

CONCEPTS OF GOD IN THE  
TRADITIONAL FAITH OF  
THE MERU PEOPLE OF KENYA

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that \* **CONCEPTS OF GOD IN THE TRADITIONAL FAITH OF THE MERU PEOPLE OF KENYA** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SIGNATURE

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DATE

The thesis has been submitted with our approval as university supervisors.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis covers the concepts of God in the traditional faith of Meru people but the background goes back to African traditional religion in general. Meru is located at the eastern part of Mount Kenya. The work begins with a literature review and field based on oral tradition, which indicates that Meru people came from northern Africa, moved to Canaan, Meroe, (south of Egypt) Meru-Arusha, Mombasa, and finally through Tana River to their present land. The Meru people also claim that they came along with all Bantus speaking communities in Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa.

The thesis has seven chapters. The first one covers introduction and background, followed by the research plan and methodology (chapter two) Literature review (chapter three). The fourth chapter outlines the geography, migration and the various stages of becoming a human being. That fifth chapter consists of Meru traditional government and specialists. The sixth one describes the concepts of the Supreme Being in Meru traditional religion. The seventh chapter discusses the interaction of Meru traditional religion with Christianity and its implications.

**THE TITLE:** CONCEPTS OF GOD IN THE TRADITIONAL FAITH OF THE MERU PEOPLE OF KENYA

### **TEN KEY TERMS**

Concepts of God in Africa, Traditional African Religion, Moral Education in Africa, Traditional African Education, Christian Mission in Africa, The Meru people of Kenya, Applied Ethics, Applied Theology, Moral Theology, and Interfaith Relations.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This thesis covers the concept of God in the traditional faith of Meru people. It has seven chapters. God whom they call *Murungu* is entrenched in all their cultural and traditional practices. The Meru elders claim that God has been part of them. Accordingly, they say that God is their creator [*Muumbi*] and so everyone including the children reflects Meru traditional religion. That is why the elders think that their knowledge of God is not through Christianity or any other foreign religion but it is inborn and intuitive

Chapters one, two and three cover the introduction and background, research plan and methodology, and literature review respectively. The practices like worship, which involved sacrifices and offerings, only rekindled the knowledge of God that was already known subconsciously. In this study, I have begun with the background of the knowledge of God among Meru people. From this background, I develop my description in other chapters. Meru people claim that it is God [*Murungu*] who delivered them from the captivity of the “red people”.

Chapter four describes Meru society, and the various stages of development through which every one must go to become a living being. These stages include birth, naming, initiation, marriage, death, living dead and the spirit. The Meru life does not end at death, but goes beyond it to the “living dead”. A dead person remains a “living dead” until no one alive remembers him. It is after that that the forgotten person will move from being the living dead to spirit stage.

The fifth chapter outlines the Meru traditional government headed by Mugwe. He was the King of Meru. He had political and religious hierarchy. When the white people came and asked the Njuri-Nceke elders whether they had a leader, they cheated them that they had none, but in the real sense, Mugwe was the king of Meru country [*Mugongo jwa Meru*].

The specialists are in the same chapter (five). Their background is from Africa because Meru is part of it. These are in two groups in this study: The feared and the respected. The feared are the sorcerers [*murogi*], witches, and the magicians [dealing in black magic]. The people feared them because they were anti-social and troublemakers in the community. Because of this, the community executed them after their conviction of these acts. They therefore operated under fear and in secret. Some operated at night. The execution was through stoning or even crucifixion [crucifying on the ground]. The respected specialists were white magicians, doctors [muga or mugo], a diviner [*muringia*] a prophet [kiroria]. They respected them because they worked in fear of God and the administration of the country. They were also helpful to the community.

The attributes of God are in detail in chapter six according to their beliefs and later that of foreigners. Murungu [God] is all-powerful [Mwene Inya] all present, and has entire attributes of God, as we will later. In the same, the source of evil emanated from the fall of Meru man. The mole and man are to blame for the fall and the consequence of it [death]. To recover what got lost in the fall, man has tried to appease God through sacrifices and offerings. Those who offered the sacrifices or offerings were blameless elders whose children were married. The animal for sacrifice was without blemish.

The seventh chapter describes the interaction of the Meru traditional religion with Christianity. In this, we see Meru people responding negatively to the foreigners who came as rulers or even missionaries. They refused their message because it was contrary to Meru concepts of God. The Meru had known God to be one and they did not have any idea of the triune God. The second reason was that these visitors came divided among themselves as denominations and so the Meru feared to be divided along the same lines.

The differences between traditional Meru and missionary perspectives pose serious challenges to Christianity in the area. Some traditionalists are pointing at the weaknesses that Christians have portrayed over the years. They think that Christianity has tampered with the morality of the people. The traditionalists offer some suggestions to overcome those challenges.

The argument about the origin of the Supreme Being from African point of view has been a matter of concern among anthropologists, particularly in Africa. The question is this, 'How did Africans [Meru people included] acquire the knowledge of God? Some feel that Africa has been in contact with other parts of the world. Moreover, who knows where did they get that knowledge? Mbiti argues that Africans did not get knowledge of God from another source because, "religious and cultural influence from this contact cannot have flowed only one way: there was always a give and take process. Further more, African soil is not so infertile that it cannot make its own new ideas."<sup>1</sup> It is true that African knowledge of God came from African minds and that it is not from other cultures and religions.

There are others who feel that the other parts of the world received the idea of monotheism from the African traditional Religion," Mbiti comments, 'This game of hunting for outside sources is dying out and there are writers who now argue that in fact it was in Africa, which exported ideas, cultures and civilisations to the outside world.'<sup>2</sup>

The background of Meru traditional knowledge of God like any other has not been clear as far as origin is concerned. Not all my informants know the origin of the knowledge of God. They say that it has been there from the time immemorial. They have grown in the knowledge of God through Meru Traditional religion. All that they know is that the God of the Meru traditional Religion is knowable. M'Ncebere, one of my informants told me how he came to know God, 'I learnt about Meru God through my parents' piety and community at large.'<sup>3</sup> Others however, hold that it is God, who chooses to reveal Himself to his people. Man had to decide to respond to the provided revelation of God.

The European explorers came to explore Africa but did not get time to study African religion. As a result, they misinformed the West about African religious background and Considered Africans irreligious. Some reported that Africans were primitive and underdeveloped even in matters of religion. As Okot p'Bitek in his book "*African Religions in Western Scholarship*" points out during the eighteenth century men like Tuunberg, Sparrman, LeValliant, Bruce, Mugongo, Park and others came to Africa primarily to explore and observe.'<sup>4</sup> The explorers presupposed evolutionist and imperialist thinking. They came with their own



minds made up as to what to see and discover in Africa. They therefore, thought that since the Africans had not developed fully in their brain in terms of Western education then they had no religion and the only thing they might have is just the basics of monotheism. Okot p'Bitek noted that "the religious stage again subdivides into three periods: Fetishism, Polytheism and Monotheism. The supposed religion of African peoples that is fetishisms thus comes at the bottom of the ladder."<sup>5</sup>

We can then conclude that the explorers were not expecting monotheism in Africa at all. That is why they used barbaric terms to refer to African peoples. Such terms as primitive, savage, animism (belief in spirits) demeaned African people. As John S, Mbiti in his book *African Religions and Philosophy* has commented that such naming amounted to abuse. He concludes:

"Other terms employed to describe African religions include dynamism, totemism, fetishism and naturism...These religious terms show clearly how little the outside world has understood African Religions. African religions have been subjected to great deal of misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding. They have been disposed, mocked and dismissed as primitive and underdeveloped."<sup>6</sup>

The other Scholar depicting the explorers and their views of African people is Samuel G.Kibicho who gives a quotation from one of the early explorers, Sir Samuel Baker, in his presentation of a report to ethnological society of London in 1867 on the Nilotes of Southern Sudan:

"Without any exception, they are without a belief in Supreme Being; neither has they any form of idolatry nor is the darkness of their mind enlightened by events a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the Morass, which forms their puny world"<sup>7</sup>

After the same quotes Benjamin C. Ray, (*African Religions*, 1976) criticised Baker. "Baker himself knew nothing of the language of the people he was confidently describing and he spent only a short time among them"<sup>8</sup> Another explorer he highlighted was Sir Richard Burton who wrote:

The Negro is still in the rude dawn of faith-fetishism- and he has barely advanced in idolatry.... He has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in the future state of rewards and punishments, which whether true or not are infallible of human progress.<sup>9</sup>

Such ideas show the information relayed in Europe by the explorers and missionaries. It was a misconception, lacking understanding and scholarly research. The explorers misinformed their people in Europe and later on in America about the African people and their social and religious systems.

As we saw above, the writings in Europe were most those of explorers alluding that Africa had no religion at all. The missionaries influenced by these ideas, came with the above concept to Africa. It undermined their own faith for they believed that they were coming to initiate religion to blank minds. They ascribed the same categories of anthropologists and explorers to Africans. They used such terms as primitive, savage, tribes, races to refer to African people.

Samuel G. Kibicho outlines the titles of the early anthropological writers: as Driber J.H., *The Savage as He Really is*, 1929, Driber J.H., *At Home with the Savage*, 1932; Tylor, B.E. *Primitive Culture*, 1871. Norbeck, N., *Religion in Primitive Society*, 1961; Radin, P., *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origin* (1954), Routledge, W.S., *With A Prehistoric People: The Kikuyu of British East Africa* (1910), Lang, A., *Are Savage Gods Borrowed from Missionaries?* 1899; Levi-Bruhl, L. *Primitive Mentality*, 1923; Lowie, R.H., *Primitive Religion*, 1925; and Swanson G.E., *The Birth of the Gods: The Origin of Primitive Beliefs*, 1960.<sup>10</sup> The titles on this list show that the missionary authors greatly misunderstood the

Africans, considering them underdeveloped even on matters of religious consciousness. Okot p'Bitek gives the reason, which, in his view, led anthropologists and missionaries to think of African peoples as described above. He asserts:

“...The missionaries planning a dialogue between Christianity and animism waste their time, because there is no such religion as animism in Africa. However, we can be sure that African scholars were engaged in perpetuating the myth of superiority of the western culture over those of African people now under colonial domination. And it is to this arrogance with which African Deities were treated that African today reacts”<sup>11</sup>

Reacting to the western scholars' reference to African peoples as uninformed, Mbiti Comments:

One needs to only look at the earlier titles and account to see the derogatory language used, prejudiced descriptions given and false judgements passed upon these religions. In missionary circles, they have been condemned as superstition, satanic, devilish and hellish<sup>12</sup>

Although the language the early writers used abused the African peoples, showing them as people without religion and without God, the missionaries who stayed longer among them discovered that this was not true. They were indeed shocked to find that the African traditional religion network, social systems and ethical values were intricate and complex. Among those was Edwin Smith who was a missionary in South and Central Africa. S.G.Kibicho reports that,

“the two (Emil Ludwig and E. Smith) were having a dinner in the home of the acting governor of the Sudan

in Khartoum. Smith was explaining to Ludwig how they (missionaries) were trying to teach the Africans to put their trust in a God who is loving and stronger than any evil power. Ludwig was puzzled for he held the view that Africans did not have any concept of God, and that they even did not have the mental capacity to grasp it...this surprised him and he made his famous statements. "How can the untutored African conceive God? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of forming"<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin. C. Ray (1976) in his Introduction outlines three phases of African tradition has:

1. Travellers, missionaries, wrote the first extended account in the 18th and 19th centuries and colonial agents (had unscholarly and unsystematic studies but random observations superficial opinions to appeal.
2. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by more objective and systematic field studies by trained anthropologists (Written from 1930s by both European and Africans).
3. A more recent phase consists of a small but growing number of philosophically and theologically—oriented studies, written by African authors.<sup>14</sup>

In this study, the phase one above is the period of travellers combined with early missionaries and phase two is of African authors and Europeans who saw the need to give true information of African religion in rebuke to those who never recognised it and were prejudiced against the African people. Those who came later were wondering whether the Africans got religion from the early missionaries. This was also a way of nullifying the existence of African traditional religion. Reacting to this, the African writers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century corrected that kind of views. Mbiti notes that:

"One of the dominating attitudes in this early period was the assumption that African beliefs, cultural characteristics and even foods were all borrowed from

the outside world...it is true that Africans has always had contact with the outside worlds but religious and cultural influences from this can't have ploughed only one way. There was always a give and take process. Furthermore, African soil is not so infertile that it cannot have its own ideas...there are writers who now argue that in fact it was Africa which exported ideas cultures and civilisations to the outside world.<sup>15</sup>

This then gives us that fact that Africans were religious people. This seemed to be the cause of many African writers coming in to make it clear that the early writers were truly wrong. Mbiti says, ``Africans are notoriously religious and each person has his own religious system with a set of beliefs and practises''<sup>16</sup> He also adds, ``African peoples are not religiously illiterate.<sup>17</sup> Africans had the knowledge of God even before the coming of Christianity through the missionaries. Richard J.Gehman in his book *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* divides African traditional religion into three basic elements: belief in the Supreme Being, the spirit worlds and mystical powers.<sup>18</sup>

Other authors employ the same categories as Gehman does. E. Geoffrey Parrinder in his study, *West African Religions* delineates African traditional religion studies into four: The Supreme Being, the chief divinities including non-human spirits, the divinised ancestors and the charms and amulets. John Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) uses the above outlines but adds some more as follows: The Supreme Being, Spiritual beings-spirits and living dead, Mankind including the cycle of life, Specialists, Mystical powers-magic, witchcraft and sorcery, evil, ethics and justice. S.G.Kibicho citing Idowu outlines 10 elements of African traditional religions as follows:

The belief in God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, sacred rites related to features, rites of passage, and other sacred rites relating to the life of the individual, family, and larger community, religious specialists and their functions. Sacred social and ceremonial laws, and

prohibitions called taboos and belief in the sacraments of interpersonal and kingship relationship.<sup>19</sup>

Benjamin C. Ray employs the same elements in his *African Religions: Symbol, ritual and community*. Okot p'Bitek is critical to Mbiti for hellenization of the African Deities. He adds that in all these societies' people have without exception had a notion of God as the Supreme Being (Mbiti 1969).<sup>20</sup> He instead favours African Supreme Being to be referred to 'strong' but not 'omnipotent', 'wise not Omniscient', 'old not eternal', 'great not omnipresent'.<sup>21</sup> He adds, "The Greek metaphysical terms are meaningless in African thinking.

