</sub> generations. Meat at other ceremonies may also have been similarly distributed, but I have no record of this practice.

The fact that the Embu followed the logic of the genealogical generational system rigorously had an important consequence for their

generational organization. The age-span of a sibling group, approximating the span of its mother's fertility, increases in a polygynous household and approaches the number of years of its father's fertility, close to fifty years at its maximum; and even this may be exceeded when an old man arranges visiting mates for his younger wives. Let a couple of generations pass, and the members of one genealogical generation would include many who are dead, some very old persons, and some yet unborn. I call this spread of a particular generation and the coexistence of numerous genealogical generations *the genealogical effect*. The resultant distortion was reflected in the personnel participating in generational activities.

*Case 12: The Genealogical Effect (ca. 1900)*

Kori (son of Ngirambu), who belongs to the senior Nz generation is in fact younger than Mbogo (son of Ngicuru) of the junior Ni generation. When Kori's generation was admitting Mbogo's generation to the groves (described later), Kori was still a young boy and had not paid the goats of elderhood; he saw Mbogo inside the grove but had to stay outside himself and take what pieces of bull-meat he might be given.

*Divisions*

We return now to consider the two coexisting, parallel divisions into which the Embu generations were ordered. Beyond the fact that the divisions were associated with and exercised control over different sacred groves, there is no evidence of any functional differentiation between them. Kimanthi and Nyangi are the names given to the two divisions by Lambert (1956:45), but this may indicate only that the generations of these names were "in power" in the two divisions during the early post-contact years.

To identify this cleavage, my informants used a variety of terms, including the names of the two moieties. Some informants said that each moiety contributed members only to one of the divisions, the Ngua moiety to the Nyangi division and the Gatavi moiety to the Kimanthi division. Indeed, Mbogo said that "Trumbi were the older generation, they bore Gatavi; and Ngua were the older generation who bore Thagana". For this neat tying together of moieties and generations I have no other support. Others maintained that the two divisions drew members from different territories, Nyangi from the north-west and Kimanthi from the south and east. One informant mentioned both moieties and territory to explain the divisions, but both the principles cannot hold since the moieties were said to have

long been dispersed throughout Embuland. For fifteen older informants I have data on residence, moiety, and generation. Their distribution (Fig. 6) lends some support to the hypothesis that the recruitment into the divisions was based on territory and not moiety; that is, a man sought admission for his sons into a grove in his neighbourhood, no matter what his moiety. Information on a larger number of elders, with greater territorial and moiety spread, and an accurate mapping of the groves would be necessary to resolve this issue.

**Fig. 6: DIVISION, MOIETY, AND TERRITORY**

<i>Moiety</i>	<i>Division</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Nyangi</i>	<i>Kimanthi</i>	
<i>Ngua</i>	10	1	11
<i>Gatavi</i>	2	2	4
<i>Total</i>	12	3	15
<i>Territory</i>			
<i>North-west</i>	12	0	12
<i>South and east</i>	0	3	3
<i>Total</i>	12	3	15

Concerning the origin of the divisional cleavage Lambert (1950:43, 1956:42) records a tradition that the Mvaraganu famine, allegedly in the time of the K5 generation, decimated the Embu population. In its wake the Embu decided that it might be safer to have two parallel series of generations in place of one. Then a calamity might affect only one of the generational series and the other would escape. Whatever its origins, the cleavage persisted in Embu society until the collapse of the generational system. For this persistence, both Lambert's and my informants gave similar reasons for its origin.

Many informants also say that some fathers liked to distribute their sons over the two divisions, to have some admitted into one and some into the other, again in order to ensure the survival of at least some of one's sons in case of a disaster. One informant considered meat to be the motive for this dispersal: a man could go to any grove where his son went, hence a wide distribution of sons ensured a good supply of meat. Whatever the motive, in fact such dispersal appears to have been infrequent. In the lineage of Mbogo, I ascertained the generational membership of thirteen males in four generations. Four generations of fathers had influenced the membership decisions, but all thirteen men belonged to the Nyangi division's generational groups. In contrast, Herbert Ndwiga (p.61) said that his father and FaFaFaSoSo both lived in one homestead, yet belonged to different divisions,

and added that this had been done in accordance with the Embu custom of spreading the risk. However, the weight of evidence from several other informants indicates that this practice was infrequent.<sup>3</sup>

Although I have no supporting evidence, it appears to be reasonable to suggest that physical mobility may have been associated with movement across generational divisions. One informant said that punitive action by one's own generation would sometimes persuade a man to leave his division and join the corresponding generation in the other division; presumably the man might also change residence in such a situation. How the Embu generational system responded to migrations during famines and the consequent adoptions is not clear; on the face of it one would expect these migrations to weaken the generational system as well as the other institutions. I shall return to this question in the last chapter.

In concluding this discussion of the structural aspects of the Embu generational system it remains briefly to refer to the special links between alternate generations, that is, between grandfathers and grandsons. As Lambert (1956:42) says of the Embu, "Normally a man belongs to the filial generation of his father's generation and each succeeding generation is the equivalent, or the repetition, of its grandfather generation". For each division, Fig. 5 presents a *series* of names for successive generations; in contrast, some informants would refer to only two alternating generations in a division. Other informants said that a new name given to a younger generation could be retroactively applied to the generation of its grandparents and earlier alternate generations. This "identity" of alternate generations, in name and presumably in sentiment, deserves notice on two counts. First, for the historian of this area, hoping to use the generational names for dating events, this identity confuses the situation thoroughly; whether an event occurred two, four, or six generations ago is seldom clear. Second, for the Embu people, this identity helped simplify some social situations. Thus, Case 14 will present an account of the laying of a public curse, amounting to ostracism, in about 1920. An elder of the Muranja generation (N<sub>2</sub>) led the proceedings for its infliction and an elder each from both the N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> generations led in its later annulment. Owing to alternate generational identity, the N<sub>1</sub> and

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3. Lambert (n.d.:187) says that the existence of parallel divisions enables "a man born 'out of time' a greater chance than in Kikuyu [to belong] to the ruling generation during the prime of his life. . . . When a man belongs to a generation which has assumed office he cannot 'cross the floor', but he can, in certain circumstances, push his son across." However, Lambert does not elaborate and does not assess the frequency of its occurrence, and therefore it is necessary to receive this statement with caution.



N<sub>2</sub> generations would represent all the generations in the Nyangi division. If Kimanthi division were completely unrepresented in that area, the participation of these two elders could be seen to represent all the people living there. (There might be some advantage in selecting such "representatives" on the basis of generations and not descent-based moieties, whose component clans were sometimes adversaries in land disputes. Whether or not the Embu thought in this manner is a question not answered by available data.)

Having described the genealogical generation, the generational division, and the linkage between alternate generations, I proceed now to describe the succession ceremonies admitting new generations into the sacred groves.

### The Succession of Generations

The sons' generation was admitted by the fathers' generation into the sacred groves, "small patches of the original forest, untouched by man". (Lambert 1950:21.) Embuland had a score or more groves, each belonging to one or the other division, its control passing to succeeding generations within the division. There is some indication that the groves of each division were distributed throughout Embuland.

The sacred groves were the principal loci for generational activities. The Embu viewed the succession of generations in terms of changes in control over the groves. Thus, during ceremonies admitting the K<sub>1</sub> generation into the groves, K<sub>3</sub> (that is, the grandfathers of K<sub>1</sub> men) would formally quit the groves, K<sub>2</sub> would move into a senior status, and K<sub>1</sub> would be inducted into a junior status in the groves. This would continue until K<sub>2</sub> and K<sub>1</sub> decided that the time had come for Ko's admission—and K<sub>2</sub>'s exit. The succession ceremonies would then be held again. As one informant said,

. . . two generations [in the same division] held power at any one time, the parent generation and its sons' generation. As time went on, and the grandsons grew up, the sons' generation urged the parents' generation to retire, to make room for the grandsons' generation which might acquire experience of running the country's affairs from the sons' generation.

The K<sub>2</sub> generation might resist the suggestion somewhat, but the K<sub>1</sub> men would persist, motivated also by the prospect of making the Ko men pay additional goats of elderhood, which the Ko men may have long deferred, before admission.

In this section I present three accounts of succession ceremonies held in 1932, 1888(?), and 1902(?) respectively.

1932 ceremonies follows H. E. Lambert, the then District Commissioner, who apparently did much to stimulate their performance. He observed part of the sequence, supplemented it with interviews, and made a full record in the Embu District Annual Report, 1933. The published version (Lambert 1956:62-64) revises this original slightly. I have added a few explanations and indicated most of the places in Fig. 7. Lambert's account gives the feeling of an overview, of the vast distances over which the ceremonial was spread. Complementing this are my interviews with several informants. Mbogo (son of Ngicuru) said that he, with his generation (N1), was admitted into the groves a few years before the administration arrived; his account concerns his local grove primarily, providing an inside view of the ceremonies. These must have followed his marriage (Case 4), making Lambert's date, 1888, seem too early; nonetheless, I retain it for identification. An account of a third sequence comes from Herbert Ndwiga, who apparently observed the admission of K1 (1902?) as an adolescent. Others gave me brief accounts; I have used them where they contradict the general argument.

#### *Succession Ceremonies, 1932 (following Lambert 1956)*

I have numbered the principal steps in this sequence in order to facilitate cross-referencing with the other accounts.

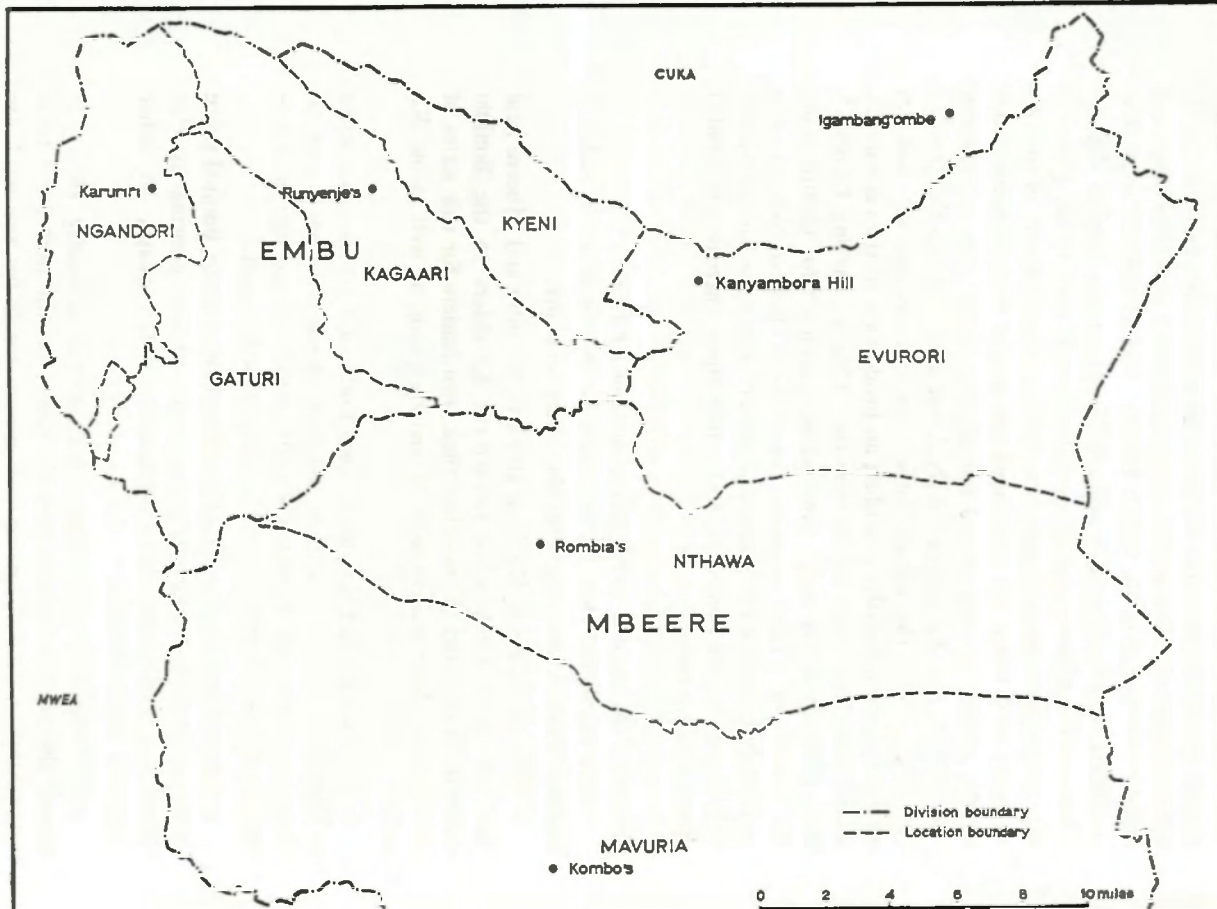
1. Adult members of K2 from all parts of Embu and Mbeere held meetings (a) to decide when to take the K1 elders to the Bonjuki grove in Mwea; and (b) to select their own leaders for this series of ceremonies—these leaders were to include young as well as old K2 men.

2. That day K2 and K1 elders, from Embu and Mbeere, assembled at Kombo's (Mavuria Location, southern Mbeere Division): some of them passed through Kanyambora Hill (north-western Evurori Location) and Chief Rombia's Centre in Nthawa Location.

3. From Kombo's the K2+K1 elders moved on to Bonjuki grove (location uncertain) following an ancient path—its clearing for this occasion specially was not permissible and, perhaps, on other occasions not necessary.

4. In Bonjuki the elders slaughtered a goat ceremonially. Here they appear also to have agreed upon the names for the next generation: Kanyakamburi (Ko.1), an interim name (Ko.2) for use until the ceremonies were completed, and Mwita (Ko.3), the name they would carry until they handed over the groves to the following generation.