Like Danquah, Mbiti, Idowu, Busia, Abraham, Kenyatta, Senghor, and the missionaries, modern western Christians, anthropologists are intellectual smugglers"<sup>22</sup> Okot p'Bitek however does not go unchecked or challenged by scholars. S.G. Kibicho challenges that While the danger p'Bitek is warning against should be heeded, there is much unbiased empirical evidence to show that the picture he ends up painting of African "deities" is not applicable to many African peoples. He found out that those ideas may apply, to some extent at the level of divinities" among some groups. However, as already Shown in the conception of God as the Supreme Being was almost universally found throughout the continent. In this study, we follow Kibicho's structure of African traditional Religions: conception of God in African traditional religion, concepts of divinities and spirits, concept of ancestors, practice of magic and medicine, prospects of traditional religion-future and rites of passage-life of individual, family and large family, clan elders and king.

Many writers of African traditional religion address this topic. Some of them are ethnographic studies of individual ethnic groups in Africa giving some details of their study. There are others however, who have written shallowly about almost all-ethnic groups in Africa. We should have a survey of traditional beliefs in Africa but specifically we centre our studies to the Meru people. We have already seen that the explorers, early missionaries doubted that there was a belief in God in Africa. Later missionaries and African scholars proved beyond reasonable doubt

through their writings that indeed in Africa God was not foreign. Mbiti says in that regard that All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the centre of African religion and it dominates all its other beliefs.<sup>23</sup> Idowu also notes that:

“The age long question in African’s encounter with the “Christian west” has been; is there an African concept of God? If Africans know God, which or what God do they know? Their own God or the real God? <sup>24</sup>

In our introduction, we noted the views of explorers and early missionaries, expressing that the African people were godless and without a clue of religion. However later missionaries corrected this, reporting that Africa is religious and knows God. For example Lang, “a western scholar had discovered that African traditional religion is a monotheistic religion in which God is believed To eternal, omniscient, beneficent, moral, omnipotent, creative And satisfying all man’s needs--rational social, moral and ethical.<sup>25</sup> J.N.K.Mugambi in his book, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* notes:

“that besides African people having God, they have the name of that God. He says, “African groups each had their name for deity and sometimes one community had several descriptive names and phrases expressing the various qualities that were attributed to deity.<sup>26</sup>

He adds:

“Although the name for deity in any one African community was part of the vocabulary of that particular community, a common traditional belief was that such names referred to beings whose power extended beyond any ethnic territory to the whole

world. Thus, it is possible for Africans from different ethnic communities to understand one another as far as basic religious belief is concerned.<sup>27</sup>

From the observations noted above then there is no doubt of the African Supreme Being or God. This note then takes us to the nature and character of the African God. Dr. Richard J. Gehman outlines the attributes of the African Supreme Being as follows: "God knows all things, God is present everywhere, God is almighty, God is transcendent, God is everlasting, God is spirit, God is kind, merciful and good, God is holy, God is unique. The works of the Supreme Being God created the world, he protects and saves and the Worship of the Supreme Being"<sup>28</sup>

Mbiti also noted almost the similar things in his book "concept of God in Africa" that god has eternal attributes-self existence, first and last, invisible, incomprehensible, mysterious and immutable. Moral attributes-pity, kindness, love, comfort of God, faithfulness of God, goodness of God, the anger, the will, the justice and the holiness of God.<sup>29</sup> E. M. Uka supports Mbiti's view of African God's attributes and concludes, "It is the notion of the moral attributes of God that strengthens the African traditional ethical sanctions and this in turn upholds the community solidarity."<sup>30</sup>

Mark R. Nikkel notes that the Dinka people of Sudan were religious people and had the knowledge of God before the coming of the missionaries. He says "the term Nhialic is commonly used to refer to the supreme being of the Dinka...As supreme being he is by nature omnipotent and just like the natural forces such as rains and rivers through which he frequently manifested himself, he brings blessings among human kind but may also inflict suffering. The Dinka accept that he is universal and so other peoples who call him by other names know him."<sup>31</sup> In this study, we have the details of the concept of God among the Meru people of the eastern part of Kenya and on the slopes of Mount Kenya. The details of the attributes of "Murungu" seem too compatible with those of those of other African peoples. We shall address this later.



African peoples comprise about one thousand tribes<sup>32</sup> and those who have supreme beings and divinities, are very few. Idowu of Yoruba of Nigeria gives a very good example. S.G.Kibicho shows that the divinities number is not known for they are so many. He pointed ...belief in the divinities is found among some ethnic groups. The Yoruba of Nigeria are reputed to have the biggest number of divinities. He adds; No one knows the actual number but the figure ranges from 200 to 1700 and more have been suggested.<sup>33</sup>

The divinities spiritual beings and occupy the highest place among spirits. They are believed to be like the Messengers of God. In Nigeria the Supreme Being is known as "Oludumare", he was supported by many divinities, and here we mention just a few. Kibicho's analysis lists just four out of the six listed by Idowu. Obatala (or Orisa Nila) is an arch divinity who assisted in creation and moulding of the physical body. He is very popular for he is the god of fertility. Oren Mila-close to God and pleads on behalf of human beings to God. He is the divinity of knowledge and wisdom, guidance and counsel. Gun-divinity of iron and war announced by tool dealers. Sango-divinity of lightning-initially a human being but was deified. This includes natural phenomena-hills, certain rivers, trees and the earth believed inhabited by the spirit.

Mbiti traces the origin of divinities to God. They are his supporters toward his creation. He says, "Divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God in the ontological aspects of the spirits. They are associated with him and often stand for his activities or manifestations or as spiritual beings in charge of major objects or phenomena of nature."<sup>34</sup> Mbiti Adds, "Some of these spiritual beings are pictured as messengers or servants of God and we have examples of this concept in several parts of Africa."<sup>35</sup>

Where there were divinities people deified them, others honoured them. The divinities are not found among Mount Kenya peoples. They were monotheists. Their God was a Supreme Being called Murungu (Meru), or Ngai (Kikuyu), or Mulungu (kamba) or Ngai (Embu). Murungu had no divinities as we see in other African peoples like Zulu, Dinka, Chagga and Yoruba. In fact, it should be noted that even where these divinities were, none of them took totally the place of God.

They are also said to be subject to God and in some cases even report what they are doing to him. Concerning the Yoruba of Nigeria divinities, Mbiti noted that they render tribute to God (Oludumare) "annual tributes of their substance in acknowledgement of his lordship."<sup>36</sup> According to Mbiti (1975), the types of spirits in the universe can be shown in form of a hierarchy: spirits, nature spirits, human spirits sky spirits long dead (ghost) earth spirits, recently dead and living dead.<sup>37</sup>

The hierarchy has one thing in common: they are all spirits. In Meru, people commonly say that the Supreme Being created some spirits as Spirits and some became from recent or long dead as Mbiti analyses. The spirits were honoured and sometime one would mistake that reverence for worship. Richard J.Gehman divides the spirits into two: the ghosts who are born as human beings and those which were created as spirits.<sup>38</sup> He adds that the majority of spirits are thought by most people to be the spirits of the departed human beings.<sup>39</sup> Mbiti says that the best term to use to refer to ancestors who died long time ago and recently is not "ancestral spirits" but the living dead whichever is applicable.<sup>40</sup> Why do we do that? He adds the advantage of the term "living dead" is that it expresses the living relationship between the living and their dead ancestors...The living dead enjoys a state of personal immortality while they are being personally remembered by name by their living descendants. Their process of dying is not yet complete.<sup>41</sup>

Gehman adds that they are half spirit and half human with one foot in the spirit and another one in the world. He adds, "When the last person dies who could remember them? However, the living dead who have completed the dying process and moved into the past or (Zamani) as impersonal spirits and become mere its"<sup>42</sup> Among the living dead are the spirits of those who are not in any way accepted to come to human beings because they can cause chaos. Gehman says, "These reflected ghost spirits include people who were not buried properly, those who died an unhappy death by hanging, drowning, being stuck by lightening or in pregnancy."<sup>43</sup>

Idowu comments that, "people who were accursed while they were living are also reflected". They will wander aimlessly, haunting such as forests, rivers,

mountains and rocky ravines. They may enter as animals. The general aim seems to be molesting and harming people.<sup>44</sup> The other kinds of spirits are created beings. These, according to Mbiti and Gehman, are responsible for bringing small pox, plague and many other calamities. Gehman writes that these spirits dwell in trees, mountains, rivers and other mighty forces of nature. Some believe that charms possessing magical powers have the spirit living in them.<sup>45</sup>

Idowu in his research noted a kind of a spirit among the Yoruba whose origin is not known. They are called “abiku” in Yoruba, that is, “spirits” born to die. The belief here is that they are wandering spirits who specialises in sadistic mischief of finding way into wombs to be born in order to die<sup>46</sup>

We saw earlier that there are two kinds of spirits. Those are created spirits and spirits of the dead people. The spirit of the dead was further divided into two: the living dead and the recent dead. The created spirits and those people who died and improperly buried, hanged or those who died of accidents have no benefit to the living for they bring misfortunes. However, those of the honoured ancestors benefited the living a lot. They are called the living dead for they communicate with the living. They got a share of meals through libations.

Kibicho notes that the ancestral spirits are important mainly because, the living regard as invisible members of their families or age grades as the case may be.<sup>47</sup> They are regarded as guardians of morality among most African peoples. They acted as intermediaries or mediators between living humans and God.<sup>48</sup>

Consequently, some groups approached the ancestral spirits for assistance. They disciplined or punished those who did evil. Kibicho adds...among all African people, they punish (e.g. bringing misfortunes, sicknesses etc) only with good reasons. Gehman lists seven roles of the living dead among the living. Some of these agree with Kibicho, we can only note those not noted correct errors of the living people. They act as owners of the land fertilising the earth and causing the food to grow. They receive the request of the living (asking for assistance). They comfort the livings that are conscious of their presence. They communicate with the living thorough revelations.<sup>49</sup> Why does the living remember the living dead? Revelations of living dead was through dreams, calamities: ecstasy. When this

happened, the people consulted the prophet or a diviner for clarification. In return, the living was obligated to remember the living dead in the following ways.<sup>50</sup>

Daily at home-when eating and drinking, they poured some to the shrine before putting anything in their mouths. They were to be remembered in all cycles of life: Birth-when the child was born and there were celebrations the ancestors had to receive libations. Marriage- when the bride was marrying, the ancestors receives sacrifices in order for them to accept the living to receive dowry. Cycles of seasons: Times of rain, times of planting, growth and harvesting and times of hunting and fishing. Gehman in his research noted that rain rites are common around the world, especially among those peoples living in dry regions where the rain frequently fails. Among African people, God alone is the source of rain. However prayers for rain may be made to the living dead and thanksgiving for the rain-afterward may be directed to them.<sup>51</sup> These agricultural stages were marked with sacrifices to the supreme God and in some cases, libations were offered to the living dead. This was common among others including the Meru people.

The African peoples had rites and in some cases made offering to the living dead or ancestors before undertaking anything. Therefore, hunting and fishing were not exceptions. An example is given by Gehman from Tonga land He says that, "Before the people of Tonga land go fishing someone must spit into the water saying, 'let the fish abound! Let them not hide in the mud! Let there be enough of them to satisfy everyone.....similar offerings and prayers are made to the ancestral spirits before a hunt'"

This now brings us to another question," How did the African people and Meru in particular recognise that there was God? Mbiti proposes three explanations for the origin of the belief in God.<sup>52</sup> People came to believe in God through reflections on the universe. The people began by questioning the origin of the universe. They realised the universe was created and now sustained by somebody and that some body is God. From there on, they believed in God. The people realised their own weaknesses. They assessed themselves and later

discovered that even if they were weak, it shows that there is one who has all the strength and this was God. The people also believed in the existence of God through the forces of nature. They realised there was God through what Mbiti says, "It is very likely that people came to believe in God's existence through such a link between heaven and the earth."<sup>53</sup>

In fact, even if we do not know the origin of the knowledge of God in Meru traditional religion, Meru people and all African communities knew God. Why should one know God according to Meru traditional religion? Somebody said that 'human being has a religious vacuum' [M' Mungania in Meru]. He cannot live without a religion for he needs to fill his religious vacuum. Due to that, Meru people are not exceptions. They similarly had that inner need of God. Almost all my informants think that their knowledge of God is very important. If they never knew God, there could have been no people like Meru. Meru people say that it is God who delivered them from captivity and brought them to their present land. He [Murungu] has sustained them up to now. It is not by their power but by the power of Murungu [God]. He feeds them, providing rain and even healing from incurable or curable diseases. To them, they are God's people just as you would say it to Israel.