FIG. 7: LOCALITIES FOR SUCCESSION CEREMONIES



5. The elders (K<sub>2</sub>+K<sub>1</sub>) then asked the K<sub>0</sub> men to come to meetings in the local sacred groves of their neighbourhoods when the name K<sub>0.1</sub> appears to have been announced to them, but K<sub>0</sub> could not yet enter the local groves.

6. Shortly afterwards the K<sub>1</sub> and K<sub>0</sub> (possibly also the K<sub>2</sub>?) from all parts of the country assembled at Githigiri, near Runyenje's in Kagaari Location. K<sub>0</sub> here received their name K<sub>0.1</sub>. Then they returned to their homes.

7. At their local groves, the heads of all K<sub>0</sub> men and women were ceremonially shaved. Also, the K<sub>0</sub> neighbourhood groups selected their leaders, messengers, and general executive who would make arrangements with K<sub>1</sub> for the ceremonies. (Later accounts will indicate that this was probably the core ceremony from the viewpoint of a new, young initiate.)

8. By now K<sub>1</sub> had received a new name, K<sub>1.4</sub>, Kimanthi, in place of Ndiiriri. Upon receiving instructions from K<sub>1</sub>, K<sub>0</sub> went to Kaguma grove, belonging to all K's, somewhere in Kyeni Location. K<sub>0</sub> entered this grove with K<sub>1</sub> and offered sacrifice; here they received the name K<sub>0.3</sub> from "the correct clan". Then they returned to their homes.

9. Nearer home, they cleared the paths leading to each local grove and sacrificed a goat in each. At this stage, it was said, K<sub>0</sub> had replaced K<sub>2</sub> who had now received a new name (K<sub>2.5</sub>, Ndure).

10. Later, K<sub>1</sub> and K<sub>0</sub> leaders went secretly to another K grove, at Igambang'ombe near Tharia river in south-eastern Cuka. They made another sacrifice and prayed for prosperity and freedom from disease. Then they returned to their homes.

11. The next summons called them to Rukanga, near Kaguma, in Kyeni. Here a bull was sacrificed and its portions taken and eaten in the local groves. This sacrifice too was intended to prevent sickness among cattle and humans. Then they returned to their homes.

12. Soon after came another summons to Rukanga. This meeting in Rukanga appeared to be the most solemn of the whole series. They sacrificed a duiker or a dik-dik. Here they swore an oath: no man would marry a generation-mate's daughter [altered in 1956 to read: "Apparently each leader of the generation swears to maintain the constitution and to obey the customary canons of the tribes"; Lambert 1956: 64].

13. The final ceremony was the sacrifice of a goat in each local grove.

Liaison between the two divisions was maintained through frequent meetings between three elders of each division, who met in some convenient place, not a sacred grove.

5. The elders (K<sub>2</sub>+K<sub>1</sub>) then asked the Ko men to come to meetings in the local sacred groves of their neighbourhoods when the name Ko.1 appears to have been announced to them, but Ko could not yet enter the local groves.

6. Shortly afterwards the K<sub>1</sub> and Ko (possibly also the K<sub>2</sub>?) from all parts of the country assembled at Githigiri, near Runyenje's in Kagaari Location. Ko here received their name Ko.1. Then they returned to their homes.

7. At their local groves, the heads of all Ko men and women were ceremonially shaved. Also, the Ko neighbourhood groups selected their leaders, messengers, and general executive who would make arrangements with K<sub>1</sub> for the ceremonies. (Later accounts will indicate that this was probably the core ceremony from the viewpoint of a new, young initiand.)

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9. Nearer home, they cleared the paths leading to each local grove and sacrificed a goat in each. At this stage, it was said, Ko had replaced K<sub>2</sub> who had now received a new name (K<sub>2.5</sub>, Ndure).

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Liaison between the two divisions was maintained through frequent meetings between three elders of each division, who met in some convenient place, not a sacred grove.

*Succession Ceremonies, 1888 (?)*

As Lambert's account has indicated, the succession ceremonies required substantial co-ordination on the part of people spread over several hundred square miles. Clearly some agency would have to choose one out of several possible years for the ceremonies and to determine at least approximately the days for each tribal gathering. Mbogo mentioned two such agencies in different interviews: the elders of the Ngua moiety (associated with his division, the Nyangi?) and the elders (of N<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>3</sub> generations) of the Kina and Gicuku clans (of Gatavi and Ngua moieties respectively). Another, younger N<sub>1</sub> informant, referring to the same sequence, said that a group of men still sexually active, none of whose children had died or been circumcised yet, went to Kaguma grove, where a man called Nthambara (Igamuturi clan, Gatavi moiety) decided upon the pattern for the ceremonies in the different groves. Whatever the procedural details, it is clear that, in contrast with the circumcisions for warriorhood, the conduct of the succession ceremonies required tribal consensus and was not a local affair. (Lambert's Step 1.) Mbogo said that the ceremonies were held during the summer (*kiaa*) when rain was unlikely and the crops were growing in the fields. There is some indication that the ceremonies were spread over more than one summer.

Early in this sequence, several N<sub>1</sub> men (but not Mbogo) from all over Embu country went to the Uvariri Hill<sup>4</sup> in Mbeere, where they learned their generation's names: Nyangi for men and Maregi for women. (Lambert's Steps 2-4?) Later, other N<sub>1</sub> men from Mbogo's neighbourhood went to receive these men in Kyeni, due east, and fetched one or two of them to their local grove (Lambert's Steps 4-6?).

*The core ceremony.* Near each local grove the young women (who brought thatching grass) and young men (who did the construction) built temporary, long huts for use by the generational elders. (Lambert's Steps 5, 7, or 9?)

Closest to Mbogo's homestead, about a mile to the north, was Karuriri grove, the scene for the following ceremony. Men of the incoming generation had already paid their elderhood goats, and the elders had bartered these for some bulls. The older N<sub>1</sub> men (or their wives?) had also brought some thirty calabashes of beer, and several horns for drinking it were at hand.

To the grove came N<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>, and N<sub>3</sub> men of all ages, but the N<sub>3</sub> men sat at a distance, possibly outside the grove. N<sub>1</sub> women who had

4. The Embu refer to this hill as the residence of men, famous for their esoteric powers, belonging to Kina clan. The special role of Kina and other clans in succession ceremonies is discussed later.

brought beer could enter the grove, but others of their generation had to stay with the No children, restricted to their homes lest "they see their fathers leaving the grove"; these N<sub>1</sub> women learned about the events from others. N<sub>2</sub> women were allowed into the grove freely but not N<sub>3</sub> women. K<sub>1</sub> and K<sub>2</sub> men had come too; "people of all the generations were mixed together". (The presence of Kimanthi men in a Nyangi succession ceremony could mean either that the men of the other division were freely admitted to the groves or that some Kimanthi fathers had earlier secured, or were then arranging, their sons' admission into a Nyangi division.)

Each clan had selected an old man and an old woman, not necessarily husband and wife, for this ceremony. First, an old N<sub>2</sub> man took some white powder (*ira*) and he drew seven lines on the face of each N<sub>1</sub> man (of his own clan?), each time going up from the nose tip to the hair line, and each time saying, *twatua Nyangi*, "we have named (you?) Nyangi"; the other N<sub>2</sub> men repeated in unison, and N<sub>2</sub> women (themselves known as *Mbeta*) added, "and *Maregi*", the N<sub>1</sub> women's name. Mbogo said that his generation had been called Kimanthi until then (its N<sub>1.1</sub> name?).

Then an old woman, wife of the N<sub>2</sub> man above, put castor oil on each N<sub>1</sub> man's face, genitals, and palms so that he could put it on the rest of his body. She also did this seven times to each N<sub>1</sub> man (of her husband's clan?). The N<sub>1</sub> women did not receive this *ira* and oil treatment.

The anointing over, N<sub>1</sub> men arranged themselves so that each age-set sat in a separate row, and all N<sub>1</sub> women made a row of their own. Then the old men who had done the anointing filled their mouths with beer and went along the rows, spraying all N<sub>1</sub> men and women in an act of blessing.

Men of all the three generations (N<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>3</sub>) then received beer. Those of the retiring generation, N<sub>3</sub>, had to drink their beer outside the grove, for they had already admitted their sons, N<sub>2</sub>, to the grove; they could enter the groves at other times, but not on this succession. The bulls too were slaughtered, and all the generations there ate the meat.

By now it was getting late, and the older people asked the younger N<sub>1</sub> men and the N<sub>1</sub> women who had brought beer to go home; the few N<sub>2</sub> women stayed in the grove. The men remaining behind continued to drink beer and eat meat; they also decided to give some more beer to the N<sub>3</sub> men outside.

Soon many of the others had to leave. Except the very old, who were sexually inactive, all N<sub>1</sub> men anointed that day had to go home

and copulate that night. Failure to do so, it was believed, would invite death. Husbands of menstruating women, unavailable for copulation, would not have undergone the anointing that day. N<sub>2</sub> men and women also went home, but copulation was neither prohibited nor prescribed for them that night. Only the very old and sexually inactive N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> men stayed behind, keeping an eye on the meat etc. in the grove.

*Later ceremonies.* For the next six or seven days and nights, the men of N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> (but not N<sub>0</sub> or N<sub>3</sub>) generations stayed in the grove in the long hut mentioned above. They drank beer and ate more meat, killing bulls when necessary; but copulation was no longer required. N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> women who brought them beer were allowed into the grove.

During these days N<sub>2</sub> elders apparently gave N<sub>1</sub> men some instruction concerning generational affairs, authorizing them to receive the elderhood goats (Chapter 4) from the younger N<sub>1</sub> men who had yet to complete payments (who, indeed, might be born later on). N<sub>1</sub> learned from their fathers how to take care of the groves, what to do in case of erratic rains, and some things about organizing raids. Finally, the N<sub>2</sub> instructed N<sub>1</sub> to turn the groves over to N<sub>0</sub>, the Riiyu, when the time came.

Towards the end of these six days, the unmarried and newly married warriors of both N<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>3</sub> generations<sup>5</sup> were asked to go home, but Mbogo stayed with the others of N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> generations for four more days and nights, eating meat and drinking beer. Then, the elders who already had at least one circumcised child asked the others, including Mbogo, to go home and organize the younger N<sub>1</sub> men for singing and dancing in the banana groves: now the N<sub>1</sub> had the groves and would need their own songs and dances.

Mbogo believes that all the men who stayed behind had, before this succession ceremony, visited Kyeni, the eastern fringe of Embuland, in order to learn the customs of the Embu people from some members of the Kina clan. This instruction was believed to be necessary before arranging one's first child's circumcision or clitoridectomy. One could, if one wished, save this journey by going to a man of Kina clan who had learned the customs in Kyeni and lived within a mile of Mbogo's home. Mbogo's father and a father's cousin had gone to him, but Mbogo had made no such trip.

The men who stayed behind had with them branches of *makindu*<sup>6</sup>

5. It is possible that N<sub>3</sub> here represents an error in my fieldnotes, and that it should read N<sub>1</sub> instead.

6. In the next account of the ceremonies, Herbert Ndwiga refers presumably to the same tree as *mukindu*. Benson (1964:224) identifies *mukindu* as a "species of palm (*Phoenix reclinata*)" and *makindu* as fronds of this tree.



tree, brought by the old men returning from Uvariri at the beginning of this sequence. Later, they offered prayers or made sacrifices in the grove, but Mbogo was not there and could not give details.

Following the above ceremony in Karuriri grove, N1 men from all over Embu assembled in Kaguma grove in Kagaari, east of Mbogo's home. They cleaned the grove, killed a big bull, gave its meat to the N2 generation to mark the succession, called their sons (No generation), and announced that they (N1) had taken over the groves. This ceremony was called *gatiinda* (meaning unclear). (Lambert's Step 12?)

A N2 man from Mbeere<sup>7</sup> had come to Kaguma with a big horn, and he "blew it so hard that men in all other groves could hear it, and then they all (of the N1 and N2 generations) flocked to the Kaguma grove for this ceremony". This man from Mbeere then gave a speech. He told the N1 people not to remove any trees from the groves, for if they felled any, rain would disappear, pests would become very numerous, or other misfortune would come. Then he instructed them on the sacrifices required to alleviate such situations.

#### *Succession Ceremonies 1902 (?)*

Herbert Ndwiga lives in Kyeni, the easternmost Embu location. He said that his generation was Irungu, also called Ndiiriri, his father's generation was Kimanthi, and his FaFa's generation was Mwita. An attempt to accommodate this in Fig. 5 will quickly run into difficulties. Ascribing the discrepancies to multiple names and to failure of memory, and assuming that he was describing the admission of the K1 generation into the groves (1902?), I move on to his account.

Ndwiga was very young then, and the administration was yet to be established. During the ceremony he stayed outside the grove but heard about the events from others. The K1 name, Ndiiriri, was probably decided in the Kaguma grove, but he wasn't sure. Before the ceremonies got under way, the K2 elders had given some instruction to the elders of the K1 generation. K2 men had also contributed some food and bartered the collection for a goat to be sacrificed during the ceremony.

On the day of the succession ceremony, people did not work in their fields. Instead they assembled in Kamburi, one of the major

7. Although the Embu and the Mbeere may have synchronized their succession ceremonies, Lambert's list of Mbeere generations (1956:45-6) includes several generational names different from the corresponding Embu names; thus, the N2 among the Mbeere is listed as Kinogu. The multiplicity of generational names, discussed in Fig. 5, may have been responsible for part of this variation.

groves of the K division, and K2 elders, in the presence of the K1 generation, killed the goat.