Those who write in favour of Christianity however, do not approve it [the tribal knowledge of God]. They say that African traditional knowledge of God is general revelation and needs a special revelation, which comes through Jesus Christ. If we say that the revelation that African tradition had is complete that is like generalising salvation [salvation without requirements]. The conclusion reached is that a special revelation is necessary if general revelation has to be effective John Baillie in his book, ' *The ideas of Revelation in Recent Thought*' observes:

“. . . the fullness of revelation is only in Jesus Christ, and in Him all other revelation is comprehended and summed up " for in Him 'Writes St. Paul, "dwelleth the whole fullness of the deity bodily and ye have come to fullness in Him."<sup>54</sup>

The traditionalists believe that their revelation of God was complete, especially for those who did not know Jesus through Christianity. They say that the only

age- groups which came in contact with Christianity, was Kaburu, Mbaya, Kibabu, Gichunge, and Mungatia. Their conclusion is that Murungu will judge them according to the knowledge of God they had.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

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- <sup>1</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p 9
  - <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 9
  - <sup>3</sup> M’Ncebere,; Interviewed on 07 / 07 / 04
  - <sup>4</sup> Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, p. 38.
  - <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.43.
  - <sup>6</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 10.
  - <sup>7</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *A Comparative Study of Religions*, p. 36
  - <sup>8</sup> B. C. Ray, *African Religions*, p. 3.
  - <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, pp. 3-4.
  - <sup>10</sup> JNK Mugambi, ed. ,*A Comparative Study of Religion*, pp. 36-37
  - <sup>11</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, ed., *A Comparative Study of Religions*, p. 36.
  - <sup>12</sup> JS Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 10
  - <sup>13</sup> JNK Mugambi, *Comparative Study of Religions*, pp. 36-37.
  - <sup>14</sup> B. C. Ray, *African Religions*, p. 3
  - <sup>15</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 6.
  - <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 6
  - <sup>17</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, p. xi
  - <sup>18</sup> R. J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religions in Biblical Perspective*. 10
  - <sup>19</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi ed., *Comparative Study of Religions*, pp. vii- x
  - <sup>20</sup> Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, p. 87
  - <sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p88
  - <sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.88
  - <sup>23</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p.40
  - <sup>24</sup> E. B. Idowu, *African Tradition Religion: A definition*, p. 92
  - <sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 92
  - <sup>26</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*, p. 60
  - <sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 60
  - <sup>28</sup> R. J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religions in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 189-194
  - <sup>29</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, pp. 56-59, 80-85
  - <sup>30</sup> P. Lang, *Reading in African Traditional Society*, p. 44.
  - <sup>31</sup> M. R. Nikkel, *Dinka Christianity*, p. 31
  - <sup>32</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 1
  - <sup>33</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *Comperative Study of Religions*, pp. 47-48
  - <sup>34</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 98
  - <sup>35</sup> *ibid*,p. 101
  - <sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p. 99
  - <sup>37</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 65
  - <sup>38</sup> R. J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 137
  - <sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 137
  - <sup>40</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 83
  - <sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 83
  - <sup>42</sup> R. J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 137
  - <sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.137
  - <sup>44</sup> E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition*, pp. 174-175
  - <sup>45</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 138
  - <sup>46</sup> E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition*, p175
  - <sup>47</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *Comperative Study of Religion*, p. 48
  - <sup>48</sup> *ibid*,p. p.49
  - <sup>49</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 140- 142
  - <sup>50</sup> *ibid*,p. 143-144
  - <sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 144
  - <sup>52</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, pp. 40-42
  - <sup>53</sup> *ibid*, 40-42
  - <sup>54</sup> J. Baille, *The Ideas in Revelation in Recent Thought*, p. 80

## CHAPTER TWO

### RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

#### DESIGN OF STUDY

This research, emanated from the oral fieldwork. We started by surveying African traditional religions existing sources but later we reviewed those on the traditional faith of the Meru people. Most of the literature on the subject did not touch Meru traditional religion. It was after the above review that I turned to the fieldwork through oral interviews with the Meru aged people whose ages range from fifty-five and one hundred and ten years. I did interviews using the list of research questions in the following areas of Meru people tradition: origin, migration, and settlement in their present land, their tradition, concept of God, leadership, divinities etc.

Those interviews intended to check the outcome of their contact with the white rulers and the missionaries, their morality before and after the advent of Christianity. I interviewed every person separately and the information that he gave kept confidentially from others so as not to pre-empt their views. When the data collection was complete, the information was analyzed, and some inferences drawn from it. In the analyses, the data went through some stages to test the correctness. We used the test recommendations that David Westerlund highlights in his book, *"African Religion in African Scholarship"* in which he notes "most of the writers use historical approach, which is supplemented with phenomenological and other approaches. He, however, says; the tests of criticism concern [1] genuineness [2] nearness [3] bias and [4] dependency.<sup>55</sup> We tried to avoid the above problems but I think it is not easy to eliminate the third test above.

The other method is prescriptive especially in some sections of chapters five and six. Prescription is a method we used because the researches, which involved

me to look for example rites and critically write about them, especially in chapter five, were helpful. For resources of chapter six, we had to go to church services, sit down and see literally some of the Meru traditional religion's practices incorporated in church worship by the Meru people. These showed us the reality on the ground. It is important to note that in some chapters we wrote first from the African point of view and later to that of Meru people especially from their religious tradition. This is because Meru traditional religion is part of the whole of the African traditional religion. Most of what we get from the other African peoples is similar to that of the Meru people. There is therefore no way the Meru concept of God is in isolation from that of the whole of Africa especially Africa West, east, south and central.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Meru people of Kenya had some knowledge of God even before the advent of Christianity. They traced this knowledge of God back to creation, since they believed God created them. However, the Meru people did not have a well-worked out system of how that knowledge came about. They just knew God existed and that he was part of every aspect of life. They invoked God in all they did or said. Whether in issues concerning governance or birth or initiation or marriage or even death, God always invoked. All they did have a corresponding religious chain. Sacrifice to God formed a cardinal aspect of their worship and prayer, serving as icing on all they did. In some Christian churches in Meru today, some of the traditional practices mix equally with Christian practices, causing fears of negative syncretism.

Our great grandfather used to tell us how the Meru people kept high moral ethical standards before the Western missionary era. Today, however, the moral standards of the Meru people have declined considerably, prompting us to ask whether the advent of Christianity has anything to do with this decline. This coupled with seeming identity crisis of the members of Meru community in



general form the basis of my investigation. As a member of Meru community, I feel that I need to find out how and why we seem to have lost our traditional moral. What role, if any, did the Christian faith play in this decline? What has been and how have the Christian faith and the Meru traditional religion made influence one on the other? What are the results of this inevitable and common clash between the Christian faith and traditional culture/religion? These questions form the basis of this study.

I set off by narrating some personal experiences, which provoked me to undertake this study. The first experience is this. I was once preaching in an evangelistic open-air meeting near Igoji Catholic Mission in Meru. Unexpectedly, some drunken people came and stoned us, succeeding in dispersing the gathering. All the people ran away. I was left with a few brave ones. The fact this incident occurred in one of the strongholds of the Christian faith in Meru disturbed me a great deal. I questioned the impact the knowledge of God has had on the lives of the people in the area. I thought if they knew God either as Christians or as even traditional religionists, they would have responded differently to our preaching.

Provoked by this incident, I started to investigate. This process led to my meeting with the 74-year-old Gideon Karani M'mungania of Meru age group known as Mbaya. When I told him Of my stoning experience he said, 'drunkards do not do anything without knowing', implying that their action was not one of ignorance but that of lost moral values. He went on to tell me that in traditional society young people did not take beer. Only the elders did and could not mess up for fear of punishment. He said that the drunkards' young people who stoned us did not know the God of Meru or the one of Christianity. He called them *Ngiti*, meaning those who not care and are therefore evil people. He added that such evil people do not grow in the knowledge of God at all. In traditional community, the Meru people used to punish such evil people.

Elder M'mungania concluded that today, irreligious people have come up because Christianity in Meru has been unable to deal with them. He thus blames Christianity for the moral mess in Meru community. My investigation also led me to Gideon M'mukindia, aged 75 of the same age group as M'mungania. He said that the drunken young people who stoned us were *viahaa*, meaning they were foolish. He contended that they stoned the preacher because of foolishness and not because they never knew God.

M'thuranira aged 78 and of the same Mbaya age group, said that those people never knew God. He called them *Kafiri*, a Kiswahili word for a non believer. He also pointed out that they were misfits and anti-religious individuals. Albert Kathenya, 48, of Gichunge age group in Meru—Tharaka, thought differently. He stated that, 'they knew God but were still ignorant of the truth'. He said they could have done this because of doctrinal differences, arguing that even the Jews who knew God still crucified Jesus Christ. He however, regretted that many people in our community have abandoned the Meru traditional religion due to the influence of Western modernism and civilization. My informants do not agree on what led to moral decline in Meru community. The Meru people did not agree on whether those drunkards knew God or not. They however agree that what the drunken young people did was anti-Kimeru. They lament that today's Meru generations do not take their traditional religion seriously.

My second experience occurred in Kanyakine, Meru. The pastor had invited to preach, in their Pentecostal Church. The Pastor who had invited went to address another congregation. During the worship, one of their elders invited to the pulpit to speak. I was half way in my message when three church elders stood up and forced me to stop preaching and to sit down. I do not remember what I said to upset them to the point of cutting short my preaching. Their action infuriated the congregation. This experience too made me to question whether these elders knew God. Accordingly, I thought that they never knew God from Meru traditional and Christianity as well. Those who heard of this incident as well differed in their views. There were some, who said, 'these elders lacked wisdom and they never

knew God of Meru tradition because, the traditional Priests were respected and feared.' There could be no interruption of the preaching at all. Others, however, thought that they were unsettled, because may be the word was condemning them. The blame is to Christianity for even if it declared the whole of Meru culture as satanic, they have failed to bring people to the knowledge of God. Some Christians are hiding in churches but they might be like wolves in sheep clothing. May be, that is why elders like those did not respect God's word and his servants.

The third experience is not personal but it concerns Meru community and has bearing on the theme of my research. The incident happened at St. Kizito Mixed Secondary School in Meru where schoolboys stormed into girls' dormitories, raped and killed nineteen of the schoolgirls. Most of the students in St. Kizito were from Meru. How could boys in such a strong Catholic mission school commit such an evil act? The neighbours of the School were Meru people. How come that they were so unconcerned that they did not even try to stop the act or intervene?

This incident shocked the whole of Kenya and the world. It would not have happened in traditional Meru society. This is because their religion, administration and social institutions united people. Nevertheless, there has been breakdown of communal unity, leading to individualism and selfishness. Kiraitu Murungi in his book, "*In the Mud of Politics*" blames the disintegration of Meru society for the St. Kizito tragedy. He states, "In the Saint Kizito tragedy, an orgy of rape and violence in which Nineteen Schoolgirls were killed by their classmates in Meru, Partly blame the social disintegration of Meru society. Our basic humanity has been eroded and each individual thought only about himself or herself".<sup>56</sup>

My informants thought unanimously that Christianity is to blame for the break down of Meru traditional network, which kept the people together in the past. If the boys were truly Merus, they would have respected the girls. Even if a few

would try, others could have stopped them. In Meru traditional society, girls and boys treated one another like sisters and brothers and antisocial acts were discouraged and punished. The neighbours also should have contained the situation before the killings happened. However, this did not happen because they did not think it was their responsibility to help. This act was shameful, showing how Meru traditional ethical values have seriously deteriorated and seriously need revival to curtail those inhuman acts.

The last experience I went through was during my research tour in Meru. I visited Tharaka and my host took me from Tharaka South to Mukothima in the North. On our way, we heard that Rev. Mati, a local Anglican priest, had died in a hospital. Therefore, we decided to pass by his home in Karuamba village. When we arrived, we found the villagers armed with Pangas or machetes. We asked them what was the matter and they told us that they were pursuing some robbers who had broken into the dead priest's house and had stolen everything. This they did during the day while his family was in hospital by his side.

Once again, this incident raised questions in my mind. What has gone wrong in our traditional or Christian ethical standards? How could people steal from the house of the dead? This case of Meru people stealing in the house was a taboo in traditional society. This was so because the traditional Meru society believed that a person lives after physical death (living dead). The fear would be that he would retaliate if he were mistreated and disrespected. My resource persons in Tharaka were very angry when they learnt of this incident. They thought that things were in great mess. The inhuman acts (*Mantu jati ja kiumuntu*) are very common and the Njuri Ncheke [Meru council of elders] claims that they are organizing themselves in order to stop anti Kimeru trends.

The cases described above prompted me to think of how I would learn more about the Meru concept of God, which had unified the Meru people to be one. The elders (Njuri-Ncheke) have already decided to bring a revival of Meru traditional religion. I found out that what is happening today in Meru has not

happened before. One of my informants thought that the reason for all these violations was partly due to the influence of Christianity, missionaries, colonizers and modernism. Kibanga in Isiolo noted that, “the missionaries, condemned the whole of the Meru culture. When the missionaries got some followers, they separated them from the main stream of Meru tradition. The converts had to leave their culture and cling to the foreign missionaries’ culture. Because of this cultural disruption, the people have lost their cultural values. Some, however, find themselves caught up between cultures, Meru and Western, resulting in ‘mixed’ ethical values. The Meru tradition, which provided discipline, lost touch and Christianity failed to provide alternatives

The Meru people trace the origin of their moral breakdown with the coming of the white rulers Meru they narrates, “When the white man came from Kikuyu country and brought by M'mwitari. M' mwitari shown the white ruler Meru Mountains from Meru, town a place called Tuntuu. He (Mwitari) told the Meru people not to fight this man because he had a weapon (gun) which penetrates their traditional shields [*ngoo*]. This made Meru people to fear him. This white man was nicknamed Baituku from the sound of the gunshot and Kangangi because he used to visit many parts of Meru using a horse (from Kimeru word Kwanganga that means loitering or being unstable.) Baituku took some girls to work for him and some young men. He would sleep with them and encouraged those working with him to do the same. This was the beginning of lapse of morality in Meru.

The Meru people blame those colonial rulers for what my informants’ calls (*Kwaga nthoni*) that is, lack of good manners. Traditionally every child was encouraged from home to have good manners. The other informants also blamed the modernism, civilization, or direct copying of what the westerners do without judging it first to see whether it is good for us. This kind of civilization has played a great role in eroding Kimeru tradition and religion. The external civilization has affected Meru culture more negatively than positively. The elders think that today the Meru people are in a mess and they decide to reverse the trend through teaching their children Meru traditional values.