Men of the Kina, Gicuku, and Igamuturi clans appear to have had special rôles in making sacrifices and leading prayers. On this occasion a Gicuku man led the prayers for rain, good crops, and children; the others said *aaui* in affirmation. Also, two men of Igamuturi clan, Nthambara and his brother, used to "take care of the Ndiiriri and Nyangi generations respectively around here".

After the prayers the goat's neck was pierced, and its blood collected in a calabash and drunk by the elders. The goat was then skinned, and the skin cut into thin strips.<sup>8</sup> Each strip had a hole close to one of its ends. Each K1 elder then got one of these strips, put the third finger of his left hand through the hole, and tied the other end around his wrist. Ndwiga said that this strip marked the man who had gone near the goat during the succession ceremony, and all elders received these at the proper time.

The K1 elders who had received the strip then ate the goat's meat. Smaller meat pieces were also given to all K1 members present, including Ndwiga.

A K2 elder then dipped his fly-whisk in oil and sprayed the K1 people with it, saying, "We have given you the name Ndiiriri". Then he gave a K1 man the branch of a *mukindu* tree (see Note 6 above). People then began to sing the "generational song" and started going home, but K1 and K2 elders stayed back. Later they secretly anointed the K1 man who had received the *mukindu* branch. Ndwiga did not see this man later that day, but heard that he took the branch home, put it under his hut's ceiling, and had intercourse with his wife. As far as Ndwiga knew, only one man had been anointed in the grove. (Ndwiga did not know of any beer having been drunk or any bulls killed or whether any people of the Nyangi division had come to the grove. He did know that the K0 generation had been excluded and that the K3 generation was not there because, he said, it had died out.)

The elders did not have to return to the grove on later days, for no further ceremonies were due. After this ceremony, all the people met in their own separate groves in their areas. (This indicates that he may have been witnessing a ceremony corresponding with Lambert's Steps 6, 8, or 11.)

In reviewing the above accounts of succession ceremonies it is hardly

8. A thin leather strip of this kind is called a *rukuru* (pl. *ngoro*) and is similarly used in an adoption ceremony (Case 10). Mbogo denied their use in succession ceremonies.

necessary to reiterate their dramatic elements. The *ira* marks, the beer or oil sprays, the repetition of acts "seven" times, the shaved heads of a whole generation, the leather strips associated with adoptions, the branches brought from distant places and the prescriptive copulation, all these symbols left their impression on the minds of the observers.<sup>9</sup> By demanding the goats of elderhood as the price for admission, the fathers' generation turned the ceremonies into an important arena for elderhood where the elders would be physically separated from the non-elders. This in turn led to the provision of uncommon quantities of meat and beer. The proceedings included a measure of instruction for the in-coming generation and apparently provided the only formal occasion for tribe-wide interaction in Embuland.

The three accounts of succession ceremonies show considerable variation, and an explanatory note is in order. The first and the third accounts concern the Kimanthi division, the second the Nyangi division, and there may have been some standardized differences between the divisions. The effect of twenty-six years of administration upon the 1932 ceremonies, apparently helped and possibly stimulated by Lambert, is difficult to assess. The differences between the two other accounts may also be due to regional variation; the Karuriri grove lay close to the Kikuyu border to the west, while the Kamburi grove was close to the eastern borders of Embuland. Finally, these two accounts may refer to different stages in the succession sequence.

Despite the variation, the accounts call our attention to the rather heavy concentration of the succession ceremonial in eastern Embuland. Mbogo's local grove was in the west, of course, but elders from that area went east for major ceremonies and also for instruction on Embu customs. Available traditions do not explain the reasons for this or for the fact that the men of Kina clan appear repeatedly in special rôles. There is also the unexplained figure of Nthambara, a man of Igamuturi clan, credited by one informant with determining the pattern of succession ceremonial in the different groves and by another with taking care of Ndiiriri generation. I made no detailed enquiry into his rôle which may have been an incipient version of that of the Mugwe of the Meru (Bernardi 1959); Lambert (n.d.:291) says:

. . . the same idea that [ritual] responsibility is vested in a special

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9. Close analysis and interpretation of these symbols would, no doubt, reveal much about Embu culture, but it would require either detailed observation of the ceremonies or extensive comparison with reports from other societies in the region: I have here neither the data for the former nor the space for the latter.

patrilineal line is found in all the Bantu tribes. In Embu the patrilineal line is a branch of the Igamuturi clan of the Irumbi [moiety]. . . . At the last [succession] in Embu the director of the sacrifices was Nthambara wa Magu. He is now dead and it is said that his successor has not yet been determined; normally it would be his son, but in any case must be one of his own [lineage]. Part of his business was to see that the elders did not delay unduly in the handing over, to give instructions as to the clearing of . . . (sacred groves), and to ensure that the sacrifices were properly performed. The representatives of the . . . division (Kimanthi) who visited him for orders took him honey-beer, and at the [succession] he was presented with a sheep and honey, the sheep having been obtained in exchange for two or more of the goats paid . . . to the outgoing generation by the next. Nthambara wore a special ring, called *ngome*, made of iron but of an unusual fashion, and presented similar rings to the *ngome* elders at the . . . (sacred grove). The ring is particularly associated with the duty of *ngome* elders to preserve the peace. On the death of an *ngome* elder the ring had to be handed back to Nthambara. . . .<sup>9a</sup>

For Lambert's *ngome* elders I use the term senior elders; their rôle in influencing rainfall and as mediators following homicide will be discussed later.

### The Generation's Power

I have used phrases like the "ruling generation" and the "generation in power"; the sources of this power and its manifestations deserve analysis. On balance these powers or capacities seem to have been incommensurate with the magnitude of the succession ceremonial; consequently, the concluding section of this chapter will probe into the structure of the genealogical generation system and ask whether earlier generations may have been more powerful or effective.

### Making the Rules

The evidence on the generations' "legislative" functions comes partly from Kibariki and partly from H. E. Lambert. Generations could act in this direction only at a tribe-wide gathering, at the succession in one of the divisions, that is, once every 10–20 years at best.

Kibariki told me of such a proclamation by his father's generation (N1) during the ceremonies when N2 admitted them to the groves. N1 held a moot during the ceremonies and discussed the barter value of livestock. To buy a cow one had to pay 50 goats: impoverishing

9a. Square brackets have my words, introduced to translate or clarify Lambert's words; round brackets, and the words in them, are Lambert's.

for the goat-owners. In this moot they decided that the value be 18 goats instead. They consulted the ruling generation in the K division<sup>10</sup> who approved their decision, an outcome that may have taken several days or weeks to achieve; but Kibariki said that the N1 then sent a spokesman to the larger gathering outside the grove. He told the people that the N1 generation had decided that a cow would henceforth be worth 18 goats; and if anyone charged more, the generation would take over the excess, to be consumed communally.

In the Embu District Annual Report, 1933, H. E. Lambert has recorded three rules promulgated by generations during the post-contact years:

(1) When admitting the Ko generation to the groves (1932), the K1 elders, with the concurrence of the other division, issued an instruction that the cut during clitoridectomy should conform with a recent bye-law of the government-sponsored Local Native Council. "This meant that the official tribal custom was in accordance with the bye-law and any offender against the bye-law was also an offender against native custom."

(2) Apparently during the same succession ceremonies (on 17 September, 1932 to be precise), the K1 also issued another "order". Formerly at divorce, Lambert says, the children invariably followed their mother, and the father got back the bridewealth livestock plus its offspring; the new order "decreed that where the fault was the woman's (a question of fact to be proved by evidence) the husband should retain the children and the woman's father the property".

(3) Some years earlier, says Lambert, the ruling generation issued another order forbidding the custom of interfemural intercourse "which had recently been imported from Kikuyu by certain Embu chiefs". Lambert does not indicate a date for this order. We have learned that the "ruling" generations could frame rules only during succession ceremonies, and the 1925(?) succession appears to be too late. In fact, the stimulus for this order may have come not from the generations but from the administration, as indicated by the following entry in the Embu District Record Book (p.128, January 1916, by Asst. District Commissioner): "Headmen and elders have also been

10. Some confusion surrounds this generation's name. Kibariki called it Gatavi (a moiety name; the moiety with the name may have been associated with the K division, see Fig. 6). He said that the K1, Ndiiriri, gave this name to their sons, the Ko. Thanks to alternate generational identity, the K2, who probably controlled the groves then, could have acquired this name, Gatavi, retroactively.

The reader may note that the succession being alluded to here is the one that Mbogo has described above. Mbogo did not mention this rule in his account.

instructed to discountenance the practice [of interfemural intercourse].”

Lambert felt that the generations, even in 1932 “constitute the essential tribal authority in the eyes of the people themselves, and the promulgation of orders by them is the machinery by which customs can be changed”. Examples 1 and 2 above illustrate his vain attempts to use this “machinery”. Although the Embu went through the motions of “succession ceremonies” and the proclamation of new rules in order to please a keen and unusual administrator, they probably knew then that the generational system was dead.<sup>11</sup>

### *Influencing Rainfall*

Excessive rain, Mbogo told me, was believed to result from interfering with the groves; therefore in case of excessive rain, they looked for the man who might have done so. The man, if found, would have to bring a goat, to be killed in the grove. To identify him, the ruling generation’s men went into the grove and said, “Whoever had cut a tree or dug land here, let him own up now or else he’ll be cursed”. The offender could be one of themselves or an outsider; in any case, if no one confessed, they proceeded to lay a public curse on whomever may have intruded into the grove.

The elders went outside into the bush and brought back one or another kind of branch; Mbogo enumerated seven kinds. Each senior elder (*kiama kia ngome*, see Chapter 4) had a stick (whether it was from one of the branches earlier gathered or whether the senior elders had used it for some time is not clear from the text). The elders gathered the sticks from all the senior elders and comminated the bundle, “Anyone who has cut a tree or has dug land in this grove, and who now refuses to confess, may these sticks poison him!” They took these sticks and placed one in each water source, stream or fountain, in that area. Drinking the water much lower down a stream’s flow would still poison the culprit.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Lambert was earnestly interested in the aboriginal institutions of the peoples he administered. Sometimes he tried to stimulate their revival although other observers were pessimistic about the outcome. This was illustrated by the controversy over native tribunals in Kiambu (Phillips 1945: Chapters 5 and 14, Appendix F) and by his views on the form of land tenure appropriate for the Kikuyu (Sorrenson 1967:54-64).
  12. In ascertaining unknown offenders, the Embu often turned to their medicine men for divination (Chapter 4). Why was divination not used to determine the culprit in this case? It is necessary to recall that interference with any of the twenty or more groves might produce a drought in all Embuland, and therefore these purifying ceremonies would be held in each grove more or less simultaneously. However, the Embu diviner could help only if his clients could proceed from his cues and identify the culprit for themselves; in the present situation the range of possible suspects would be far too wide for such divination.

The elders then returned to the grove and sacrificed a sheep and a he-goat which they had previously secured.<sup>13</sup> To purify themselves, they fetched branches from three other kinds of bush. Two old men, who had waited in the grove while the others were depositing the sticks, now cleansed the returning elders and the grove. One of them mixed a little sheep oil and castor oil with some *ira* on his palm, scooped the oily paste with a bunch of leaves, and applied it to each returning man's forehead from the bridge of the nose toward the hairline, his wrists, his knees, and ankles.

To purify the grove, the same old man made a paste with sheep oil, castor oil, *ira* and honey and, starting from one end of its entrance went round the grove laying the paste at several points until he reached the other end. There he put the leaves down. Then the second old man cleansed the first just as he had the others.

If someone did confess to interfering with a grove, he brought a goat to the NI generation. The elders painted it with *ira*, punctured its neck artery, and let some of the blood stream smear the bundle of senior elders' sticks. They caught the rest of the blood in a banana leaf, dipped the bundle of sticks in this blood, and sprayed it all over the grove. As they did this, they prayed, "Ngai (God), help us, it is raining too much now, try to stop it." Or, "Ngai, help us, the sun is too hot, give us some rain." With this prayer the ceremony would end. (My fieldnotes do not mention the disposition of the goat's meat; if other practice is a guide, the elders would eat it.)

To appreciate the importance of this rain-inducing ritual fully, we recall that rains in this region fluctuate widely from one year to the next. Prolonged drought especially would affect the food supply for man and animal alike. This was so for the Embu born there and also for the waves of immigrants who arrived every few years when famine struck their homelands.

Rainfall, then, was a source of very considerable anxiety, and the only known procedure for influencing it was action by the generational elders in the groves. This was a major topic for instruction during succession ceremonies. People learned to be especially careful near the groves, for any tampering would bring drought; and if one did come, ceremonies became necessary in all groves. It appears reasonable to suggest, then, that generational elders generally, and senior elders

13. In another context an informant said that the elders could secure a goat required for a communal sacrifice by ordering "everyone to work in the field of a man who had offered to provide them with a goat in payment". Presumably the shared need for rain and some social pressure would persuade most people to join such a communal work party.

particularly, derived such influence and power as they possessed through their association with the rain-inducing ritual.

### *Functions of the Generational System*

Mbogo's account of succession ceremonies above suggests that the adult population in one division then would have been distributed over *four* contemporary genealogical generations. This is a logical consequence of the genealogical effect discussed earlier. Thus only a fraction of the adults would at any time be "in power", that is, have control over the groves. In other words, if the generations are recruited on a strict genealogical basis, the percentage of adults in the "ruling generation" declines steadily with the passage of years. Extrapolating the system backwards, clearly at its initial promulgation the percentage of adults in the "ruling generation" would be very much higher.<sup>14</sup> One may hypothesize that its effective power was rather greater then.

Even though the power of the "ruling generation" may have declined, the generational system continued to serve various needs of the Embu. Thanks to alternate generations' identity, it appears that the total population in an area could be represented in some religious contexts by only two men (or by four if both divisions were present). We have noted the Embu stress on the generational elders' role in influencing erratic rainfall, which caused continual anxiety. The tribal co-operation in the succession ceremonies every decade or two no doubt enhanced the feelings of tribal identity. The ceremonies enabled formal instruction (and some legislation) as well as interaction with people from tens of miles away. This tribal identity undoubtedly contributed to the security of life and property in Embuland; as we have seen (Chapter 1) they might steal from a distant neighbourhood, but their warriors would not mount raids on other parts of Embuland. Indeed, the co-operation extended beyond Embu limits, possibly bringing Mbeere, Cuka, and even Kikuyu to the ceremonies of generational succession in Embuland.

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14. Indeed, it is logically possible to determine the approximate date for the initial promulgation of the system provided one has the data for the individuals' generation and age at one point in time, and reliable estimates of the average and maximum age-spans of sibling groups. Needless to say, this information is not available for the Embu.



## ELDERHOOD, LITIGATION, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Through their age-sets, war councils, and generation-sets the Embu met a number of specific contingencies, but in a wide range of situations in the community—especially those concerning disputes and their settlement—they turned to *ad hoc* councils of elders. I proceed now to examine the rôles of elderhood, the limits of the elders' authority and the patterns of litigation in Embuland. Lacking sanctions to enforce their decisions, the elders used oaths and ordeals in attempting to determine the truth, thus harnessing the aid of the supernatural in their own rôle of settling disputes. Their efforts were only partially successful, however, for the laying of curses and the fears and accusations of poisoning were widespread and played a residual part in social control in Embuland.

**Elderhood**

A young Embu warrior, moving into elderhood, expected to pay his seniors a series of goats.<sup>1</sup> As he paid these and grew older, and as he demonstrated his skills as a warrior, a war councillor, and an elder resourceful in conducting and resolving disputes, he could look forward to increasing renown, when his advice would be sought not only in his own homestead and neighbourhood but also far beyond. Which particular councils he was drawn into would depend both on his choices and on the others' perception of his skills.

Within elderhood the Embu appear to have thought of two relatively specific rôles, *njama ya ita*, "the war councillor" noted earlier, and *kiama kia ngome*, literally "the councillor with a ring" but here translated as senior elder, a rôle activated following homicides and droughts. Between the war councillor and the senior elder was a relatively diffuse rôle, *muthamaki* (pl. *athamaki*), the spokesman or the leader, who had paid all the goats but was too young to be a senior elder, and who participated in much of the routine litigation concerning disobedient wives, defaulting sons-in-law, straying cattle, recurring

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1. I use the terms "goat" or "small animal" for all she-goats, ewes, small he-goats, and small rams. For payments of this kind in Embu country, these appear to have been used interchangeably. (Cf. *ng'ondu* in B. 325.) A large he-goat is called *nthenge* or *thenge* (B. 503).

thefts, inheritance, and land and livestock sales. A young spokesman might also be called *njama* or *munjama* (councillor), and some years later he would be called *kiama* or *mukiama* (one of the elders). His skill in argument might be noted by calling him *muciri*, in giving verdicts by calling him *mucirithania*. These terms indicated one's overall place in the continuity that was elderhood and not specific rungs in a ladder with sharp transitions from one to the next.

### *Becoming an Elder*

Payment of goats was an essential step in becoming an elder. We have seen that a candidate's offer of a goat to a category of seniors, the goat's slaughter, and the distribution of its meat, skin, head, and sometimes other parts to these seniors constituted, in Opler's terms, a nexus in a series of assemblages associated with Embu life-cycle ceremonies (Opler 1959:962). This nexus provided the milestones for a passage through elderhood also.

My informants mentioned four, five, or six goats as the number required of an elder during his lifetime. Such a goat carried a name linking it to the context, but the nature of the linkage is often unclear. My informants mentioned goats paid at the time of admission into the war council, a man's marriage, his first child's circumcision or clitoridectomy, the same ceremony for his last child, and other less specific occasions.<sup>2</sup>

The lists from different informants agree only partially with each other. The goat with a particular name, for example, *mburi ya urigu* (p.20) was not always given in the same context, and therefore the same names in two lists do not always follow the same order. The situation was similar with regard to payments for a bride, a cow, or land. In each case, a core price and some additional animals would be paid over the years, sometimes generations. In each series, every payment would be named, but the Embu did not always use the names uniformly and consistently. A similarly permissive attitude apparently prevailed towards naming the elderhood goats.

Various incentives led a man to make the payments. These facilitated his advance in elderhood. The neighbourhood elders, who had made similar payments in the past, received the goat; the prospect of joining the elders' meat-and-beer feasts, too, encouraged a man to make his own payments. Reluctance in this regard would also invoke some pressures from one's seniors. For example, Kibariki mentioned that

2. For an enumeration of the goats given by one informant, born *ca.* 1905, see Saberwal 1963. Other relevant information will be found in the two previous chapters and in S. 146-47 and S. 284-88.

a number of elders had been assembled at the time of his own first marriage to bless the event (S. 283–89). When the time of his bride's arrival approached, the assembled elders demanded *mburi ya nthumbi*, "the goat of the hat", which they said had been due from him since his circumcision; and when Kibariki pleaded poverty, they reminded him that his marriage could not be completed without their co-operation.

When Kibariki gave the *mburi ya nthumbi*, its meat was eaten by all those assembled elders who had themselves given this goat. They may have come from his own neighbourhood, and very likely some came from farther off. The goatskin and also, probably, the goat's head went to one of the elders, who would be the principal witness to the payment. In order to participate in some of the most important Embu ceremonies, it appears that one had to show that one had given a certain number of goats. We learned from Mbogo (son of Ngicuru), for example, that he had paid only two goats before the succession ceremonies for his generation's entrance into the groves; he then had to pay two more goats. Kibariki mentioned a similar reckoning when some sacrifices were being made to Ngai (God), presumably in connection with rainfall; to convince the assembled people about the goats he had given, an elder would say, "I gave this-and-this goat, and its skin went to so-and-so". The recipient of the skin would support this claim.

His age, the number of goats he had paid, the respect he enjoyed in the community, and perhaps the size of his herd and homestead were among the determinants of a man's standing as an elder. His interests turned on the workaday affairs of his homestead, his neighbourhood, and his people: ensuring that crops were planted in time, necessary ceremonies performed properly, the diviner and medicine man consulted in sickness, his children's bridewealth negotiated, a cow or a piece of land bought or sold, a famine refugee adopted, raids on other tribes organized and those on Embu territory met, and the disputes in the neighbourhood heard and discussed and hopefully settled. But the elders had few resources to enforce their decisions.

### *Case 13: Homicide and Revenge within a Clan (ca. 1890)*

Several years earlier Mbogo (Kithami clan, Mirori lineage) had sold a pregnant cow to Ruthiringa (Kithami clan, Mbogo lineage) on the understanding that the new calf would go back to Mbogo when it was grown up, and then the cow would stay with Ruthiringa. When the calf had grown up Mbogo went for it, but Ruthiringa said he would give it to Mbogo later on. When the cow delivered a second calf Mbogo went again, but Ruthiringa still refused. Then Mbogo sued Ruthiringa

before an elders' council. They told Ruthiringa to give the calf back to Mbogo. Ruthiringa agreed but did nothing. Upon the cow producing a third calf, Mbogo went to Ruthiringa again and pressed for his calf, but to no avail. Mbogo went home and waited until the cow produced the fourth calf; by now the first calf itself had delivered a calf too.

One day Mbogo slaughtered a bull for consumption at his home. Ruthiringa was passing through his homestead, returning from a case where he had gone as an elder and he was carrying some meat. Mbogo, who was somewhat tipsy, called Ruthiringa to come to get some more meat there. Ruthiringa went in and took a hind-leg from Mbogo. Mbogo had a sword ready near the door. He ran quietly after Ruthiringa and cut him on his right shoulder. The cut was fatal.

Mbogo tried to run away. Then the *muviriga* (that is, the elders of the Kithami clan, Mbogo lineage?) met and decided that Mbogo should be killed. (Presumably Mbogo's kinsmen did not offer bloodwealth?) Ruthiringa's cousins ran after Mbogo and killed him.

Clearly, if a man was determined to evade an obligation or a liability, his adversary could find little redress in the elders' councils (see also Case 16). The relationship between them would probably be strained and some informal sanctions applied. Individuals who had managed to antagonize a large number of neighbours no doubt felt the force of informal ostracism; this could be made a formal act through the laying of a public curse.

#### *Case 14: A Public Curse (ca. 1920)*

It was back in the twenties that Kibariki saw a public curse inflicted against the then Chief's appointed elders and later lifted by a public gathering.<sup>3</sup> I did not elicit the details of the quiet campaign that probably preceded the swift laying of the curse. Kibariki told me that the people gathered and sat down. One elder, belonging to the Muranja generation (N2 in Fig. 5) stood up and asked the others to get ready. Everyone then started to clap and to murmur in a low-pitched hum. The leader said, "Anyone who speaks with X or his wife or his children, anyone who shaves him or his wife, anyone who gives him water or food, anyone . . . etc.," and everyone there picked up a handful of soil from the ground and, throwing it west, said, "Let him be scattered like this". They threw the soil west because, Kibariki said, "that is the direction where the sun sets, not the east because the sun rises in

3. My informants used the word *urogi* for "a curse" as well as "poison", and *kuroga* for "to curse" as well as "to poison". Similarly in Kikuyu (B. 402).

that direction and brings all good things. In the west the sun sets and then follows darkness, nothing good is connected with darkness.”

Presumably the object of the curse would feel severely isolated. He could, if he wished, make amends by producing a bull for the public who would then gather again, eat the bull's meat, bless him, and withdraw the earlier curse.

During the blessing ceremony, an elder of another generation (Nyangi)<sup>4</sup> stood up and waved his fly-whisk. The public sat down and everyone held his hands folded in front of himself. The leader said, “Let X be blessed!”, and the people replied, *caai* (that is “peace” or “let there be cessation of conflict”), everyone opening his hands wide, palms upwards, and closing the hands again while the leader said the next statement.

“Let there be peace in his home.”

“*Caai*.”

“Let his home be productive.”

“*Caai*.”

In addition to these blessings they repeated the items in the previous curse, asking for counter-effects: Let X's hair be cut; let him drink the water; let him be greeted; and so forth.

X's wife then brought gruel in a gourd, and a little of it was served to everyone gathered there, so that everyone had a mouthful. They did not swallow it all but saved some in the mouth. Then a man of the Muranja generation, not necessarily the one who had led in inflicting the curse, got up and repeated the act of blessing in the manner above-described. (Apparently, by consuming X's gruel collectively they were demonstrating the annulment of the earlier curse.) This time the people could not say *caai* because their mouths were full; instead they made a hum. In conclusion the leader said, “Let there be peace with him”, and the people spat the remaining gruel out of their mouths in an act of blessing.<sup>5</sup>

This public curse was laid against the then Chief's appointed elders who may have used the powers derived from the recently established administration to excess (Saberwal 1969b). What were the contexts for

4. In Fig. 5 the Nyangi generation was given the code N<sub>1</sub>. Men of the N<sub>1</sub> generation were the sons of the men of the Muranja generation, the N<sub>2</sub>. In view of alternate generational identity, N<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>3</sub>, and N<sub>5</sub> were identical, and thus one representative each from the N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> generations would be seen to represent all the N generations.
5. The act of blessing in this situation was elaborate, apparently to counter the severity of the earlier curse. For a simpler account, see the generational succession ceremonies. In a marriage (S. 283-89), a cow sale (S. 68-69), a land sale and other events also, appropriate persons would be blessed.

its use in pre-contact times? The ceremonial for influencing rainfall, we have noticed, included the infliction of a public curse on the unknown person who was believed to have intruded into the sacred grove and caused the drought. In Case 1 we learned of a man who had tried to sell his clan's land apparently without consulting the various clan leaders. One of his lineage-mates later refunded the payment already received for the land and so redeemed it. Whether or not this followed the laying of a public curse is not clear. However, when the Kithami people made a common fire and declared, "let anyone trying to sell Kithami land be burned like this", they were inflicting a public curse on an unspecified object. Another possible target for a public curse would be a notorious poison man, one who was believed to possess and use poison but who refused to take an oath denying such accusations. Informants mentioned that one would stop eating with a poison man, prevent his entry into one's homestead, and forbid one's children going into his homestead.

For the pre-colonial period, then, we have no established case of the laying of a public curse on a specific individual. Conceivably, its use against known deviants was an innovation of the post-colonial period, when the government-created rôles of the Chief and his councillors and retainers became an important factor in Embu experience. They derived their authority from external sources, and the traditional Embu sanctions were unavailing against them; widespread, public ostracism would seem to have been an effective, appropriate response to the situation.

Given the weakness of formal procedures for getting wrongs redressed, self-help, often leading to violence and death, was often the only available course. When a man outside the homestead was killed in this manner, the killer's kinsmen often turned to the senior elders to forestall revenge.

#### *Senior Elders*

The term *kiama kia ngome* (senior elder) referred to a very senior elder, one who had paid all the goats there were to pay. The hazards of life would permit only one or two such men in several adjacent neighbourhoods, a population of perhaps a thousand or two. My informants could not tell whether an aged elder paid a special goat or underwent a special ceremony in order to enter this rôle. (One informant said that a man had to belong to a generation already admitted to the sacred groves in order to be a senior elder.)

*Ngome* means a ring, worn by a senior elder on the middle finger of

his right hand; hence the name of the rôle.<sup>6</sup> The ring apparently had some associations with the sacred; one informant said that during the preparation of judicial oaths it would be put under the container holding the materials for the oath. This association with the sacred probably originated in the senior elder's rôle in rain-making.