## JUSTIFICATION

When growing up, I used to hear old people conversing about the worship of God. They would call him Murungu in Meru. They talked of how in the time of famine the respected elders used to make sacrifices for him in the sacred forest. To my surprise when I became a Christian I found out that the missionaries used Murungu to refer to the God of the Bible. God was still Murungu and it was used in Kimeru Bible. I saw some inconsistencies in the way missionaries and translators used traditional name of God in Bible translation but demonized Meru culture in practice. This made me to begin to ask myself questions because if the preaching of the gospel portrayed that our tradition and culture were evil and anti-Christian, then why was our traditional name of God used to refer to the God of the Bible?

Another thing that attracted my attention was the sitting arrangement in Meru churches. The men do not mix with women in churches. Men have their own rows and women theirs. This is same in Meru culture and tradition where males never mixed with females. In a meeting for example, they sat separately. It seems there are things, which Christianity was unable to change. The singing style is the same, employing the use of drums in worship and retaining traditional music.

The morality of the Meru people was very high before the coming of Christianity through missionaries. Nevertheless, the traditional moral system of countering crimes was broken down since it was antichristian according to visitors. When they abandoned this system, the result was moral breakdown and social decay. In the traditional ethics, such things as children born out of wedlock, rape and other moral crimes were uncommon. In the traditional society, it was a crime for a man or a woman to see the nakedness of a person older than him/her was and especially one's parents or grandparents. Offenders would pay a heavy or suffer penalty or death depending with the seriousness of the crime. In case there was a pregnancy that took place out of wedlock and the elders resolved it

that death penalty was lifted to a lesser penalty of paying a heavy fine. The elders the pregnancy was terminated to avoid shame. When Christianity came, some people left the traditional practices not because they wanted to be Christians but because they wanted, is free from the tough and restrict traditional rules. They termed the tradition as backward and claimed to be illuminated and modern. There is therefore a problem because the traditionalists blamed Christianity for moral breakdown claiming that they misled the Meru people. In this study, we try to find out how things went wrong.

Polygamy is still in Meru even after the advent of Christianity. It is very common among Christians. Some Christians even choose to leave the church if the need to marry a second wife arises. If a man would like to have children and his wife is unable to have any or if he just wanted a younger woman, he opts for polygamy irrespective of the consequences. Other reasons for marrying a second wife also includes wanting to have sons when the first wife has only given girls. This forced a man to marry more wives for honour and greatness. In one of my tour in Meru South, I met a young man aged twenty-eight years, married to four wives even though he was a member of a Christian church.

Thus, polygamy highlights one aspect of clashes between Christianity and tradition. Here traditional practices within the church seem to take the upper hand. The prevalence of polygamy among Christians too made me to see the need to learn more about the Meru tradition in an attempt to find solutions and to provide guidance where possible. This study therefore will attempt to distinguish between Meru tradition, and biblical teaching. We believe there are good and bad elements in every tradition or culture. This study will therefore endeavour to differentiate good Meru traditions and cultural practices from bad practices rather than condemn the culture and tradition wholesale as missionaries did and failed to provide proper alternatives.

Another concern of this study is the revival of Njuri Nceke and with its main aim of reintroducing old Kimeru systems of tradition. If this happens, the church in

Meru Christianity stands because an exodus of believers going back to tradition might occur. Because of this, our work intends to equip the leaders in Meru and maybe in other communities to be prepared to face the challenges that may emanate from traditional revivals.

It is beneficial to Christians to know what their traditional and cultural practices are so that they decide which ones to keep and which ones to discard. The leaders of churches will have to capitalize on parts of the tradition which do not contradict the historic Christianity teaching because if they keep quiet the elders' revival of the tradition might restore everything regardless of whether it suits Christian faith or not. Most of the elders in Meru who want to revive Kimeru claim to be Christians of different denominations but as I found out in the field, they are no firm ground in Christian faith.

As we shall see in the literature review, those who have written ahead did not write in details of the knowledge of God among the Meru people. Those that are available have written on culture, traditional leadership but they lack detailed description. Some works in this category were written many years ago and do not cover the recent and current situation. This study will in that regard is essential to the Meru people in particular and church leaders of other African communities in general, because the Meru traditional religion is similar to that of other African peoples.

## OBJECTIVES

The following have been my objectives in conducting this research:

1. I would like to trace the origin and descent of Meru people.
2. I would like to investigate if there is any connection between traditional practices and the knowledge and worship of God among Meru people.



3. I would like to know why there are so many moral evils in Meru community today contrary to the assertion of our grandfathers that the Meru were morally upright before the coming of European missionaries and colonial rulers
4. I would also like to know how to reach Meru people with the Gospel, considering that my early attempts to minister suffered rejection. My own father told me that even if he dies I should not bury him because I have become a Christian.
5. In our early Pentecostal teaching, they taught that Meru tradition was demonic and so was curious to find out more about that 'demon'.
6. When I was a pastor of one church in Meru, I discovered cases of Christians going secretly to seek assistance from traditional healers. I also want to find more about those specialists.
7. Meru Christians trust 'prophets' and 'prophetesses' more than pastors and this is disturbing. The church with a prophet is likely to receive more of Meru people than any other ethnic group. This is true even in big towns in Kenya. I would like to find out why this is so and why those with prophetic gifting seem to be culturally grounded.
8. I wanted also to find out the challenges a Christian is likely to face in Meru from the traditionalists.

## HYPOTHESES

When I started undertaking this research, I presupposed the following:

1. I thought that the church could not accommodate Meru tradition because it was evil.

2. I thought that Meru people never knew God at all except through Christianity.
3. I wanted to use my knowledge of God to judge the Meru tradition
4. The traditionalists according to me were anti-God and needed total deliverance from that traditional bondage.
5. I thought that all specialists like herbalists, diviners, prophets, and traditional hearers were Satan's servants.
6. Tradition to me was bondage of worthy deliverance.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ronald H. Nash in his book, *The Concepts of God* outlines the following considerations, which the scholars must take into account in the process of formulating a coherent understanding of divine attributes. According to him, the concept of God in Christian theism must meet the test of "logical consistency".<sup>57</sup> A coherent understanding of God must meet four criteria, as follows:<sup>58</sup>

- a) The individual attributes must be self-consistent.
- b) It should not be faulty.
- c) The divine attributes must logically compatible with each other. It has to be in line with other divine attributes.
- d) The divine attributes will have to be consistent with other important concerns within a particular theological system. The concept of God its self must be consistent and not contradictory.

Anthony Kenny warns the theistic people not to take concept of God lightly. He explains the importance of considering whether they are logical coherence. He writes:

“Anyone who is interested in the question of the existence of God has to study first of all the divine attributes, for to say that God exists is to say that there is something that has the divine attributes and if “God exists” is to be true, and then the divine attributes must at least themselves be coherent and jointly compatible. The coherence of the notion of God, as possession of the traditional attributes, is necessary, though of course not sufficient, condition for God’s existence.”<sup>59</sup>

In similar argument, Nash has noted that attributes are the existing evidence that God who bears them exists. He clarifies that:

If a particular concept of God is logically contradictory then it is logically impossible for such a God to exist. The incoherence of the concept of God would provide an inescapable argument against the existence of such a God.<sup>60</sup>

Recent theological and philosophical discourse includes some reflection on the tension between the Thomistic concept of God and that promoted by Process Theology. According to David Griffin, the Thomistic concept of God has eight attributes, some of which he does not agree with. In his book his book, *“God, power and evil: A Process Theodicy*, Griffin outlines the following Thomistic attributes:

- a) Pure actuality,
- b) Immutability,
- c) Impassibility,
- d) Timelessness,
- e) Simplicity,

f) Necessity,

g) Omniscience and

h) Omnipotence.<sup>61</sup>

The scholars questioned the completeness of these Thomistic attributes especially because of the absence of divine love and sympathy. Nash expresses this shortcoming. He observes “. . . one of the major tasks for Thomistic Theism is showing how the “God” described in the Thomistic package of attributes can be the caring, loving God of the Bible.”<sup>62</sup> Thomas Aquinas insisted that, if you accept one of the eight attributes you would have to accept the whole package. Nash noted:

“...the Thomistic attributes of God are full of errors. [He adds that,] “A growing number of philosophers and theologians are persuaded that the Thomistic concept of God is fraught with serious problems... but it should be noted here that one is not forced to choose either thomistic theism or process theology; the adjunction between their respective theories of God is not exclusive. It is possible to develop mediating concepts of God that can avoid the major difficulties of the static God of thomistic theism and the finite god of process theology.”<sup>63</sup>

Those who support Process Theology claim that Thomistic Theology as proclaimed in Catholic doctrine evokes many objections. They also suggest that Thomistic theism bases its theology on Greek philosophy and therefore differs with the biblical teaching. They therefore look for an alternative concept of God, which they discerned in the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947), the son of an Anglican vicar, who taught at Cambridge University and was for many years best known for his work in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of

mathematics.<sup>64</sup> Whitehead is the founder of the Process thought, which differs radically with Thomistic thought. The two schools of thought, according to Nash, were extremes. Whereas Thomistic Theism accepts the eight divine attributes, White head's Process thought does not accept the notion of a transcendent of God. Process theologians teach that God and his creation coexistent with each other. According to Process Theology, God benefits from his Creation just as the Creation also depends on him. Whitehead was the first to articulate Panentheism but popularised by Charles Hartshorne together with other philosophers. Nash outlines eight beliefs of panentheistic theology: God and the universe are interdependence. When the universe is affected, even God too: a. God and the world are mutually independent on each other. b. God to them is a changing God. c. Their God is impersonal. D. Their God can change. E. God is not perfect. Their God is growing or developing. God is not absolute and not relative, God omniscience – God knows all things.

The controversy that we find in Christian conception of God does not feature at all in African traditional religion and indeed Meru concept of God. Mbiti in his book, *Concepts of God in African*<sup>65</sup> (1970) gives all the attributes of Thomistic, and panentheism. The outlines of the attributes of God that he gives do not miss the attributes of God that are lacking in Thomistic and the process theology. This shows that he was not waved by any of the arguments above but rather took the middle ground. The concept of God in the traditional faith of Meru people has all the doctrines of Godhead. The Meru concept of God originated from God himself. They claim that God created the first family and from this, all the rest came through propagation. They call God their father and he used to stay with them until the day that man ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Their worship was not for other gods but one God. These concepts of God that the Africans had been not borrowed but it was their tradition heritage. All other Meru social systems like leadership, stages like initiation of boys and girls linked to God. Everything that was going on in Meru tradition centred in God. The Knowledge of God entered the people by birth and by orientation. The people learnt about God through their

parents, grandparents and communal functions like sacrifices to evade incurable disease outbreaks.

Samuel G. Kibicho in his book, *God and Revelation in an African context* highlights the concepts of God among Kikuyu ethnic group in Kenya. He noted that:

“For the Kikuyu people, as for most African peoples, there was no division between religion and nay other aspect of life such as politics or economics. Rather, religion, or the fear and the worship of God, was interwoven into the total fabric of life. Moreover, the fear of God meant at the same time both loving and respecting one’s fellow human being and showing concern for is wellbeing.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, the religion among Meru tradition had knitted the people together since they had one common origin. This is from the family of God. Respect for one another was common; no property belonged entirely to an individual because the owner was like a concierge because it benefited the whole community. A Mumeru had land and others did not have they had the right to cultivate without payment except that they would give a gift of appreciation.

The God of Meru traditional religion is one and had his sanctuary on the Mountains like Kirinyaga (Mt. Kenya), Mt. Nyambene, Mt. Kijege in Tharaka and so on. The sacrifice was prepared under a fig tree (*Mkuu*) or groves like *mugumo*. This God was the most holy, his servants were to be blameless, and above old aged men who had all their children married.

It is important to note here that the concept of God in Meru traditional religion and indeed Africa was a network, which cannot be broken at all. Other theistic religions like Christianity and Islam came but instead of assimilating it, they were rather assimilated. It the bond that made us realize that ontology was part of their worship because; all came to exist through the (Being) who is God. Religion,

existences of man, leadership (of the tribe) all were instituted by God and empowered by him. To conclude we can say that God (Murungu) instituted the concept of God among Meru people and if it might end, God will do it. This study also portrays the concepts of God in the tradition faith of Meru people.

This concept has a bond that spread to every aspect of traditional life. It connected the following elements together: Politics, kinship, religion-God, aesthetics, and ethics, economic and social. All the above are part of a Meru people and connected indirectly to God. According Merus God is the source of everything beginning with worship.

**Political Bond:** As explained in details in Chapter five dealing with Mugwe, the Meru people believed that Meru is a country (Mugongo jwa Meru) and their king was Mugwe. Under Mugwe is a chain of political hierarchy as shown in this study. All Meru people belonged to this political system. They lived in reverence to their leaders like Mugwe and the others. Besides Mugwe being a political leader he was also a religious leader; and in fact, a prophet (Kiroria)

**Religious Bond:** The Meru people claim that they had the knowledge of God before the coming of the white people. They consider God as their father (*Baaba weetu*) since he is the originator of the first Meru family from which Meru descended. In the worship, they claim that God who is their father who showed them who He is and how to worship him. The research of this study attempted to show that God initiated worship to the Meru people. All the people believe that Meru religion is theirs and they belonged to it since it comes from their God who is their root.

**Kinship bond:** The people there had a sense of belonging because they had a social system of kinship, which joined them together. From the topmost is Njuri Nceke, clans, larger family, extended family and the nuclear family. These social units connected with God and Meru religion, since God (Murungu Mumbi) created the first nuclear family. Every unit had a head. The nuclear family traced their link to a father or an ancestor and all their children traced their lineage from

the father's side. In Meru, the descent is patriarchal and we never had matriarchal lineage. This is because their God is a male ancestor whom they all descend. The Meru family lineage goes backward up to God.