A senior elder commanded widespread respect. (One informant credited him with prestige so high that he could even stop inter-tribal fighting.) His help was sought in the most serious situations, particularly in cases of murder. The killer's kinsmen, anticipating revenge by the victim's kinsmen, would approach the senior elder to ask him to go to the victim's homestead to assure them that bloodwealth would be paid in due time, and to ask them not to take revenge. The senior elder went to the aggrieved homestead with goat's fat, spread it around the homestead, and said, "Do not prepare for revenge. For your dead man there will be compensation." The offer was usually accepted and, Kibariki said, the subsequent payment would amount to nine cattle, fifteen goats, and an uncounted tenth bull<sup>7</sup> for the senior elder who had conveyed the offer. However, a rejection of the offer was not, by itself, expected to bring retribution; the senior elder's intervention carried with it no supernatural sanctions.

#### *Case 15: Homicide in Revenge*

Kangai (Kithami-Marema sub-clan) of neighbourhood K took a girl (Gicuku clan) of neighbourhood L, about half a mile away across a stream, to his own homestead but sent no dowry for her. Later a group of warriors from neighbourhood K went to a clitoridectomy ceremony in neighbourhood L, and a fight concerning the unpaid bridewealth developed between the warriors of the two neighbourhoods. During such ceremonies the parents of the girl undergoing the operation used to be the targets of voluminous, good-natured abuse; and subsequent fights between groups were common. A close agnate of Kangai killed a warrior of L in the fight. The visiting warriors then began to escape, but the host warriors captured Kangai.

The people of K quickly sent some senior elders to L offering bloodwealth. According to my informant, the people of L would have been obliged to accept this peace offer had they been preparing to attack the other neighbourhood in retaliation. In this case, they already

6. For Kikuyuland, *ngome*, "long iron sheath-like finger ring worn by rich elders and medicine men." (B. 311.)

7. This tenth bull was called *ngundoro ya muthiori*; the literal meaning of the phrase is not clear. Benson (1964:213) notes that in Kikuyuland too there are phrases incorporating the word for nine, *kenda*, which imply the idea of an uncounted tenth.

had a captive, Kangai, who was still 'in the fight', and they chose to reject the offer and kill him.

When Kangai understood that bloodwealth was being refused and that he would be killed, he laid a curse that no one from his clan should marry anyone from the clan of the people who were going to kill him. His captors tied him up with banana leaves and burned him to death. His bride departed from his homestead and returned to her father's house.

This harsh treatment by the men of Gicuku clan no doubt evoked extensive comment among their contemporaries. This story and the curse are still widely remembered by the Embu people, at least in the western areas, and early in 1963 one knowledgeable father of Marema lineage prevented his son from marrying a girl of the Gicuku clan because of this curse.

### Litigation

Litigation in Embuland appears to have been concentrated into the two dry seasons when the crops (such as millet and maize) were growing and, in most years, rainfall was not an immediate anxiety. One litigant would invite the elders of his neighbourhood, and occasionally some from farther off, to a nearby litigation ground (*kivaro*), and he would provide them with beer, gruel, or other food. Ordinary litigation could proceed during six or seven months every year, but homicides could be discussed—and the compensation settled and paid—only *after* the summer harvest, before the long rains set in; otherwise, I was told, the crops would deteriorate or the rains would fail. The enforced moratorium no doubt helped calm the passions aroused by the murder.

Several pre-colonial disputes have been examined above. Here I present detailed reports on two recent cases. In 1963 I observed the first case, arising from a son's claim to a bridewealth contribution from his father. The second case, a land dispute, came to a head in 1942, and I have drawn upon a fortunately rich record by the District Commissioner (D.C.) and two informants' accounts. Unable to elicit much reliable evidence, the D.C. arranged a traditional oath to determine the truth, and in this context I discuss the nature of these oaths as a judicial procedure. The ordeal, another traditional procedure, will be discussed later.

#### *The Moot*

##### *Case 16: Paying a Bridewealth Contribution (1963)*

Nyaga has four sons and no daughter. The Embu tradition entitles a



man who has no sister to expect his father to contribute a bull and a cow to his bridewealth payment. Nyaga's son, Parmnus, had been married for over ten years, but he maintained that his father had not met this obligation yet. Early in August 1963 he went to his father, who lived a couple of miles away with an elder son, and asked for these cattle. His father promised to think about the matter. A few days later he summoned Parmnus. Reaching his father's homestead, Parmnus met seven elders of various clans gathered to hear the argument. Nyaga declared to the elders that he would give his son only one cow and no bull, but the elders decided that he should give both. They suggested Sunday, September 1, as the day when Nyaga should turn these animals over to his son and Parmnus should give five shillings to his father "for Nyaga has been herding these animals for you".

On the appointed day Nyaga offered Parmnus one she-calf but no bull. One of the elders from the earlier moot was present that morning and also another elder, but Nyaga refused to follow the elders' verdict. When Parmnus said that he would assemble the elders again for a firm decision, Nyaga replied that he didn't care whether or not Parmnus did so.

Parmnus asked one or two elders, whom he knew, to invite other elders to come to a moot the following Sunday. Soon after midday the participants converged on a grove of orange trees in the field of one of the elders. Seven of these elders belonged to clans or sub-clans other than the litigants'; several others of the litigants' sub-clan were more or less closely related to them; and a dozen or so younger men had come there to spend a lazy Sunday afternoon. Parmnus had arranged for tea and loaves of bread brought from a nearby tea shop. I observed these proceedings with my interpreter. All of us sat in a circle on the ground, took the tea and bread, and chatted. Soon Parmnus started the case.

An hour or ninety minutes of crisp arguments followed. Each party addressed, not the other party, but the elders, through a spokesman.<sup>8</sup> Thus, opening the case, Parmnus said to his spokesman, PS, "Tell the elders that I have called Nyaga here because he hasn't paid the cattle though I am now married". PS repeated the message to the elders. (This repetition was said to prevent misunderstandings.) Sometimes

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8. This spokesman, I was told, was called a *muthamaki*, one of the general terms for an elder. Both the spokesmen in this case, who were not the litigants' clan-mates, participated in reaching the verdict later. Nyaga and Parmnus both stated their arguments well, but on another occasion I saw a spokesman ask his principal questions designed to clarify or strengthen his case before the elders. On that occasion the spokesman was called a *mwitikia* (cf. *itikia*, in B. 202).

Nyaga's spokesman, NS, repeated Parmnus' statement a third time, addressing Nyaga with, "Parmnus says this, what is your reply?" Thus the argument moved back and forth. A summary of the major issues follows.

Several questions appeared in the first few minutes. Nyaga recalled a discussion long ago with his sons about the bridewealth, to be paid for the three of them, charged that his son had insulted him by suing before the elders, and demanded a ram to assuage this insult. In his replies Parmnus called the elders' attention to the decision given at their last meeting and denied any insult since it was his father who had convened the first meeting. PS said to Parmnus, "What happened when you went to look for your cow at Nyaga's?" Parmnus replied, "The calf was so young it hadn't been weaned". Nyaga declared, "The calf I offered Parmnus was selected by his three brothers".

Jeremiah, one of the elders, intervened at this point: he has had many years' experience as court elder in the local government court. He made notes in the meeting as he would have in the court, and several times that afternoon he summarized the various arguments, indicating the areas of agreement and focusing on the disagreements precisely. He noted that Parmnus was against giving his father a ram because his brothers had not given any, and that Parmnus found the calf to be too young; but why not take the calf to the father-in-law and see if he would accept it?

In reply Parmnus asked, "What about the bull?" Nyaga asserted that he had already given Parmnus two bulls. In the course of a lengthy argument Parmnus conceded that Nyaga had indeed given him two bulls, but how could these be for bridewealth when he wasn't even courting his wife then? One elder said that the father would have been entitled to receive specified parts of the bulls' meat if he had given these to his son for consumption and not for bridewealth; did Nyaga receive these parts? Parmnus said that he had butchered the animals, sold the meat, and given part of the proceeds to Nyaga. Nyaga denied receiving even a cent and added, "I am sure I have given Parmnus livestock for his father-in-law, what else do you want now?"

Nyaga's eldest son was present and said that he had seen the first bull butchered, had then fallen sick, and did not know whether his father received any money from it. Nyaga had given Parmnus the second bull to enable him to use its proceeds in planting coffee. "Planting coffee isn't the same as getting married," Parmnus countered, and there was some banter about which was preferable.

Both Nyaga and Parmnus then mentioned the various occasions when each had helped the other with cash for planting coffee or buying a van or entering a business, but Nyaga's eldest son, Jeremiah, PS, and another elder repeatedly intervened to say that this case concerned livestock for bridewealth, not coffee or business loans, and if Nyaga wished to recover his loans from Parmnus, a separate case would be in order. Nyaga agreed, "We shouldn't talk of cash here, but I have given Parmnus two bulls and four goats equivalent to a bull; now I am not giving him another bull, only one cow." Parmnus replied, "I deny having received the bulls. If you don't want to give me the bull, you had better give the clan [or elders' council] a bull and declare that I am no longer your son."

At this point one of the elders announced that they had heard enough and now needed privacy to make a decision. Everyone related to the litigants was asked to withdraw (and since my interpreter was Nyaga's SoDaHu, he and I had to leave also). Seven unrelated elders stayed behind.

PS later told me that NS started the elders' discussion by asking the others to summarize what Parmnus and Nyaga had said. NS took the initiative not because he enjoyed any general seniority but because he had been the most active in the case. Later another elder reviewed the arguments and suggested the verdict described below. All the elders agreed with this and appointed two, Mugo and Gacewa, to deliver the verdict together.

Meanwhile the litigants and their kinsmen had been sitting several hundred yards away, chatting cordially. Slowly they returned to the grove and took more tea and bread, brought fresh from the tea shop. A little later Mugo started giving the verdict, and Gacewa repeated each sentence except the hawk-and-dove story. NS interjected a few comments.

Mugo said that the elders had concluded that Nyaga had not paid Parmnus the cow and the bull for bridewealth. The bulls he had given were for other purposes, and the planting of coffee could not be equated with getting a wife. Once he saw a hawk chasing a dove. The dove dived to the river bank and got stuck in the mud. The hawk tried to pull it back but succeeded only in getting its feathers. As Mugo approached, the hawk flew away. Mugo got the dove from the mud. (The point is that Nyaga had indeed given the bulls and the cash but, like the unsuccessful hawk, Nyaga had not achieved his proper objective: the necessary obligation of helping Parmnus get a wife remained.)

No doubt the reader has noticed already that artificial insemination, the coffee trees, the cash transactions, the tea and the loaves of bread are post-contact traits. Furthermore, the memories of other old men and observations of contemporary litigation, lacking a trained court elder's guidance, suggest that the proceedings in a similar case in 1900 would not have been as brief and tidy. For one thing, the litigants would have brought beer for the elders, and no doubt this would have impeded the deliberations. (Elders often demand and receive beer these days also, but Parmnus is a sturdy Christian, a leader in the Anglican Church, who would not provide beer.) Also, the elders would have let the case spread so as to include a variety of issues; then, on one or another matter they would have asked the litigants to take oaths affirming their conflicting statements: the disposition of the two bulls in this case was a possibility. To prepare the oath the elders would have asked each litigant to bring a small animal (a ram or a goat); most of the meat would have been shared between the elders. Or, the case might never have reached this stage. Living in his father's homestead, the son might have been more afraid of paternal authority.

Despite these handicaps, some basic principles of the traditional Embu social structure are manifest here. In Embuland, as elsewhere, the father-son relationship was complex, and the elders appear to have tried to deal with several strands. Indeed the father should be interested in his son's general welfare, but his specific, inescapable responsibility to aid his son's marriage remained; hence the father should pay the bull and the cow. But the elders also knew that the son had to try to ensure that the father continued to be well-disposed to him; for, as the father told me about the inheritance of his livestock, "I cannot tell the exact pattern because . . . my final allocations will depend on the treatment I get from my sons between now and the time I am about to die." The son's long-term interests required that he retain his father's goodwill; this was important in the short run also. As we have seen, the elders have no authority whatsoever for making their verdicts stick. (Their authority was no better in pre-contact times, as Case 13 shows.) At best the meeting drew a guideline for the parties to settle their dispute within a framework of goodwill. The procedure for discussion, which prevented the parties from confronting each other, as well as the content of the verdict recognized this basic objective. The objective was largely attained. The father visited his son's homestead every few days and ate there, but no one mentioned the disputed livestock. As the weeks passed, the son understood the strength of his father's determination, and the dispute appeared to have been resolved.

The parties had argued about the cash transactions between them, but the elders decided that these did not concern the dispute before them.

Then Mugo asked Gacewa to tell the people that the elders had decided that Nyaga should give Parmnus one cow and one bull. Someone enquired whether the cow could be the same as the one offered earlier, and Mugo said yes, Nyaga had the right to choose which animals to give Parmnus. Mugo added that the elders had found that Parmnus had insulted his father by calling him before the elders. Before Nyaga gives Parmnus the cattle, Parmnus should give him a big fat ram and, to wash down the meat, Parmnus should provide him with sugar for making beer. Turning to his co-elders Mugo asked, "Elders, is this the decision we all made?" And the elders replied in unison, "Yes". This ended the meeting.

Both Parmnus and Nyaga appeared to take the verdict quietly and cheerfully. A week later Parmnus told me that he thought the elders had given a good decision, but they had erred in awarding the ram to his father. He thought that Nyaga was trying to escape his obligation, believing that Parmnus was very rich. A month later Nyaga told me that he had given two bulls to each of his sons, and he would not give an extra bull to Parmnus as the elders had asked him to do.

By now Parmnus was unsure how far to press his father. In an interview he started by saying that he would call the elders again if his father were to withhold the cow and the bull. Then he hesitated and said that he would simply give up; it would be degrading to sue his father in court. At his death Nyaga's livestock would be shared between his sons anyway.

One evening four months after the elders' meeting I met Nyaga returning from Parmnus' homestead. He had just delivered the she-calf in settlement of his obligation to Parmnus. Nyaga had not received the ram from Parmnus yet and Nyaga said that he did not care whether he did, and if Parmnus wanted that other bull, he could go and sue Nyaga in the government court.

Later Parmnus told me that he expected his father to give him the bull also, but Parmnus would not sue him in the court in any case. Parmnus would give his father a ram, or maybe an overcoat. In fact Parmnus did not owe his father-in-law any cow. He would let the she-calf graze in his field. When the calf was ready he would ask the man from the agriculture department to come and give it artificial insemination, so it would produce an up-graded calf.

*The Oath**Case 17: Establishing Clan Ownership in Tribal Land*

Ownership in land could be acquired by breaking new ground or by buying from previous owners. To maintain one's ownership, it was necessary to be able to defend it against conflicting claims. Thus, a man of clan X might cut a hardwood tree, try to cultivate the land, or take his livestock to pasture in the land; and if any man of another clan Y protested against this, the issue was usually translated into the question, "Who owns this land?" The Embu process for answering this question is illustrated in the following account.

The sloping ridge called Ngiinda is several miles long and lies between the Kiye and Rupingazi streams at the western edge of Embu country. Land farther west was controlled by the Kikuyu. Fear of Kikuyu raids led the Ngiinda land to be infrequently cultivated, and then only under the war councillors' close supervision. Occasionally some temporary structures may have been erected there, but the evidence strongly suggests that the clans had not reached firm lines separating the areas each controlled. (See Case 9.)

The time of the first clash is difficult to tell, but in about 1936 a man called Muno (Marema lineage, Kithami clan) felled a *muringa*<sup>9</sup> tree and faced a challenge from Petero (Ndiri clan). The dispute went to the court and Petero won. Before Muno's appeal was settled, men of Mirori lineage (Kithami clan) and Withima lineage (Igamuturi clan) had filed separate cases challenging Petero's ownership of that land. (My informant, of Marema lineage, told me that these two lineages—acting as independent landholders—had waited for the winner between Muno and Petero to emerge, so that the other clans could sue him for their own claims.) Petero lost the case to the Withima and appealed. Losing the appeal also, Petero appealed again to the District Commissioner's court in 1941. Of the three cases above, this was the first to reach the D.C.'s court.

As the D.C. heard the arguments, he decided that the three cases were of one piece.<sup>10</sup> In effect, the case became one where Petero

9. B. 389, "tree (*Cordia abyssinica*) (produces good light timber, reddish brown in colour, used for making hives and stools; barks formerly used for making shields)."

10. I plan to deal with land litigation in Embu since the thirties in detail elsewhere. The present account is based on the transcripts of Cases No. 2/41 and 9/48 in the Embu District Commissioner's court, supplemented with interviews with two elders from the Marema and one from the Ndiri. The presiding British officer wrote the court records, giving rich detail from the evidence before the court. The litigants and their witnesses presented their own cases, without mediation by lawyers, and it appears reasonable to assume that the substance of their arguments was similar to the arguments that would have been offered to a pre-contact elders' council

claimed for his clan a ridge several square miles in area, while the other litigants claimed smaller portions of that ridge. To support these claims, each clan's spokesman cited incidents, in the recent or remote past, alleged to have occurred on the ridge. Below I summarize the principal events. Baffled by available evidence, or the lack thereof, the D.C. appointed a council of elders who would supervise a traditional oath to be taken by all parties. A year after the oath the council met again, took stock of the effects of the oath, and recommended to the D.C. that Petero had lost the case. The D.C. based his verdict on this recommendation.

Petero's arguments recalled the following. When an earlier Chief (post-contact, of course) had wished to build a house on that ridge, the Chief had sought permission from Petero's father. In the earlier case against Muno, Petero had won, and this strengthened his larger claim. Although he had only one other witness who claimed to share a boundary with him, this was because his clan's land had streams as natural boundaries. Furthermore, he asked that the powerful and severe "oath of the lamb" be administered so that the truth be properly established.

His adversaries cited several incidents displaying greater physical activity by their men in this area. A fight between Embu and Kikuyu warriors had taken place there, and their ancestors had helped the Embu warriors trick the Kikuyu into a defeat. During a case for land on that ridge a generation or two earlier, Petero's ancestors had made no claim. When one of their ancestors had made a pit there to trap wild animals, they had had trouble with the Kikuyu, and Petero's ancestors had given no help. Besides, Petero's ancestors came from Mbeere country; how could they own land in Ngiinda? As for the homestead built by the ex-Chief, the permission to build had come not from Petero's father but from his adversaries' ancestor.

The D.C. inspected the land with men of all parties and observed:

. . . There were a number of huts on the land under dispute, but neither the respondent nor the appellant appeared to know the names of the residents on their land. They said in effect, 'Anyone who likes can come and use the land without asking but the land itself is mine'.

An old man, a native smith, was questioned as to who owned the

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gathered to consider a land case. The essential difference lies in the fact that an elders' council could not have enforced its decision whereas the D.C.'s verdict, complete with a map, became binding. This decision was also used by other clans for laying their own claims to other areas in that ridge, and later D.C.s drew on it for their verdicts. A consideration of this process must await another context.

land on which he had built his hut and very primitive smuthy. He had no idea to whom the land belonged, at least so he said.

The parties did not reside on the land themselves but at some distance from it.

\* \* \*

There is little on the ground to help in a decision. The whole position is further complicated by the relationship and position of the Respondent. He belongs to the same clan as the Chief and is a friend of his. He is full brother to the president of the Central Native Tribunal, Poulo Muthathai. Poulo was the President of Embu Native Tribunal last year when the first of these cases came up.

I feel that this case should have as much publicity as possible lest it appear later that the present litigants are merely claiming land to which they have little or no right, the persons with real claim being too small or too poor to intervene. It is true that I have had no complaints of this but the respondent is powerfully placed, and there certainly are a lot of huts on the land now. . . .

At a crowded session of the court soon after this visit:

. . . it was agreed that a very solemn and very powerful oath be taken on sheep, that the elders who were to officiate at this oath would be chosen by agreement, that after the oath, if it were not possible to see at once who had failed to take the oath properly, then a period of seven months would be allowed to elapse after which the arbitrators would report to the Court as to the reasons they had for saying that one side had been found out by the oath in telling lies.

I do not like this method of attempting a settlement at all. But I like less the idea of land grabbers, rich land grabbers stepping in at this stage and getting possession of large holdings by foul means, and that is what I fear may be happening in this case. I want to get this matter settled if possible once and for all. This appears to be the only way. The clans all seem quite satisfied.

A few days later a group of twelve elders from various clans met the D.C. This group, henceforth called the Elders' Council, would be "the umpires after the oath"; a group of eight "officiators", who would prepare the oath, was also appointed.

The D.C. did not attend the oath-taking ceremony, but asked the Chief to attend with his retainers and to maintain peace. Malachi Nthiga (Marema lineage), one of the umpires, described the ceremony to me. For the appointed day they asked the principal litigants to bring



a goat or a sheep each. Three animals and a quantity of honey beer were received. The umpires and the oath-makers shared one animal each, presumably giving some of the meat to the large crowd of spectators. The third animal went into preparing the *muuma wa kagonda*, "the oath of the lamb".

The lamb was not killed, but its skin was separated from the flesh around the belly. Then, using thorns the skin was attached back to the flesh, and the eyes, ears, and anus (possibly also the nose and the mouth), the animal's principal openings, were sealed as the oath-makers said, "May the thief [of land] be fastened like this". Then an oath-maker took *ira* (a white paste used in preparing oaths and in other dramatic contexts) and marked the lamb's body with four lines, one from its navel to the nose along the chest, a second from the navel to the nose along its tail and back, a third from the navel upwards to the left until it met the fourth going upwards to the right. While making these marks, the oath-maker said, "May the thief be hurt by this *ira*".

Then the litigants and their witnesses with their spears were summoned to the oath-making place, and the oath-maker drew lines with the *ira* over each spear's point, along and across. The oath-makers then joined the Elders' Council, and they all sat in a row to observe the oath.

Petero took the oath first. Holding his spear he said, "If this land did not belong to my ancestors, may I be speared like this lamb", and he thrust his spear into the lamb. He removed his spear and said, "If so-and-so clan isn't my witness, may I be speared like this lamb", and speared the lamb again. Then he made a series of statements like, "If I go to a medicine man to have the effect of this oath removed, may I be speared like this lamb", "If I poison anyone, may . . ." "If I send someone to poison any of the litigants, may . . .", each statement being accompanied with a thrust into the lamb.<sup>11</sup>

A man of Rukwaro clan who supported Petero by claiming to border on his south, took a similar oath next, his principal assertion being, "If I do not have a boundary with Petero, a boundary known by our ancestors for many, many years, may I be speared like this lamb".

Following Petero's witness, four other men took the oath, each claiming a part of the land and each affirming to be a neighbour of Petero's principal adversary.<sup>12</sup> Then the Elders' Council asked the

11. As Cases 9 and 10 have shown, this is only one of several ways for making and taking an oath.
12. This is my informant's version, but the court transcript indicates that one witness took the oath supporting Petero and five supporting his adversary. An additional list of five supporters for Petero and nine for the other side does not state whether they took the oath.

oath-takers to go home and not to copulate for the next seven days, for anyone doing so was likely to die. The elders also asked the oath-takers to return to the oath-taking site seven months later and urged them to look out for the effects of the oath on the other litigants.

The elders did not have to do, or refrain from doing, anything particular during the following seven months. In the eighth month<sup>13</sup> they called the litigants together and asked them what they had observed. Petero said that he had not seen anything noteworthy. His principal adversary said that a child of Petero's had died during this period and Petero's house had been burned down. One of the adversary's witnesses also mentioned the same things. The other witnesses were not called. The elders heard these reports from each litigant individually, in private. Then they discussed the testimony and noticed that the run of the events went against Petero. They informed the D.C. that they were ready to report the effects of the oath.

At this point the court transcript again becomes helpful. Of the twelve elders one had died, two were away at jobs, one may have been absent, and at least eight were present when the D.C. resumed the case. Two elders maintained that the oath had failed because none of the oath-takers had himself died, while the other six appear to have argued that an oath-taker would not necessarily die himself. One elder said that Petero's "daughter Ngima had died. His grandson Mwaniki had died. His wife had miscarried. . . ." A dissident elder denied that Petero's wife had miscarried, denied that Petero had any daughter called Ngima, and asserted that one person in the opposition camp had lost a child and two others had lost grandchildren.

The D.C. sought the oath-makers' opinion on the mode of action of the oath, and they appear to have been in agreement that "it is not the striker [of lamb] who is affected [by the oath] but the people of his household".

In his judgment the D.C. supported the majority view:

In this case there was very little in weight of evidence between the parties. The Appellant himself urgently desired this form of oath. It was agreed that it should be taken and that persons should be appointed to decide on the action of the oath. These persons . . . are present today with the exception of three, one of whom is dead. Of these seven are of the opinion that Appellant has been affected

13. The transcript and my informant agree that this evaluation was due seven months after the oath. The number seven connotes solemnity in Embu culture, and this may have led to the intended review date. The transcript shows, however, that the review came almost exactly a year later. The difference is not explained.

by the oath and should lose the case. The Appellant denies that his wife has miscarried or that his daughter has died but he admits that his grandchild had died. Two of the umpires hold that because the oath did not affect the parties themselves or the strikers, the oath has failed. With this view none of the other umpires agrees. . . . From the little I know of custom on this subject I believe that oaths of this sort are expected to affect the person or the family of the parties. I agree with the majority of the umpires that judgment should be given against the Appellant. The Appeal is dismissed. It should be noted that this judgment follows that in both the lower courts.

In passing we may note that the D.C. probably took the only course open to him in the context of 1942, but in retrospect it is possible to explain the conflicting evidence from the elders in terms of their descent groups, fortunately preserved in the case record. Of the nine (or eight?) elders who gave evidence interpreting the oath, only two belonged to the clans on Petero's side, and both of them opposed the majority opinion. The other elders belonged to the clans represented in the other camp. It is reasonable to suggest that an elder interpreted the consequences of the oath in a manner that would advance his own clan's interests.<sup>14</sup> Petero lost not because he had told a lie but because his opponents had a larger coalition. Just about this time clans appear to have begun to rally around the need to defend their corporate interests in land and, as the years passed, the substance of a man's evidence in land cases could be predicted quite accurately from a knowledge of his clan affiliation. The District Commissioner in 1948 hearing another land case (No. 9/48) wrote:

The Embu Division is divided into two [moieties]. There is at present considerable [hostility] between these two [moieties] in this area. All the witnesses in this case are divided according to these two [moieties]. That is to say, no matter to what [clan] does a man belong, he gives evidence for his [moiety]. No evidence given in this case can therefore be taken as likely to be true. . . .

For present purposes my interest in the above case centres on the rôle of oath-taking in reducing uncertainty and establishing 'truth' as between conflicting statements. Before discussing this problem, I refer to another land case, this one from pre-contact times.

14. The elder who argued against the majority view and cited the misfortunes on the other side was Petero's clan-mate. It is curious that the D.C.'s verdict took no notice of this elder's allegations about deaths in the other camp.

*Case 18: Defending Ownership of Land (ca. 1900)*

Perusing some private records of arguments concerning Kiini neighbourhood (Fig. 2) during the land consolidation (1958-61), I noticed repeated references to a previous land case in an area just south of Kiini. Eventually two informants gave me their variant versions of that case, and I present both below.