After the nuclear family was the extended family. This family included many nuclear families of grand and great grandparents. The fathers (brothers and sisters of your father) commonly called aunts and uncles are all part of this family. It also included your brother's wife, children, and your own children as well. The great grandparents whether dead or alive were included and expected to be alive spiritually since one was dead if he or she has no one alive who remembers him or her. Many extended families formed one large family commonly called [*Mwiriga*] or society. The head of the extended family represented it to the society. That representative was generally a senior member (aged) of the extended family. The larger family attended to the issues of the families. One representative represented it at the clan level. All the societies formed the clan in which every member was part.

The clan was very powerful that it became like the national identity card today. When a Meru met another, the first thing they talked about was the clan each belonged. Some clans were did not intermarry with others and were restricted to marry within a specified clan. If one loved a girl and desired to marry, he was supposed to inquire the clan and the larger family. The nuclear family, extended family, larger family and clan had names. Those names were usually those of famous leaders or heads of particular units whether dead or alive. The nuclear family used grandfather's name as their name of the family.

Many clan leaders formed Njuri-Ncheke. This is the topmost cream in the Meru country hierarchy. Mugwe who was the head of everything in Meru headed Njuri-Ncheke. He was a political, religious, social, ethical, and cultural leader in the national level. He was also an army leader of the country and could address the soldiers before going to war. He blessed them when going to war and whatever spoils they got in the war they brought to him.



**Religious Bond:** Religion was part of the Meru people. Every member was automatically a member of Meru traditional religion. One was religious by birth, that is, the individual knowledge of God was inborn. God created a Mumeru, born by his parents but grew in the worship of God. The head of the family whether nuclear, extended or larger led members of his family in the worship of God and teaching. They did not have anything written but it was all oral, made perfect by constant practice. They practiced their religion until it became a part of the whole community. All the other aspects in Meru society all knitted together in religion because it permeated to the rest of the aspects automatically.

**Aesthetic Bond:** This community had practices that brought people together. These ceremonies included circumcision of both boys and girls. All the rites they had were ceremonial and religious in nature. Rites like naming, circumcision and marriage brought people together. They had songs for elders like *kirarire*, women, and candidates for circumcision, boys, girls, and even children. All the above bonds depicted in form of art, music, drama, poetry and so on.

**Ethics Bond:** The religion of Meru people provided all morals and ethics. It gave solutions to moral and ethical problems. Every stage of the people had its own morals and ethics, which they were supposed to keep without failure. If one broke any of them the members of that particular group punished he/she. If it is the group of very small boys (*Kithiga ncege*), the boy's mother was supposed to give the whole calabash of food commonly called *Ikiye*.

These rules were in the nuclear, extended and larger families, clan and Njuri Ncheke level (national level). An issue addressed by Njuri-Ncheke was that of a person who became a traitor of the country. This person was stoned to death at the national level but the first person to throw the stone was his father, extended, larger family heads, clan head and Njuri-Ncheke elders.

**Economic Bond:** Initially when the Merus came, from Mbwa (land of red clothed people) they were pastoralists but they settled at Meroe, which was in the southern part of Egypt. When they left Meroe, they claim that they found a mad

woman with many different grain seeds like millet, maize, beans, sorghum, finger millet and so on. They took these seeds and planted them on their way and by the time they arrived in Meru-Arusha (in Tanzania), they had already left pastoralist for agriculture or farming. However, they still kept cattle for milk and meat in small numbers. They also based farming in their religion. They designed their farming area for future benefits. They left and maintained forests since they were God—given. They preserved some forests and trees as the [*mukuu*- fig tree] sanctuary of God. From these sanctuaries, they sacrificed to Murungu [God] in times of famine or war or outbreak of diseases and sicknesses. The forests were also used as the source of Medicine for them [Meru] because they relied on herbal medicine. As we have seen, the Meru people were fixed by religion in their faith in God (Murungu)

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

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<sup>55</sup> D. Westerlud, *African Religion in African Scholarship*, p. 15

<sup>56</sup> K. Murungi, *In the Mud of Politics*, p 70

<sup>57</sup> R.H. Nash, *The Concept of God*, p. 12

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, pp. 12-13

<sup>59</sup> Kenny, *The Theistic People*, p. 5

<sup>60</sup> R.H. Nash, *The Concept of God*, p.13

<sup>61</sup> Griffin, *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* p. 1

<sup>62</sup> R. H. Nash, *The Concept of God*, p. 20

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p. 22

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 23

<sup>65</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, pp. 56-59/ 80-85

<sup>66</sup> S.G. Kibicho, *God And Revelation in an African Context*, p. 15

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

Jomo Kenyatta has written about Kikuyu people in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*.<sup>67</sup> He however does not give the details about where Kikuyu people came from. He has given a concept of God within Kikuyu people. Except in the map where we see Meru included in writing, he does not at all write about Meru people. Jomo Kenyatta does not connect Kikuyu origin with any other Bantu community. In addition, many things have changed since he wrote in 1938. The Customs of communities also have undergone through changes with time and some have abandoned them in many places.

John Mbiti in his book, *Concepts of God in Africa*, gives the attributes of God, which is similar with that of the Christian God. When I read that book, I just saw another African borrowed systematic theology because of the terms he uses like Omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient just to mention a few. It seems from his book that when he wrote, he had a kind of western mentality. Although the African Supreme Being had the attributes of a Christian God, the attributes had mother tongue terms, which I think Mbiti should have used. As much as I agree with Mbiti that our African traditional beliefs should remain, I think it was necessary for him to accept that African tradition needed Christianity. Mbiti does not seem to give any room for Christianity in his African concepts of God. He says, "Traditional religions neither sends Missionaries nor make proselytes; their strength lies in being fully integrated in all departments of human existence. As such, they can not and need not be completely wiped out, so long as those who follow them are alive."<sup>68</sup>

If we leave non-Christian faiths to exist alone, we shall show that those faiths are all right even without Christianity. I think we should contextualize Christian teaching to make it compatible with African religion and Mbiti is against that position. What really makes one to question Mbiti's concepts is because he does

not at all point at any evil in African religion. He justifies them all even that which African themselves condemned.

Even though we have above criticism on his works, Mbiti wrote on the “concepts of God in Africa” at the time when the explorers and early missionaries had already painted a picture that African peoples were totally below the stage of having even a religion. The words they used like animism, which because of their knowledge of Darwin evolution ideas would evolve from animism to spirits (Polytheism – dominants...) and evolve further to the Supreme Being. The teaching portrayed African peoples to be at the lowest level referred to as ‘animism’.

Mbiti also in his book, *African Religions and Philosophy* gives the analysis of that argument. He shows that Taylor coined the idea but his followers popularized it. Mbiti however argues. This type of argument and interpretation places African religions at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution. It tells us that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are at the top since they are monotheism. The theory fails to take into account the fact that another theory equally argues that man’s religious development began with monotheism and Moved toward polytheism and animism. We need not concern ourselves unduly here with either theory...African peoples are aware of all these elements of religion: God, spirits and divinities are part of the traditional body.

With that, comment on those who referred to African Traditional Religion as animist, Mbiti advices that those words should go for good. One is now able to see that Mbiti did the right thing at the right time when he wrote his books in 1969 and 1970 consecutively. They correct the earlier anthropologist misconception and shed more light on African traditional religion. If we exclude his books, we lose all to the first writers and we cannot understand better our tradition.

Mbiti’s books *Introduction to African Religion* (1975) and *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) and his other works became the basis for future African traditional religions anthropologists. These includes E. Bolaji Idowu (1973),

J.N.K. Mugambi and N.Kirima (1976), Okot p'Bitek (1971), Laurenti Magesa [1997] and others also from Africa and Western world, Mbiti proves beyond any reasonable doubts that in Africa there was and there is monotheism and it is not borrowed from the white missionaries but rather it is a heritage. Even if African traditional religion there is nothing written but then they have passed religious ideas from one generation to the other over the years.

He says Religion "... is part of the cultural heritage, Religion is in all areas of human life. It has dominated the mind of the African People to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic activities we can say, therefore, that religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, while at the same time, this way of life has shaped religion as well.<sup>69</sup>

In his first book, *African Religious and Philosophy*, Mbiti states in the introduction that 'Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of believes and practices.<sup>70</sup> Still his early studies covered African religious ontology in which he writes about (1) God. He has covered many topics in it like concept of time in relation to the past, present and future, the nature of God, which includes eternal and moral attributes. [1] It follows God's works like creation, providence and sustenance. It was after that he wrote about [2.] God and nature examples are animals, plants, and objects. Worship follows marked by sacrifices and prayers.

Spirits beings made up of superhuman beings and spirits of men who died along time ago. The living and those who are expected be born, animals and plants biologist, phenomena and objects without biological life. The comments at the back cover calls this book, "systematic Study of the attitudes of mind and belief which have evolved in many societies of Africa (Mbiti 1969, last – cover page)<sup>71</sup> According to me, Mbiti's work was just like an eye opener to Africans and non-Africans as far as the African traditional religion is concerned.

In his following volume 'Concepts of God in Africa' shows that in Africa, there was the worship of "One God referred to as "One Supreme God". He points, "...there are about one thousand African peoples (ethnic groups) and each has its own religious system.<sup>72</sup> They worshiped one God whose attributes are the same with that of God of Judaism and Christianity. In the whole of this book he has written about God of African traditional religions who like any other being has nature intrinsic, eternal and moral attributes and the active attributes like – creation, providence, governing. This followed by his natural attributes like anthropomorphism, animals, plants, and spiritual beings heavenly and earthly objects. He has ended with God and man – worship, time, history, ethics and eschatological concepts. The comments at the book show that this book is a translation of mass of anthropological information successfully into theological terms. The commentator adds "The author shows how behind many simple expressions of belief, there often lies a profound faith in God as Father and Creator, or in God working as spirit.<sup>73</sup>

The volume has shown that even if Christianity came it underwent enrichment through the African traditional religion for the missionaries came with God who was not foreign in Africa. The commentator also adds; "it is one thing to admire the way in which Africans have enriched Christianity from their own cultural and spiritual heritage.<sup>74</sup> In the third volume he addresses, the world of anthropologist about African traditional – Religion, that "African Religion has a 'heritage'. It is our inheritance and so it is unfair to lose it at the expense of the others". Mbiti asserts that African heritage is very rich, old and diverse. It has similarities and differences. He comments, "Some studies of the origin and development of man suggested that the earliest men may have lived in East Africa. While this has not yet been fully proved, we may say that if it was the case, then Africa can be considered the mother continent or origin of all the peoples of the world.<sup>75</sup>

He added, "There are traces of early forms of man, found in Kenya and Tanzania, which date from about two million years ago. Africans according to Mbiti have lived here for hundreds or thousands of years ago. In his contents

Mbiti has given African heritage, religious rites, where religion is found, views of universe, beliefs in God, worship, man, his origin, birth, marriage, death and hereafter, rituals, objects places, leadership, enemies, morals, contact with other religions and value of religion.

The comments are its usefulness. It is clear that African traditional Religion is a heritage, which is precious not only to Africans but also to non-Africans in the world. This proved by the fact that it goes back to the first man who ever lived on earth. Mbiti's works did not go down very well with his anthropologist counterparts like Okot P'Bitek and others. Okot p'Bitek, a Ugandan from Guru wrote "*African Religions in Western Scholarship*" [1970]. In chapter 10 of this book, he has given a superb criticism of the African traditional religion from anthropological point of view. He blames them of Hellenizing the African deities. Among those he criticised was Abraham with his "Akan *theology*," Mbiti (1969) Danquah: Akan – Bore" and African anthropologist in support of African supreme being God and attributed as infinite, omnipotent, omniscient he says. "When students of religion described African duties as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient etc. They intimate that African duties have identical attributes with those of the Christian God."<sup>76</sup>

Okot P'Bitek advises that, "African peoples may describe their duties as, "Strong" but not "omnipotent"; "wise" not "omniscient"; "old", not "eternal", "great", not. "Omnipresent"<sup>77</sup>. "He argues that the Greek metaphysical terms are meaningless in African thinking. Like Danquah, Mbiti, Idowu, Busia, Abraham, Kenyatta, and senghor he takes the missionaries, modern western Christians and anthropologists to task, calling 'intellectual smugglers" Besides blaming them of hellenisation of African deities, he also says that it is their creations. He adds that, "The African deities of the books, clothed with the attributes of a Christian God, are in the main, creations of the students of African religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside."<sup>78</sup>

After Mbiti's works of 1969 and 1970 consecutively, there came a Western Africa anthropologist known as Idowu. Idowu wrote his work in 1973 trying to redefine African tradition to those who never knew it properly. He argued that, to understand about African traditional Religion that over the years been something difficult to world outside Africa. Therefore, Idowu is trying to continue where Mbiti and the others had left off showing that in Africa there was a religion and not animism, polytheism and so on. He adds that the whole world still has to be convinced that there is an indigenous religion of Africa and that, by right; it deserves the name of religion.<sup>79</sup>

Idowu justifies his work, showing that it is important in the campaign of educating Africans and non-Africans about their religious heritage. In chapters' I-IV, he gives the general background of African traditional Religion. He points out some errors of the earlier missionaries and shows where they erred. He shows that it was the error of terminology. The error is their reference to African people as primitive, savage, native, tribe, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, fetishism and animism. He notes that the reason why they used those terminologies is because,

... of preconceived notions, that all sorts of offhand names have been coined or adopted to describe – what appeared to be indescribable – the essential characteristics of African traditional religion.<sup>80</sup>

In chapter v. Idowu gives what he calls “structure” of African traditional religion, namely belief in God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine. He ends his book with prospect of African traditional religion. Overall, Idowu tries to correct the earlier anthropologists of Western African religion for failing to get the right word or term to refer to West African religion, especially the Yoruba of Nigeria. He singles out writers like P.A. Talbot and E Geoffrey Parrinder who, in his view, seemed to have had a problem Of knowing how to report rightly the west Africa religion. He therefore advises,



I do not know of any place in Africa where the intimacy is not accorded to God. That is why, because this is very true of the Yoruba, I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheism. I modify this 'monotheism' by the objective 'diffused', because here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers derive from deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in them. The description phrase 'implicit monotheism' will serve as well as 'diffused monotheism.'<sup>81</sup>

Long after Mbiti's and Idowu's work was Laurenti Magesa recent work, "African Religion (A moral traditions of abundant life)". [1997]. John Mary Waliggo writing in his forward gives his contribution, which the book has given. He writes,

"He brings into an organic whole the moral tradition of African Religions from a rich variety of case studies from Black Africa. He argues convincingly why we should talk of African Religion in the singular, rather than African Religions in the plural. Black Africa is ultimately linked in the ethos of culture, religion and morality."<sup>82</sup>

Magesa's book besides being a scholarly workbook, but gives a superb criticism to those scholars who do not see religion in Africa. He argues that the religion we see in any ethnic group in Africa relates to another group and in fact, it has influenced the rest of the world over the years. It should be termed not as African religions but African religion and more than that, a 'World Religion'.

He challenges ... Both African and non-African students of religion should desist from "marginalizing" African Religion. The power of myth and taboos that underlie African Religion is strongly established in the worldview of Black Africans.<sup>83</sup>

Magesa has used the theme; the promotion of life is the criterion of African – morality. This is the life in its fullness, the mystique of life. Using this theme, he analyses the transmission of life force, the enemies of life, restoration of the force of life and the “political ethics in Africa.”<sup>84</sup> His challenges go to:

“. . . students of African religions and morality; to African public and religious leaders and to Black Africans in general. Our understanding of marriage and procreation should be based on the pro-life criterion. Our understanding of immorality should be based on anti-life forces. All our efforts to restore life and harmony should be guided by the life principle. This pro-life criterion should be used to judge good and bad leaders, parents and persons and to judge good and bad systems and structures – be they political economic, cultural, religious – environmental – again the same principle is the sure guide. One of the root causes of the anti-life forces, systems and problems in Black Africa has been our failure to embark on the movement of reawakening our own moral and religious values and to construct the future on them. No society chooses to build its future on foreign cultures, values or systems. Every society is obliged to search deep in its own history, culture religion and morality in order to discover the values upon which its development and liberation, its civilisation and its identity should be based. To do otherwise is nothing less than communal suicide.”<sup>85</sup>

In his back page, John Mbiti comments in support that ... Magesa takes the moral traditions as a starting point to analyse and presents African insights into the moral universe, which derives from God, and concludes that the basis of African morality is the promotion of human life. (Magesa, 1997)<sup>86</sup>

Magesa extensively explores the moral and ethical aspects of the African religion and equalizes it with other world religions, thereby considering it as one of the world religions. He continues to argue that the other world religions like

Christianity or Islam define how people ought to live. African religion does the same. The problem with Magesa is promoting African traditional religion to be equal with Christianity as above hence giving no room for Christianity in it. It seems that just as Judaist needed Christianity so it is with African traditional religion. The teaching of the Bible should undergo contextualization in order to fit in the African peoples.

Mugambi his book, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* takes issue with East Africa missionaries for not beginning the Gospel from the knowledge of God the Africans already had, just as it was the case with Christianity and Judaism. He suggests,

“During the first century the Christian Gospel was first proclaimed in synagogues to Jesus and proselytes who, being familiar with the Old Testament messianic prophecy were expectedly the evangelist to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as Christ, the messiah, to accept his teaching and become his followers. The modern missionary movement in East Africa did not have such a familiar religions spiriting point.<sup>87</sup>

In my research, I have found that some people in Meru would actually worship a tree, and even the devil and spirits. Idowu has done a commendable job in his “African Traditional Religion-A Definition”. The problem with him is when he tries to generalize the prophecies as though they were directly for African people: I know he did this mostly to support universalism of salvation. For example, he quotes Micah 4:3-5 here, in defining,

" Total peace" as the end of religion Micah adds startlingly the acceptance and understanding of each people in the religious context in which they lived. This would be already asserted, because Yahweh was in

control everywhere; and may be that he would like to have added that, therefore, every impulse to worship at all, and the resulting practice of essential worship, was the creator of the ends of the earth".<sup>88</sup>

Idowu quotes the above implying that the peace that Micah speaks about is for religious context in which every one lives. His work entitled "*Oludumare- God in Yoruba Beliefs*". In it, he has dealt with the concept of God among Yoruba people of Nigeria. Idowu began by giving a defence or justification of his usage of the attributes of God [Oludumare] of the Yoruba people, which he says are similar to those of Hebrews. He asked:

"Is there any reason why what has been thought and practised in one place could not occur in another without any previous contact of the two places? This is a question about which we can not be too careful, for there is no point at all in creating distinctions where they do not exist merely because we fear that we may be accused falsely of employing foreign categories where they do not employ."<sup>89</sup>

He added,

"If we find that the Yoruba have religious doctrines and practices similar to or identical with the doctrines and practices among the Hebrews ... It should Be legitimate to employ in reference to the former such terminologies as have been used in describing the later, provided that they are found to be appropriate."<sup>90</sup>

Idowu has taken his readers from defence to accusation: After the writer defended himself enough, he now began to accuse or attack the people he calls generally 'modern school of investigators'. He pointed out their claims; ... they claim that they are free from handicaps and prejudices, which according to them

include the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> The statement, which he has made above, is not satisfactorily clear. He does not mention those responsible for the school of thought noted above. The reader cannot understand fully the scholars in question for he does not disclose any one of them. In the above quotation, the writer gives the claims of those modern scholars. He, however, goes beyond that and accuses them of being naïve as far as knowledge is concerned. He explains,

“... They tend not to know exactly what to make of their collections, to rationalise, to refuse to admit that other people besides themselves are capable of thinking, pooh-pooh anything that is not in agreement with their own particular view. In consequence of his attitude, they are likely to remain forever like those against whom Paul warns Timothy: ‘Ever learning, never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.’<sup>91</sup>”

Even though the writer seems to have the full knowledge of the scholars in question, he chooses not to disclose them for reasons known to him. However, the accusation does not seem to have a base because he is not particular in his rebuke. This kind of accusation can lead one into pride and bias. When the writer finished rebuking those modern scholars, he moved his readers from accusation to the Yoruba people. Here, he introduces Yoruba people as monotheists in their knowledge of God [Oludumare]. Their God, however, did not work alone but did so by the help of powerful deities namely *Orisa*, *Orumlila*, *Esu*, *Ogun*, *Sopona* and *Ela*. He gives the attributes of *Oludumare* and his worship according to the Yoruba people. It is clear from his writing that Yoruba people were monotheists and the author tries to prove that beyond any reasonable doubt.

When I read his work, I saw that the writer was somehow trying to impose to Yoruba people monotheism, which did not exist in their worship. They were worshipers of gods. Their worship was pantheism, pantheon or even polytheism. Their Supreme Being and other gods are like gods of Hinduism. I agree with

Parrinder's comment concerning Yoruba divinities, "that it is in the West Africa, however, and that we find fully developed polytheism. Here are pantheons of nature gods, with their temples and priest like the polytheisms of Egypt, Greece and India".<sup>92</sup>

Due to the above argument, Kato, also a Nigerian accuses Idowu for turning Yoruba polytheism into "implicit monotheism" or "diffused monotheism". He says that Idowu put up an effort to explain the view that Africans, particularly some Nigerian tribes, believe in one God, and that this God has 'not left himself without a witness.'<sup>93</sup> Kato adds that, "Idowu does this in contradiction with the common theory that polytheism is a prominent belief in West Africa."<sup>94</sup> Just as Byang Kato point that Idowu has contradicted, this is true for he has promoted the gods into ministers of God. He says,

Let it suffice to say that the Yoruba are quite convinced that the world and all that is in it owe their existence to him. They believe, nevertheless, that he has portioned out theocratic administration of the world among the divinities that he brought into being and ordained to their several offices. By the functions of these divinities, and the authority conferred upon them, they are almighty within certain Limits".<sup>95</sup>

Even if it is Yoruba, people who are speaking out so that we can learn. The learning Idowu is trying to portray is overshadowed by the polytheism that Yoruba people depict. If we compare with most African people groups like Meru, they are more polytheistic than monotheistic. When we say that West Africa especially Yoruba people were polytheistic, we do not undermine the fact that in Africa there was monotheism in most African communities. However, spade should be called a spade. We should not baptize polytheism with implicit monotheism. Idowu should have quoted Yoruba in rebuke or correction since polytheism seems to be totally rooted in Yoruba beliefs.

The next to review is Malcolm McVeigh in his book, " *God In Africa*". I agree with some of the issues that McVeigh has written concerning African traditional religions. I however do not agree with some of his views. For example his comment about African dynamism, which he says: "nevertheless, as presently structured, dynamism is a negative element in African Society... It is one of the things that Africans must leave behind in their onward March."<sup>96</sup> The reason why I do not agree with him is because; not all dynamism was bad as we see in this study. Another point I am uncomfortable with is of a taboo. He quotes Smith:

"Edwin Smith does not believe that the tribal concept of taboo, as traditionally understood, can orient the new African since they are in essence based on magical conceptions rather than scientific foundations."<sup>97</sup>

Most of the taboos in African writing from Meru point of view were healthy and meant to instil good behaviour. They were not in any way based on magic. In Meru, it was a taboo for a son or daughter to see the nakedness of the father or mother. The parents told the children that if they did they would become blind. Taboos in Meru were not directly giving the truth but were for helping one to be well behaved. He added, " Christianity provides the African with new moral ideals to replace those of his own traditions, which are increasingly called into question by interaction with western culture."<sup>98</sup>

This statement is not based on true research because African cultural beliefs had given the people superior morality compared to Christianity. These Missionaries did not bring pure Gospel to Africans, but one 'polluted' by their cultures, biases and presuppositions. They gave the Gospel and culture at the same time; as a result, there was cultural interaction. Tokunboh Adeyemo has written a book on, *Salvation in African Tradition*. In it, he imparts understanding about African beliefs dealing with worship, sin, death, and various concepts of salvation. He also argues that the salvation is from sin and from the final peril. This is the goal

of the living God, which He has for all men. Jesus Christ opened the way for us all to acquire salvation for our individual persons because of our faith in him. He also adds that man has been seeking God and his salvation. In this however, African people in their traditional religious beliefs sought God. With the above in mind, Adeyemo gives a survey of African traditional religions as it relates to salvation. He warns his readers who revert to African traditional religions to look for salvation that they cannot get it. He comments in the preface that:

“The battle for the survivals of biblical Christianity will be won or lost on the battlefield of theology. The issue to settle is not whether or not the Africans knew God before the advent Islam and Christianity to the continents; rather it is whether such knowledge is capable of bringing back man to God.”<sup>99</sup>

He refutes the scholars who go for plurality and universalism of salvation and shows that Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man and He monopolises the way of salvation in the whole world. In this, we support Adeyemo. African traditional Religion gives people the knowledge of God but need Christ just as a Jew with his Old Testament. In their work known as, ‘*The African Religious Heritage*, JNK Mugambi and N. Kirima show the importance of what we have received from African traditional religion and forefathers. They have covered some complete details of the concepts of God in Africa. To do this they referred Idowu, Mbiti and others. The categories of God in Africa have been summarised using simple and understandable terms, which I think might suit high school students and readers in general. We agree with the information presented because of the details of the African roots.

The book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa (1987)* by Byang H. Kato gives the concept of God among the Java people of Nigeria. He had a personal interview with Idowu. He does not deny the concept of God in Africa but rather warns that salvation should not be taken as something that is for everybody regardless of



whether they are Christians or not. He rather concludes that African peoples need the Saviour Jesus Christ. We also see the work of John V Taylor in his, "Processes of Growth in African Church". He gives in it the details of the growth the church making in Africa. He then records this in four categories: congruency, detachment, demand and Crisis.

*Congruency:* he notices that in Africa Christian ideas mixes with tradition.

*Detachment:* After conversion, the Africans separate gradually from the traditional religion.

*Demand:* The missionaries brought the Gospel with its prerequisites of one to be obedient to Christ but they borrowed a lot from the Africans.

*Crisis:* The intercourse of the Christian ideas and traditional ideas has left the converts in confusion.

Berkouwer in his book "*Studies in Dogmatics: General Revelation* discusses the revelation of God. He argues that the general revelation, which many communities had, was and is incomplete. Man according to him cannot know God except when God Himself chooses to reveal himself to us. The revelation people had before Christianity had partial revelation [general] but it is complete in Christ who is the special revelation. He comments:

"We shall especially have to know inconcreto how scripture speaks of the revelation of the mystery of Christ in this connection of the 'Christ only' and of the exclusively of salvation; of Christ as the door, the way, the true, and the life.<sup>100</sup>"  
He quotes J. Calvin in support and in emphasising that:

"...man cannot himself know God without God revealing himself. He concludes however, that with God's revelation man is able to know God. Calvin adds that, 'All men have a sense of religion and there is no nation so neither barbarians, nor race so savage as to be firmly persuaded of the being of God.'<sup>101</sup>"

To conclude we can say that man is a religious being as Berkouwer tries to show, that he had revelation from God whether general or special, and that he is capable of knowing God. Godfrey Muriuki, in his book, *The History of Kikuyu 1500-1900 AD*, has given some essential history of Kikuyu, Embu, Mbere, Chuka Ndia, and Gicugu. He says that they have a common origin and that is from Igembe. He has also given highlights of Thagicu as the name of all Mount Kenya peoples. One of my informants surprised me when he narrated about these people as from Thaicu so close to Thagicu, which Muriuki has written. Muriuki however, has not given the concept of God of Thagicu people. He has indicated only their probable route from Igembe.<sup>102</sup>

Bernardi in his book, *The Mugwe: A blessing Prophet*, of 1959, has written more about Mugwe and origin of Meru. He has given only a page of the concept of God in Meru tradition. His Meru government does not include the political system, which ranges from national council, clan's council, larger family council, extended family council and nuclear family.