Mbogo (son of Ngicuru, Mirori lineage) told me that many years earlier the Kathuci clan had given permission to some Igamuturi people to cultivate in the disputed area. Then a famine came and Kathuci people went away to Kikuyu country. During their absence Gatirimbo (Igamuturi clan) sought to cultivate some of the land that continued to be owned by the Kathuci. When the Kathuci heard of this, they returned, and an oath was taken. Mbogo's father, Ngicuru, and his FaFaBr Kuvinda helped the Kathuci in the oath (presumably as witnesses). After the oath Gatirimbo died, and the Kathuci rights were re-established.

Njagi (son of Thagicu, Mbugi lineage) emphasized the part a Mbugi man had played in the case. For some time the Mirori people had been trying to push the Igamuturi out of the area, and in so doing they had been cutting down crops belonging to the Igamuturi men. Then Kanjoya, a Mbugi man, uprooted Gatirimbo's yams, and the two men had a physical fight. A group of clans' elders (*athamaki*) heard the dispute. They questioned the parties and concluded that Kanjoya had a right to that land. They told Gatirimbo to quit the land and to cede it to Kanjoya. When Gatirimbo left, three Kithami elders (of Mbugi, Marema and Mirori lineages) went along the boundary between the Kithami and the Kathuci lands and buried poison containers (*ithito*) under each tree to prevent any future encroachments on their land. A Kathuci elder watched them from his side of the boundary to ensure that the Kithami did not try to take his clan's land.

We notice that the judicial system of 1942 provided for a succession of appeals moving a case inexorably towards a lasting settlement; each such settlement also created a precedent for the future. For orderly resolution of serious disputes in 1900 the uncentralized Embu society had no rôles with the authority prerequisite for anyone to judge and to compel. When Njagi says that the elders asked Gatirimbo to quit in favour of Kanjoya and that Gatirimbo obliged, he appears to credit the elders with more power than our other evidence would allow us to believe. It seems rather more likely that the elders arranged an oath. Gatirimbo himself or a close kinsman may have died soon after this. Meanwhile his clan's neighbours, the Mirori and the Mbugi,

may have increased the pressure on the Igamuturi family (or families) living there, cutting their crops and uprooting their yams. Then, perhaps, with the argument renewed, the elders would meet to review the action of the oath. In this case, too, Igamuturi clan would confront a coalition, men of the Kathuci and the two Kithami lineages. An adverse decision from the elders, added to a natural misfortune or two and his neighbours' hostility, might well persuade a man to leave and to make his home elsewhere. (Cf. Michuki 1962 : 38-40 for a land-oath in the Ndia part of Kikuyuland.)

Misfortunes such as deaths, miscarriages, or house fires appear to have been necessary, at least occasionally, as sequels to oaths in order to sustain this mechanism's credibility as an arbiter of truth. The needs of the Embu society strongly favoured the maintenance of this credibility. When a serious conflict threatened, the Embu had little by way of an alternative. If the oath was slow in showing the signs, at least a moratorium on the dispute was achieved. Meanwhile other activities could continue. Furthermore, every oath attracted an audience of observers in addition to the litigants. Whatever the outcome of the oath, its power would be reaffirmed for the observers as well as the victors. The losers might feel uneasy, but they were in a small minority; besides, they too could retain their belief in the oaths by seeing the fine hand of a medicine man in the course the events had taken. Questions of medicine and poison will engage us shortly.

### *The Ordeal*

In concluding this survey of litigation in Embuland, it remains for me to examine the use of ordeals in determining truth. Only one informant ever mentioned it to me, and it is possible that ordeals were used infrequently. I was told that the ordeal, *gucuna gikama*, "to lick a blade", was used in disputes about impregnation, livestock debt, or thefts. Some elders would gather and light a fire with wood. One of the elders spat at a blade, and said, "Burn the guilty person". Then he applied some fat and other medicine on it in order to render it safe for the innocent. Then the blade was heated until it became red. The accused person took the hot blade, said, "Blade, burn me if I'm guilty", and licked it twice. Then he returned it to the fire. The accuser repeated the action with the statement, "If this person did not take (or do) this thing, may this blade burn me". The elders sent both the parties to drink some cold water, and the party whose tongue showed a scar was adjudged the liar. The blade burned only the guilty,

my informant said, only one party would show the scar.<sup>15</sup> In his boyhood he and his brother underwent this ordeal when a Chief's retainer charged them with stealing maize from someone's field, and their tongues were not scarred. (The Chief's retainer did not have to undergo the ordeal himself.) He said that the ordeal was abolished in the thirties because none of the elders then knew how to render the hot blade harmless for the innocent.

In his pioneering cross-cultural study of oaths and ordeals Roberts (1965:209) has demonstrated that:

. . . oaths and autonomic ordeals are patterns associated with somewhat complex cultures where they perform important functions in the maintenance of law and order in the presence of weak authority and power deficits.

The weakness of authority and the deficiencies in power of the Embu elders, who were in the main responsible for maintaining good order, needs no reiteration. Given the moderate complexity of Embu culture (large domesticated animals, far-ranging "peace groups" with age-sets and generation-sets, and "judges", however weak their authority), the importance of oaths and ordeals in this case is consistent with their occurrence elsewhere. This resort to supernatural aids served to supplement the elders' fragile authority in determining the facts, but it did not help in enforcing whatever judgments might flow from the facts. In this context an offended party could turn to an elders' council in order to marshal public support, to have the relevant norms publicly aired, and to direct the pressure of public opinion towards the offender; but there remained substantial areas for self-help. We have previously considered what might be called the "natural" forms of self-help: physical punishment, seizure of livestock, homicide in revenge, etc. In the following section I consider forms of self-help invoking, or believed to invoke, supernatural forces.

## Curses, Poison and Social Control

### *Private Curses*

*Kirumi* (pl. *irumi*) means an abuse, a prohibited act.<sup>16</sup> At one extreme, anything said by an elder, especially by a close kinsman who

15. Orde-Browne, an administrator in Embu (1909-16), writes, "The ordeal often results in a true verdict, owing to the party in the wrong fearing the result and refusing to undergo the trial. If, however, the ordeal is undertaken, it usually results in both parties being more or less severely burnt, when the Elders conclude that 'both are lying' and dismiss the case, having eaten the goat or goats paid as 'Court Fees'" (1925:197).
16. In Kikuyuland, a "dying curse, ban imposed by an ancestor on his descendants or on the clan" (B. 409). As far as I know the Embu do not distinguish between curses by a dying man and those laid by others.

This section summarizes material discussed at greater length in S. 226-66.

had recently died, was believed to be mandatory. For example, Kibariki told me about a girl whom he would have liked to marry in his youth but could not because his father, then recently dead, had said that she was going to be *his* wife. More generally, it was an irate individual who would lay a curse prohibiting close kinsmen from doing something in order to punish a perceived offender. In Case 15, Kangai while facing imminent death laid a curse on marriage between two clans; this curse was seen to have influenced behaviour two generations later.

The capacity to lay a curse disinheriting a son was seen earlier to be an important support for paternal authority within the homestead. Such a curse was believed to act through the livestock, bringing misfortune to one who was cursed (or his descendants) if he drank the milk or ate the meat from the livestock or its increase. At the time of infliction the son might wish to show contrition and make amends: if he took a he-goat or a ram and some beer to the angry father, the latter would kill the animal and eat its meat, presumably along with some friends, and then would say, "Although I cursed you, no curse will lie on you now, and you may eat or drink anything from these cattle. I bless you". And filling his mouth with the beer, he would spray the beer on his son in an act of blessing.

If the father died without lifting the curse, his herd might be parcelled out between his sons, including the victim of the curse. Later some misfortune might come to the victim or his family. To save the rest of his family, then, the inherited livestock would be led back to his brothers who were believed not to be suffering under the curse. That the curse was active in a situation might be realized through a diviner, consulted in connection with the misfortune; the subsequent performance of remedial action probably helped ease excessive anxieties.

We notice, then, that the laying of a curse was a sanction available to the weak, the infirm, and the old for use against those who were better placed at the time. The curse was believed to act diffusely, affecting a variety of persons unpredictably over a long period of time, stretching over generations. There were, besides, in Embu society numerous causes for distrust and hostility between adult peers, kinsmen and neighbours, and these feelings and attitudes found expression in fears and accusations of poisoning.

### *Medicine and Poison in Social Control*

*Mundu mugo* (pl. *ago*) means, *generally*, a person who deals with things and techniques believed to have the capacity to prevent, cause, or remove sickness or other misfortune; and *particularly*, one who deals with things and techniques believed to have the capacity to prevent,

divine the causes of, and cure sickness or other misfortune. Complementary to the latter is *murogi* (pl. *arogi*)<sup>17</sup> who uses the devices of the *mundu mugo*—and any other he can muster—in order covertly to cause sickness or other misfortune. The root word *roga* (a verb) denotes all malevolent acts; personally delivering poison, planting it in a field, influencing an animal to attack an enemy, or laying a public curse. The following discussion preserves the ambiguity of Embu thought, using the term ‘medicine man’ for both the meanings of *mundu mugo*, and the term ‘poison man’ for *murogi*, someone who secretly engages in hostile activities; the term ‘poison’ has a parallel ambiguity. The discussion concentrates on the principal rôles, the contexts for their activation, the Embu concept of ‘poison’ and its modes of operation; a longer statement appears in S. 235–66.

The Embu often turned to medicine men in situations of uncertainty; to choose a propitious time for life-cycle ceremonies or for organizing raids, to help find a thief, to forestall or cure sickness or infertility, or to determine the identity—and combat the influence—of someone using poison to harm one’s interests. These were public acts, and the medicine man’s treatments employed a variety of powders, charms, prohibitions, incantations, physical movements, and animal sacrifices in the service of his client’s interests (Crawford 1913:148, Orde-Browne 1925:189ff).

A man, X, could also draw upon the medicine man’s services to secure prophylaxis for his family against thieves and poison men by getting the necessary treatment for his homestead. In this treatment, poison would be planted around the protected area in order to make any intruders sick. This would be a public act. Some months or years later one of X’s neighbours might become sick. A medicine man then might point to X as the source of poison. The neighbour may well have walked through the protected field innocently, but the protective poison was believed to act nonetheless, and in the neighbour’s eyes X would be a poison man, a *murogi*. This is an intermediate zone between the socially approved and disapproved activities, a continuity that has often been noticed elsewhere (LeVine 1959, for example).

Covert activities cross this zone. Admissions of covert activity are, as elsewhere, far less numerous than the allegations. Here I indicate the prevalent kinds of accusation; some or all of these may have corresponded with activity. Anyone driven by hatred and needing poison for use against his enemy, my informants said, could try to get the

17. While some of the *murogi*’s activities could be considered sorcery, there is no evidence for witchcraft among the Embu (S. 260–62; Middleton and Winter 1963:3).



poison from a medicine man; he might deliver it to his adversary personally, say during a beer-drink, or he might persuade someone else to deliver it on his behalf. This agent would be called *mutumwa*, "one delegated (to do a job)". Hatred was especially likely to exist between close agnates, brothers with their eyes fixed on the same herd for inheritance and patrilineal cousins who might owe each other livestock. Furthermore, as we have seen earlier, to affirm one's position in a serious dispute or accusation, a man took an oath charged with the power to kill were he to tell a lie on oath. Someone intending to lie would, my informants said, try to go to a medicine man and seek protective treatment against the imminent oath. Whether or not immunity from the oath could be attained thus was a matter on which informants disagreed; but contemporary litigants, sure of their own truthfulness, when confronted with the continuing survival and good health of adversaries despite recent oaths, often explained the situation by alleging that the adversary had previously visited a medicine man for the protective treatment. Needless to say, the adversary held precisely the same position, in reverse.

As for the war councillor and the elder, one's recruitment into the rôle of the medicine man probably resulted from personal choice and the demonstration of unusual skill in the characteristic activities, namely, divination and curative medicine. Instruction in these skills was probably available from older medicine men, and the payment of one or two goats, beer, and other food may have been customary. The medicine man was a part-time specialist, with cultivation a major occupation. If he had won renown, especially as a diviner, he might be very busy, and then he might get his agricultural work done by his clients—while he dealt with others. His activity in this rôle was unrelated to his activities as an elder in Embu society. Indeed, if he were to be accused of possessing or using poison, he would not be allowed to participate in such elders' activities as preparation of oaths for litigation: a poison man could not be trusted, for he might put poison into the oath while it was being prepared and so endanger the litigants; he would either take the oath to clear himself of the charge or withdraw from the elders' activities. Widespread suspicion about the dispensing of poison by medicine men may well have prevented them from playing a major part in the Embu public life.

My informants were divided on whether or not poison was made in Embu country: some held that the medicine men bought it from men of Kina clan living on the Uvariri Hill in Mbeere country, but one man gave me his recipe for producing poison, using pieces of meat from chameleons and frogs, finger millet grains, and leaves

and roots from seven plants (S.241-44). Concerning its mode of operation, the important fact is that the relationship between an effect and a cause would normally be established *post hoc*, with the diviner explaining a particular misfortune—any misfortune—as following a suspect's malevolent acts. Informants do give elaborate accounts of how, for example, protective treatments of a homestead would ensure that "the whole of the thief's family would die within a month" or "the thief would start shouting immediately upon entering the homestead" or "a number of snakes go and entwine round the thief, who then would fall down and begin to shout". These beliefs no doubt originate in the medicine man's and his client's imaginations.