He did not differentiate Mugwe and Diviner. He calls M'lunyiru a Diviner and he called him Mugwe. As far as my informants are concerned, Mugwe does not do the work of a diviner as we see it in this work. If we rely on Bernard, we cannot get the concept of God in Meru.<sup>103</sup> David Matai Rimita in his book, *The Njuri Nceke in Meru*, discusses the origin of Meru people, their journey from Mbwa and settlement. His centre of interest is Njuri Nceke whom he discusses throughout in the book. He briefly addresses the concept of God and lacks detailed explanation. He records some names of God, private and public prayers and beliefs in spirits. We disagree with him when he writes: " Those (ancestors) who were good settled and A Meru pray to them to assist them when in trouble".<sup>104</sup> The Ameru never used to worship their ancestors but used to honour them as their intermediaries. He does use the word "Nkoma". He has shown that the 'Nkoma' stands for bad spirits. This is not true because " Nkoma" in Kimeru is a

general name of "Spirits". The spirits of the dead ancestors for example are "Nkoma cia Bajuju". Literally means the spirits of the dead, ancestors or living dead.

There is also " Nkoma imbi, or irundu bibii". These are bad spirits and they are the ones that brought trouble to people. These spirits includes the spirits of the ancestors forgotten or created to be spirits (*Irundu*). We cannot rely on Rimita for his information about the Meru concept of God is not satisfactory. The next to review is the work of Alfred M. M'manyara in his book, *The Restatement of Bantu Origin and Meru History*. He has written many things about Meru people beginning from origin, migration and settlement. He has also written about the government of Meru emphasising more on Mugwe and *Ugwes* under him and their functions.

However, concerning the Meru knowledge of God, he has given it only three pages. In this, he links Mugwe and his *Ugwe* literally to God, which I think, is right because this was a spiritual hierarchy. There was also the political hierarchy, which I think he did not make very clear. This hierarchy moved from Mugwe to society, clans, large family, extended family, and nuclear family. The concept of God he portrays of Meru people is too weak. There is a need for a detailed work concerning Meru knowledge of God. We however, agree with him when he candidly says that:

"There was no idol or spirit and although they were regarded as intermediaries between God and Meru people, they were not worshiped ...Thus; the Meru was a monotheist Society whose religious approach was theosophical"<sup>105</sup>

The last literature that we reviewed was that of Father Daniel Nyaga. His book is entitled "*Customs and Traditions of Meru.*" In it, he has tried to convince his readers and especially a Meru of their customs, which include cultural practices,

origin, migration and settlements. The above somehow overtook him so that he was unable to convince them of their belief. 'Murungu' 'Ngai': He does not connect the AMeru customs and traditions with their concept of God. I personally do not know why he did this because according to my informants' religion, customs, and traditions of Meru were inseparable. When he wrote, he gave Meru concept of God only two pages; this might show that some did not have the knowledge of God, which I think is not true. Unlike the above, Meru people themselves trace everything to God whom they call *Ngai* or God.

To conclude the above review we can say that all those who wrote about Meru people have done a good job in their writing of customs, origin, migration and settlement of Meru people. They however, left out the concept of God. When they did that, their works seem not to have a pillar because a Meru person began everything with God. All that they practised; no matter how insignificant it was God was the centre. I noticed only rare cases where they deviated to do other things outside the will of God, which I think, are normal when you are dealing with the community.

We have seen the limitation of the books written about Meru people. We now turn to our own limitation also. Our limitation comes because most of the elders we find alive are now Christians of different denominations in Meru. Only a few did not profess Christianity. Some of them are [born again] or saved. However, this did not deter them from talking all that they knew, thought, and convinced about their culture. To be honest the elders moved me when some attacked Christianity while they belonged to it. This really challenged me a lot also because I have grown knowing that Kimeru is satanic, only to see God in it.

Another limitation is that we may not go to some of the details of other topics like Mugwe, Njuri- Nceke and some of customs because the other authors already cover so that we can tackle the most relevant to our topic. When I finished with literature review, I turned to the fieldwork. It took almost one month. There I did

the work by interviewing elders in Meru. I began in Isiolo, Meru central; Tigania, Tharaka, Igembe and Igoji just to mention a few.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

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<sup>67</sup> When he was distributing land to various people. He then told Kikuyu to go and begin living Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga when he went he found that God had provided a wife for him (Mumbi) by whom he got nine from whom the nine clans came.

<sup>68</sup> Mbiti 'Concepts of God in Africa.' pp. 56-59/80-85

<sup>69</sup> Mbiti, J.S. *Introduction to African Religions*. 1975, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> J S Mbiti, African Religious and Philosophy" 1969, p. 1

<sup>71</sup> ibid, back cover page

<sup>72</sup> J S Mbiti, African Religious and Philosophy" 1969, p. 1

<sup>73</sup> John S. Mbiti 'Concepts of God in Africa. 1970, last cover page

<sup>74</sup> ibid

<sup>75</sup> J S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions"* (1975), p. 2

<sup>76</sup> Okot p'Bitek *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, p. 80

<sup>77</sup> ibid, p. 88.

<sup>78</sup> Okot p'Bitek *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, p. 88

<sup>79</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*. London; S C M press limited, 1973, p. ix

<sup>80</sup> ibid, p. 108

<sup>81</sup> ibid, pp.135-136

<sup>82</sup> Launti Magesa. *African Religion: A Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> ibid, p. 8

<sup>84</sup> ibid

<sup>85</sup> ibid, pp. 7-9

<sup>86</sup> Magesa, *African Religion : A Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. back page

<sup>87</sup> J.N.K. *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*, p.30

<sup>88</sup> Idowu. Orita: *Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, iv./2, p. 89

<sup>89</sup> Idowu. *Oludumare : God in Yoruba Beliefs*. p.4

<sup>90</sup> ibid, p. 4

<sup>91</sup> ibid, p. 4

<sup>92</sup> G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 44

<sup>93</sup> B. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, p. 91

<sup>94</sup> ibid, p. 91

<sup>95</sup> ibid, 91-92

<sup>96</sup> M. McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 21

<sup>97</sup> ibid, 21

<sup>98</sup> ibid, p.21

<sup>99</sup> T. Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: General Revelation*, p. 113

<sup>101</sup> ibid, p. 152

<sup>102</sup> G. Muriuki, *The History of Kikuyu 1500- 1900AD*, pp. 39- 50

<sup>103</sup> B. Bernardi, *The Mugwe: Ablessing Prophet*, pp. 133-140

<sup>104</sup> D.M. Rimita, *The Njuri Ncheke in Meru*, pp. 15-16

<sup>105</sup> A.M. M'Imanyara, *The Restatement of Bantu Origin, Migration and Meru History*, pp. 155-156.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### GEOGRAPHY OF MERU

#### BACKGROUND

Meru Land is on the Eastern Part of Mount Kenya. It stretches from Thuchi River to Ntonyiri Hills. It Comprises Chuka, Mwimbi, Ijogi, Miutine (Miitine) Imenti, Tigania, Igembe and Tharaka. The Meru Administrative Districts are now Meru North, Meru Central, Meru South and Tharaka. Meru North consists of North Igembe, South Igembe, Central Igembe, Mutuati, Lare, East Tigania and West Tigania Divisions.

Meru central district divisions are North Imenti, South Imenti, East Abothuguci, West Abothuguci and Timau. Meru South district divisions are Magumoni, Chuka and Mwimbi (Muthambi). Tharaka district divisions are South Tharaka and North Tharaka (see Figure A in a separate page)

The origin of Meru people is traced back to God. They call Him our father (*baba weetu*). The story narrated to me by one of my informants <sup>106</sup> is similar to that recorded by Bernardi in his book *The Mugwe: A blessing prophet*<sup>107</sup>. The story of the creation of God is also similar to that of Genesis chapter 2:1<sup>108</sup> God created a boy and later found that he was not pleased and so created the girl. The boy became happy and they grew up playing together. In the midst of playing, they began to get attracted to each other until and they discovered sex. When they found that it was sweet, they continued with it bearing the first child they continued with the reproduction up to today.

God told them that He was going and He would be providing food to them therefore, they should not eat the fruits of that tree in the garden. The deceiver whom they call Mugambi or “a wise creature” crawling on the ground and said, “how is it that there are so many fruits on that tree? Does mean you do not eat it? They said, no! Our leader (Munene) told us not to eat the fruits of that tree. He told them no! If you eat the fruits of that tree, you will be wise and very intelligent

as God (Murungu). The woman convinced by that climbed on that tree, took one of the fruits, and ate. She also took another to the man. He hesitated to take but after some pestering, he accepted and ate it.

When the man ate the fruit, it refused to be swallowed and developed into a throat apple (which they commonly call the Adam's apple). From that time, man had a throat apple. When God came and was very angry with them. He asked, "Didn't you know that you are not supposed to eat the fruit of this tree? They replied. "The snake has cheated us". He told the snake, "I know that you are full of falsehood (*Uri wa maeni*). Because of that, these people will crush your head. As for the man and his wife, he sent a mole to inform him that men will be dying and rising again. On the way with the message, the mole met the hyena. The hyena asked him, where are you going? (*M'munyanya witite kuu?*). He said that God had sent him to take a message to man. What is the message? 'He has told me to tell the people that they will be dying and rising again.' The hyena said, "No oo! If you go and say that, what shall I live on to eat?" The mole hesitated but the hyena threatened to kill the mole and it became afraid. He went (mole) and said, 'you will die and not rise again.' The mole returned to God and said, "I went but on the way I was deceived by hyena who forced me to say, 'you will die and not rise.' When God heard that, he was unhappy with it and told it that it would live under the ground away from heaven. It made a hole in the ground and comes out only at night ever since.

## ANCESTRAL DESCENT OF THE MERU PEOPLE

The first parents of Meru people according to one of my informants from Tharaka and Father Daniel Nyaga <sup>97</sup> are "Mukunga" and his wife 'Nгаа'. The name Mukunga means (kirindi) or people. In fact, all my informants' agree that they came from "Mbwa". This "Mbwa" can mean across the sea. At the same time they say that it is (mwena jwa urio) which literally means on the right hand or side facing North Africa. Some even calls it Egypt, others Canaan. They were in the

country of slavery under the people of red clothes (antu ba ngu intune). They were mistreated. In the process of the enemies killing their male children immediately after birth, they thought of running away (baambiririe kuraga aana ba tuiji baajiarua orio). At that time, one handsome boy was born and the mother hid him on the riverside in a basket she had made.

The hidden (*mwithe*) child was later on called Koome Njwe or Muthurui; he later became a great prophet. He was an adviser to the people, especially on the plan to escape. Concerning that child Nyaga also says, "The child later called Mwithe [the hidden one] his mother kept him hidden by the riverside, in a basket she had made. Mwithe also called Koome njwe or Muthurui, later became a very great prophet, and was the one who used to advise his people on what they had to do in order to escape from bondage.

He did not do it alone but his brother Kauro – Bechau, assisted him. He and his brother organized the Meru elders later called Njuri – Nceke or council of elders. These organized how Meru would escape from captivity or oppression. The escape was through several tests of which even if they passed, their masters could not commend some of them. My informants from Isiolo, Meru town, Tharaka and Igoji narrated to me a similar story with those found recorded by Daniel Nyaga in his book *Customs and Traditions of the Meru People*. Bernardi in his book, *The Mugwe: A Blessing Prophet* has also highlighted a similar story from his informants.

The master of Meru people according to the above sources was planning to exterminate them and especially all men from the face of the earth. They therefore decided to give them the tests so that they could get something to accuse them. Due to that, they gave them five tests. The first test required them to make a shoe with two furs on both sides. Their leader Koome Njwe told or advised them to cut a dewlap of a bull and stitched it before it was totally severed. They made the required shoe even before the bull recovered. They gave the enemies the shoe, but they refused, and elders came back with it. The



second test was to produce a steer, which can produce what Nyaga calls “Diatomite.<sup>109</sup>”

Muthurui who is also Koome Njwe advised the people to feed a bull on milk until it evacuated white dung. They did that and consequently it dropped the white dung as it was expected. They collected the dung and gave to the enemies but they rejected it too. The third test was that of removing the fruit from a pit. The leader as well told them to pour water in that pit up to the brim and the fruit floated. It was given to the masters but they also rejected it. The fourth test was to kill all elders until their blood flowed like flood. The leaders advised them to slaughter old flocks and before they were supposed to hide old men. The flock’s blood flew like rainwater. However, the masters still were adamant. They refused that the Meru people had passed the test. The fifth test required them to make a spear, which will pierce or touch heaven and the earth. The leaders thought about the fifth test a lot. They even consulted the prophet to get divine guidance. He was advised to go after one week by the prophet. When he went there, he was given a mystery staff but was advised to sacrifice a human being and he would get the answer.

When Koome Njwe came to the elders, he asked for one who would volunteer to be on a person accepted to be sacrificial leaf (kithinjiro). Another person also volunteered to be next, to be sacrificed should the answer not come. Another one gave a sacrificial knife. When Muthurui was operating on the stomach before cutting deep, he got the answer of the fifth test. He stitched the person and addressed to the elders. He got the interpretation of the spear, which touches heaven, and earth was a journey. (He went and asked the masters to give him time to forge the spear. He asked elders to tell all the people to prepare old men, cows, goats and all old and weak animals to set on the journey and go ahead after others.