The limited available evidence suggests that the ideas concerning poison, threats of poison, unannounced poisoning, and allegations of poisoning generated considerable anxiety, intermittently relieved by associated procedures; but how important and how frequently used were these activities for social control? During my fieldwork, in 1963-64, I knew only two persons who made earnest allegations of poisoning, but these were discounted as baseless by others almost invariably. In forming a judgment about the pre-contact period, it is useful to remember that the burden of accounting for misfortunes did not have to be carried by the notions of poison alone. When one consulted a medicine man (diviner), one's troubles were just as likely to be traced to the neglected curses or the violated general taboos concerning sex during menstruation or immediately after a birth or a death. It did medicine men little good to encourage the growth of poisoning allegations. My informants referred to a mass oath-taking ceremony, when every one of a large number of persons accused of possessing or using poison would be required to take the poison oath.<sup>18</sup> Since the medicine men were commonly believed also to carry poison (or use their medicine malevolently) they too would have to take the oath and pay the requisite goat. Nonetheless, this ceremony is said to have been customary and may have marked the climax of a period of steadily swelling accusations (during an epidemic?), provided a ca-

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18. For this oath two terms were mentioned. One, *ruoga*, was taken to clear oneself of theft or poisoning accusations, and several persons took it at the same time, each providing a goat or a ram. (Cf. B. 355 for the Kikuyu, "Form of oath introduced from Embu and administered by the ruling generation to all members of a locality to get rid of witchcraft.") The other, *king'ore*, referred to a ceremony "where *everyone* had to take an oath about poison, and because the poison men had poison, they would die". The ceremony included a song of the same name. (Cf. B. 326 for the Kikuyu, "Concourse of warriors etc. directed by their councils, for the purpose of executing a public enemy, thief, or sorcerer".)

tharsis for the hostilities in the community, and begun a period relatively free from accusations.

In conclusion, then, we notice that the fears and the accusations of poisoning provided the Embu with a vocabulary of language and actions that expressed, and purged, the hostile feelings between kin and neighbour. They took recourse to it both to find explanations for the accidents that inhere in the human condition and because their procedures for resolving disputes did not lead to binding outcomes. But it was a malevolent language and when the incidence of its use in turn threatened to disrupt the social order, the elders had to intervene in the situation again.

## CONCLUSIONS

In defining the characteristics of a "loosely structured" society, with special reference to the Thai and the Sinhalese, Ryan and Straus (1954:199) suggest that:

. . . a society, its institutions, and consequently the behaviour of the participants, may be [so] termed . . . when:

A. Norms are expressed with a wide range of alternative channels of conformity, frequently being implicit statements of principle around which individualized definitions of conformity are acceptable within broad and inexact boundaries.

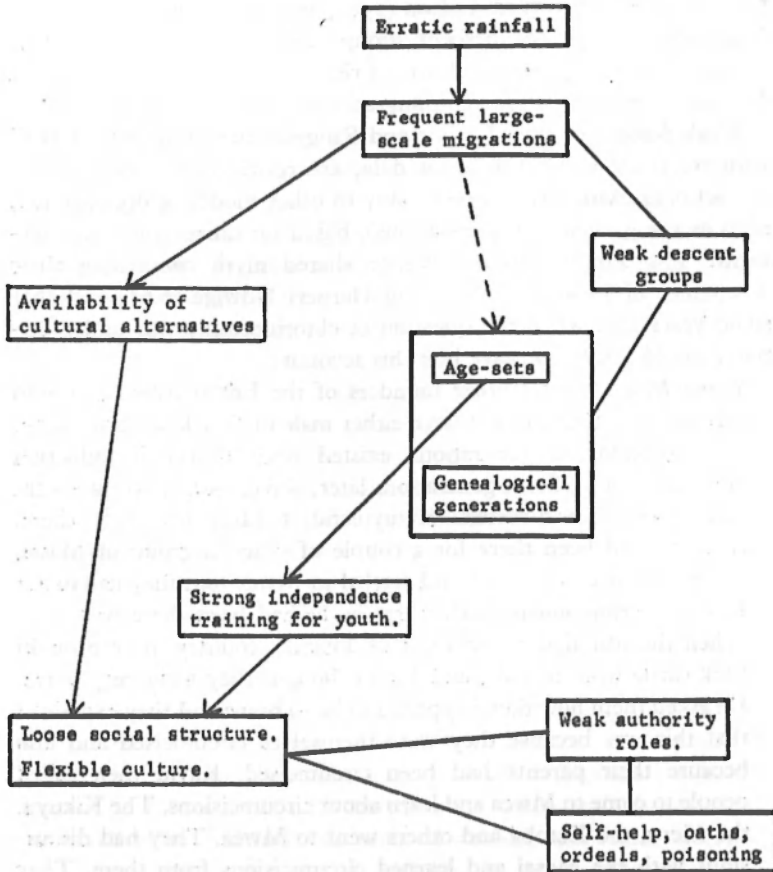
B. Behaviour which goes beyond the acknowledged sphere of the normative is condoned or tolerated without the need for rationalization to competing or conflicting norms except in so far as the value of tolerance may be considered normative.

C. Values of group organization, formality, permanence, durability, and solidarity are undeveloped, giving group life the character of informal, unstable, and ill-defined associations in which group rôles are subordinated to the individual ends of the participants.

In concluding this reconstruction of the pre-colonial political institutions of the Embu, I shall argue that the Embu society at the turn of the century was very loosely structured. Previous chapters have discussed the indicators of this looseness of structuring, and several antecedent variables have been hypothesized. Here I propose to focus on the relationships between the variables which sustained this structural looseness and which may have contributed to its genesis. Fig. 8 summarizes these relationships; needless to say the variables considered are by no means exhaustive.

Wide annual rainfall fluctuations led large numbers of famine refugees to migrate over long distances in the region south-east of Mt. Kenya. These population movements every five or ten years brought people from Meru, Cuka, Mbeere, Kamba and Kikuyu tribes into Embuland. The immigrants brought their variant beliefs and practices with them, introducing numerous alternatives in Embu culture. These alternatives were overt, such as styles of male circumcision,

**Fig. 8: ANTECEDENTS OF LOOSE STRUCTURE IN EMBU SOCIETY**



**LEGEND**

- > cause
- - - - -> cause the weakening of
- > be associated with

modes of adoption, and paths to elderhood, as well as covert, such as beliefs about the nature of poison.

The Embu descent groups, we have noted, were at best weakly corporate. Descent groups' weakness is consistent with frequent population movement, as Colson (1961) has shown for the Tonga.<sup>1</sup> Migration *weakens* the descent group; and the existence of weak descent groups, which do not attend rigorously to the ties of descent, *facilitates* the assimilation of immigrants as adoptees.

Weak descent groups, LeVine and Sangree (1962:104) have argued with reference to west Kenyan data, are relatively less resistant to age-set organization (and presumably to other modes of organization, such as the genealogical generations), based on universalistic recruitment. The Embu have no widely shared myth concerning their acceptance of age-organization, but Herbert Ndwiga (p.61) said that some years ago, when the question of clitoridectomy was under dispute, an old neighbour gave him this account:

When Muembu and other founders of the Embu tribe came into this country, they did not have either male or female circumcisions. (The genealogical generations existed prior to the introduction of circumcison.) Some generations later, Kaviu (son of Nthiga) went into Mwea (south-eastern Kikuyuland) herding his cattle there. After he had been there for a couple of years, a group of Masai, herding their cattle, came and settled in Mwea too: they had to ask Kaviu's permission to graze there as he had been there first. . . . When the Masai went on raids to Tharaka country, they brought back cattle won in raids, and Kaviu thought they were very brave. He asked them how they happened to be so brave and they explained that this was because they were themselves circumcised and also because their parents had been circumcised. Kaviu then called people to come to Mwea and learn about circumcisions. The Kikuyu, the Meru, the Kamba and others went to Mwea. They had discussions with the Masai and learned circumcisions from them. They decided to return to their homes and to talk with their people about circumcisions. Later they returned to Mwea and announced the introduction of female as well as male circumcison. The women too were to be circumcised because they would be producing the male adults of the future, and if their mothers were circumcised, the sons would be brave too.

1. A comparison of the Embu and the Tonga shows significant parallels and divergences, but their exploration would go far beyond the limits of the present analysis. Thanks are due to Professor Victor Turner for calling my attention to Colson's material. (Cf. Symmes Oliver, 1965, for the Kamba.)

Ndwiga went on to say that some people decided against the operations and emigrated. He said that the Turkana in northern Kenya came from Embu country at this time, and the Meru of Mt. Kilimanjaro also split from the Meru of Mt. Kenya on this issue. While these linkages may be far-fetched, it is probable that the acceptance of age-sets by the Embu was facilitated by the weakness of their prior descent groups.

Population movement would weaken not only descent groups but also age-sets and genealogical generations.<sup>2</sup> The generational system was subject, besides, to the consequences of what I have called the genealogical effect: since the generational boundaries were set in genealogical terms so that all brothers—whatever their age difference—belonged to the same generation, the adults at any time belonged to a number of generations; reciprocally, the elders in any generation constituted only a fraction of the adult population of their time. Therefore the generational system was an unsatisfactory frame for the emergence of effective authority rôles in Embu society. Self-help was the principal resource for establishing and defending one's rights, and it was supplemented with extensive reliance on oaths, ordeals, curses, and poisoning accusations. In this context the Embu youth received strong independence training, designed to prepare them for the rôle of the warriors who would raid enemy territory and defend their own herds, and the war hero was held up to them for emulation. Their corporate group, the age-set, had little internal structure with authority-bearing rôles for internal discipline, although their dances and raiding parties generated considerable *esprit de corps*.

The age-system of the Masai differed from that of the Embu in several critical ways. Alan Jacobs (1965:240-368) has described the Masai system in excellent detail, but only an outline can be provided here. The Masai distinguish between the grades of the junior warriorhood, senior warriorhood, junior elderhood, and senior elderhood. An age-set (about 15 years wide) starts in junior warriorhood and enters the three other grades successively. Alternate age-sets are linked powerfully by the ritual "father-son" tie (*olpiron*) which enables the senior set to exercise authority over and command the alternate junior set. Thus, the senior elders have this *olpiron* link with the senior warriors, and although the senior elders are small in number, they can control the junior elders also by threatening to order the senior

2. The strength of the Masai age-organization despite their warriors' impressive mobility would appear to refute this generalization. The points at issue can best be resolved through detailed attention to the context of mobility in the two societies, their patterns of subsistence, and other factors, a task which must be deferred to another occasion.

warriors to use force against the junior elders. Jacobs (1965:344) calls the senior and junior elders together the "ruling elders" who derive . . . their authority . . . in large part from the special power they exercise as *olpiron* 'fathers' over the two warrior sets below. In each locality of a tribe, ruling elders join together and form a single 'local council' which meets regularly to discuss and take action concerning the public affairs of their local community.

While the Embu believed in the existence of a special relationship between alternate generations, there is no evidence for a special link between alternate age-sets; indeed, as we have seen, even specific age-sets were only weakly corporate. Furthermore, the ties of age-set co-membership were dissipated in Embu society as the warriors moved into elderhood individually and not in corporate groups. Whereas the age-set membership in Masai society decisively overshadowed kin-ties, the Embu had no dominant corporate group of this sort. The elders' councils were *ad hoc* assemblies which did not persist over time. Their members were also involved in their descent groups, genealogical generations, and possibly war councils. These cross-cutting ties served to limit conflicts and prevent feuds, but not to stimulate the emergence of effective authority rôles.

Consequently, the warriors, trained to be aggressive and independent, found it possible to defy presumably important social norms with impunity. We have noted the Embu ideal prohibitions against marrying a clan-mate's, an age-mate's, or a generation-mate's daughter; we have also noted that these prohibitions were often violated with only moderate or no punishment. Ideally, sexual relations were forbidden an uncircumcised boy, but Case 4 described a liaison for an overgrown uncircumcised boy without serious penalty. A sister was certainly held to be sexually taboo, but I learned that occasionally a girl would conceive from her brother: her mother would then ask her to name another boy in order to cover up the embarrassing situation. Pre-marital sexual activity is said to have been forbidden a *muiritu*, yet she had the specific right to spend nights with her warrior-friends in her mother's kitchen. It appears to be appropriate that these adolescents, subject to little institutionalized authority and able often to violate important norms, should grow up into adults who would frequently pursue their individual goals, ignore the prevailing norms, and seek situational adaptation to similar behaviour by others.

The answer to the question, "Who ruled the Embu?" then, has to be given in situational terms. Within the homestead, the father could compel some obedience from his sons, largely because he could, if provoked, lay a curse preventing them from inheriting his livestock.



However, the young men, trained to be warriors, would on occasion risk paternal displeasure and its consequences; they would also continue this orientation in relationships with adult peers in later years. In their rôle of warriors, they were subject to the supervision and leadership of war councillors, a relationship specific to the context of warriorhood. Threatened with excessive rain or drought, the leadership in the necessary ceremonial would pass to the elders of the appropriate generation-sets; every decade or two these elders from all over Embuland would assemble for the important generational succession ceremonies. Here they could promulgate new rules for the whole tribe, but the available evidence does not indicate that this opportunity was used intensively. While the neighbourhood was not corporate in any sense, it was the *ad hoc* assemblies of elders that performed the task of resolving the routine disputes between kinsmen, neighbours, and buyers and sellers.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the loosely structured Embu society with its acephalous polity and poorly disciplined warriors remained autonomous because the neighbouring peoples were similarly unorganized. Some three hundred miles east, along the coast, were the small but better organized Arab-Swahili trading communities. Their traders were interested in the inland ivory but not in political control, and their contacts with the peoples of the Mt. Kenya foothills were too infrequent to promote much stimulus diffusion. Some pulsations for centralization, coming from the inter-lacustrine area (Oliver 1963:196-99) had made their value manifest in southern and central Tanganyikan societies and were apparently moving northwards, bypassing the Masai. At this juncture the task of centralizing the societies of Kenya was assumed by the empire builders from England.

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