The young people were to collect the entire cow dung into heaps. The day they were to leave in the morning, they set that dung on fire. They did so and left all of

them. When the enemies saw the smoke all over, they thought that the Meru people were in, forging the spear. They came to the Red Sea and beyond were another barrier but Koome Njwe being now a prophet got the answer. He stroked the water with the mystery staff and the sea parted creating a road at the centre. As they were crossing, the enemies were coming and they even followed up the Meru people but they drowned except one person who managed to follow them. They stayed with him and he married him a woman but later they killed him for fear of his descendants to control and torture the Merus. This happened because he began to disagree with the elders. When the Meru crossed the Red Sea, beyond was a dry land and there was no food or even water. They however began the migration to a greater land for pasture. Bernard in his book, *The Mugwe – A Blessing prophet*, shows that the Meru people became farmers although they had been pastoralists. He says:

There was a mad woman, who was found having almost all the seeds. This woman as happens with mad men who may twist their clothes and sometimes and soil them, had twisted and folded her clothes with soil in which there were seeds. It was thus we started to farming. At that time, we started to move from one place to another, and therefore we left many fields with seeds without returning to them.<sup>110</sup>

The above shows the beginning of Meru people shifting from pastoralist to farming from their movements after crossing the red sea (iria etune)

## MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

The following informants are the source of this migration and they include Stanley M'mucaï Kibanga – Kiruja 96 years, M' Ngara – Age Group Mbaya Age 78 years, M' Mungania – Kiruja Age 108 years, and Amos M' Mukindia – Age Group Mbaya Age 79 years. These informants do not say where the Meru people

first went after coming from (Mbwa). Instead, they trace the Meru migration as from Canaan. According to Godfrey Muriuki in his book, *History of Kikuyu People 1500 – 1900 AD* the Meru people are the only ones who claim to have come from the east before settling in their present land. He observed that it is the Meru congeries alone that claims to have come from place to the east called “mbwa.”<sup>111</sup> In that connection however, H.S.K Mwaniki in His book, *The Living History of Embu and Mbeere* hints that, some Embu and Mbeere people claim that they came from beyond Meru. He says.” ‘Some specify the place of origin beyond Ethiopia and others Uru.’<sup>112</sup> Daniel Nyaga also gives a similar report in his book, that Meru people migrated from the ancient area of [Ameroe] people who were black Jews also called farasha situated south of Egypt.

Whether from Canaan, Mbwa, or south of Egypt, the Meru migrated. They came through the present-day Sudan along the River Nile. They also passed through northern part of Uganda. In Uganda, my informants told me that some people from their group decided to stay in Ugandan region. They name them as Baganda, Banyoro and other Bantus there. They continued and crossed up to the present day Kenya along Lake Victoria. The ABaluya, Abagusii, and Abakuria dropped on the Western part of Kenya. They went on their journey and settled at Meru Arusha in the northern part of Tanzania. At Meru Arusha, and after staying there for some years, some groups of people from their group left them and went southward up to South Africa. Lawson Thomas in his book, *Religions of Africa* says that, “Bantu – scholars chose the name “Bantu” because this word occurs in a large array of languages spoken by immigrants. These people slowly settled the southeast area of Africa all the way, down to what is now known as the province of Natal in the Republic of South Africa (see Figure B in a separate paper).”<sup>113</sup>

Another group went to Central Africa and even West Africa. The Meru people used to call themselves Ameroe from *Mbwa* to Meru Arusha where their name changed from Ameroe to Ameru. The group settled in Tanzania and multiplied a lot. The Ameru moved north east of Tanzania and on their way to the present day

Mombassa, dropped off at Taita. After coming to Mombassa, they settled at Kirindine [a place of many people]. At Mombasa, they had several groups remaining there. These are the Giriama, Ndigo, Chonyi and all the Bantus of the coastal region of Kenya. They went along the Indian Ocean coast. On their way, they found Tana River and walked along it to the interior.

A group left them and proceeded to Ukambani. My informant made me to laugh when he told me that the Kamba were unable to cross the river Tana and so they remained there to the other side of Tana River. The other group crossed Tana River and arrived at Igembe side. It is from Igembe that all sub-tribes of Meru migrated going to their present places according to all my informants.

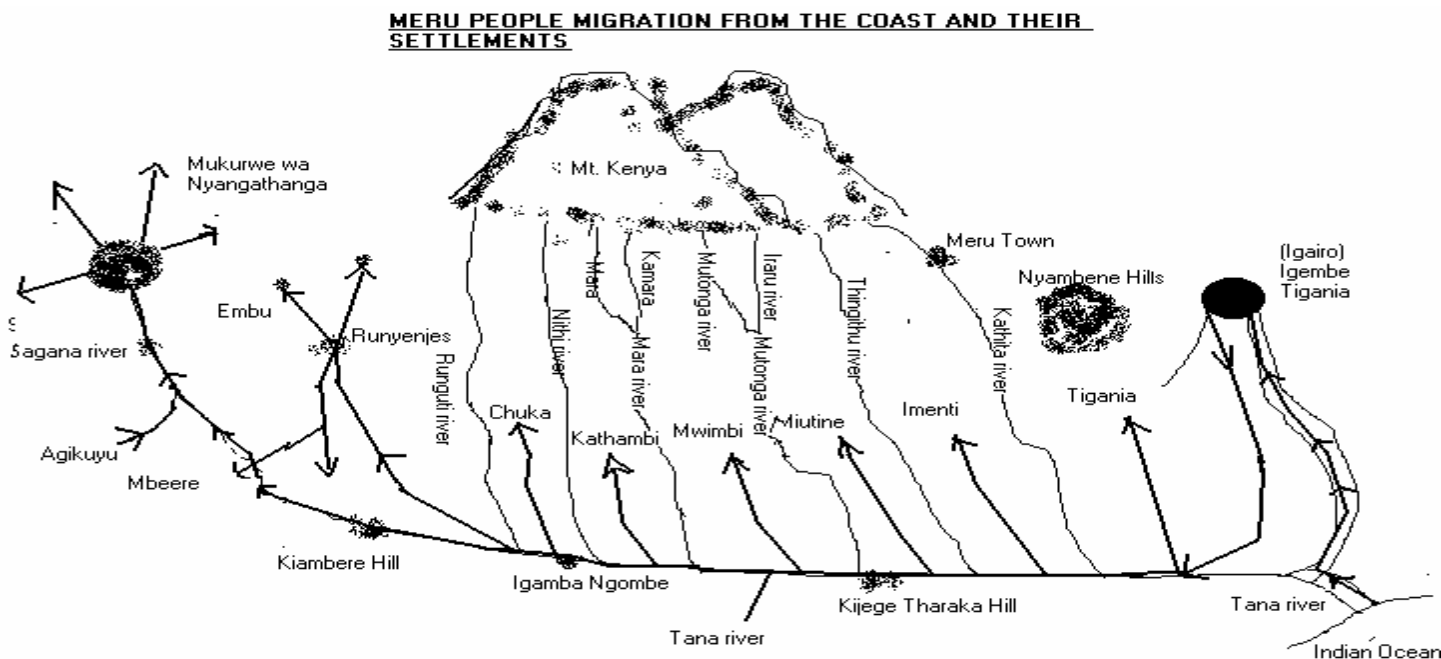
The Igembe settled where they were. The Tigania moved further and settled at Nyambene area. The Imenti went further and settled at Imenti. My informants however, say that Chuka are not true Merus for they found them there. Tharaka people were formed by different remnants of people from Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Miutine and Igoji. Those who went hunting met and formed Tharaka people.

The Agikuyu stayed at Meru before going to Kikuyu land. There is a mountain called mount of Agikuyu at Tigania. The Meru people changed later into mountain of Mikuyu to a void the Agikuyu from claiming for the land there. The Embu and Mbeere also migrated from Meru especially from Igembe before coming to the present land of Aembu and Ambeere. Godfrey Muriuki says, "the Agikuyu pioneers migrated from as far as Tigania, Igembe, Tharaka, Chuka, Embu and Mbeere."<sup>114</sup>

The way in which the Kikuyu, Embu and Mbeere passed was Ithanga and Uru in Tigania along the Tana River. The Embu and Mbere branched on right after passing Igamba hills and went to Runyenjes, which became their dispersion point. The Mbere moved to the south and occupied the Mbere hills area. The Embu occupied north and central part our modern Embu and Mbere. The Agikuyu however migrated further along River Tana to Sagana up to Mukurwe

wa Nyagathanga that became their dispersion point of their sub tribes namely Nyeri, Muranga, Kirinyaga and Kiambu. Those who study languages like thagicu propose this route. Linguistically, Thagicu people are all Merus, Embu, Mbeere and Kikuyu. This is a further proof that they have a common origin.

Below is the figure C with details of how Mount Kenya Bantus settled



Godfrey Muriuki in his book, *A History of Kikuyu 1500 – 1900* writes that:

“...in the event and because of available evidence, it is clear that the ancestors of Tharaka, Chuka, Mbeere, Embu, and India Gicugu and of the Kikuyu migrated from the Tigania and Igembe in Meru.”<sup>115</sup>

In addition, Patrick R. Bennett in his book called – *Dahl's law and Thagicu African Language Studies*, argues that Thagicu is a group of dialects or very

closely related languages that are spoken to the east and south of Mount Kenya. It includes the Kikuyu, Kamba, Embu, Mbeere, the Meru congeries and Tharaka. Bennett also divides the Thagicu into two groups: The northern and southern Thagicu. The northern Thagicu includes the Tharaka and full Meru. The southern Thagicu cover Mbeere, Embu and Kikuyu. Bennett also argues,

“The name “Thagicu” is in various forms and various ways, associated with all the major subdivisions of the group, and there is some reason to believe that it was in fact the name of the tribe from which they all derived.”<sup>116</sup>

Dundas in his book *Notes Kikuyu and Dorobo tribes man* also points out that, “the actual Kikuyu were said to come from two tribes called Shagishu (Thagicu) and ngembe.”<sup>117</sup> The Meru people and others like Kikuyu, Embu, and Mbeere came and found other people when they arrived at Igembe. These people are Gumbo, Dorobo and hunters [Aathi]. The meru people fought these small groups and they ran to the outskirts of unoccupied surrounding areas. The Meru people absorbed others. One of my informants M’chebere of Tigania caused laughter when he said that some of the people who the Meru people met and got absorbed never knew how to talk. They were barking like dogs. Those who stayed with the Meru people they taught them how to talk.

H.S.K Mwaniki in his book, *The Living History of Embu*, noted that,” the Embu lands were owned by a people called Gumba who the Embu fought and chased a way afterward. The Embu were helped by horn hills who cried like Embu warriors to expel the Gumba<sup>118</sup> Muriuki also notes that when Kikuyu came to their present land they found some people had preceded them. They also fought them and eradicated them or they ran away. He says:

' There seems to be little doubt that the Kikuyu were preceded by two groups, but perhaps related groups of people, and in all probably these were the Gumba and the Aathi, Doroba. <sup>119</sup>

## TO BE A HUMAN BEING IN MERU SOCIETY

In this chapter, I have presented the concept of self among the Meru people. Lets us examine how a human being develops with regard to birth rituals, initiation, and marriage and death rituals in order to know how one becomes a human being. The other cultural practices of Akamba and Kikuyu will be quoted as presented by other writers because they are similar to those of Meru people.

**Concepts of Self:** According to Meru self-understanding, a human being is made up of body and spiritual part (soul). Soul to them is spirit but they sometimes use it interchangeably. The body is the tangible part of man or the material part. They believe that Mwene Nyaga, Murungu, or God created the body from the soil. After the creation, he put the spirit. The body is important to them for it enables a person to work, eat, walk, think and worship the creator. The spirit helps the person to live. If they separated, the man cannot be alive. He becomes a living dead. The body returns to the soil and the soul (spirit) joins the living dead ancestors. Men are generally superior to women for women as servants. They served men with food, and all that they needed. They were regarded as weak people for no man could waste his time to fight with a woman.

The adults were those who had gone through circumcision process. The uncircumcised male was "mwiji" and uncircumcised female was "mukenye". If one was not circumcised he or she was still a child even at any age. Stages of human development in Meru had four stages of life. Development starts from birth, the initiation, marriage and finally death. Rites of passage accompanied the birth of a child, childhood and adulthood.

**Birth:** The baby and the mother would undergo some seclusion in the house for several days. It was their belief that when they do that, they could attain protection and purification. After the end of seclusion, the mother and the baby were preserved guarded as new people who needed some orientation to the family as a whole. That introduction was a social birth of the mother and the baby. This was a great day whereby the living dead were believed to be also one of the attendants. The naming of the child followed the above ritual. The children among the Meru people were named after the father's parents or mother's parents. The first-born and the second born if they are a boy and a girl were named after the father's two parents. The proceeding two children they named after the mother's parents. This was to keep the kindred represented both family lines. He Meru believed that the children were brought by nature. In addition, a society makes a child a social being. Therefore, a pregnant mother was highly treated because pregnancy indicated that a new member in the society was coming. The marriage was not honoured until a woman gave birth.

At eight months of pregnancy, the relatives started preparing a woman for the birth of a child. The midwife was alerted. When the baby was born, one of the female relatives cut the umbilical cord. They it wrapped up in a bundle and kept it outside the hut. Then the woman who had cut the umbilical cord busted into a rejoicing thrill, which was to announce to the community that, a baby had been born. This was four times for a girl and five times for a boy. After this, the women, one after the other called out. "This is the son of so and so, or this is the daughter of so and so". By doing this, they gave the child a name and made it into a human being.

After the naming ceremony, the mother and the child spent four days by themselves. On the fourth day, if a child was a girl, she was taken outside and given a small piece of stick, which was later broken into pieces and kept to the fireplace. This was symbolic of firewood, as looking after the fire was one of the things the girl would be expected to do when she grew up. In case of a boy, they



gave him a miniature bow and arrow, which were afterwards put by the fireplace, as he was expected to hunt.

A few days later, the father of the child would go out into the garden and dig up some yams, which he would leave in the garden. At the same time, the mother at home prepared porridge from finger millet called (wimbi). The porridge was put into a gourd. In the next morning, the mother and the child took the porridge with them to the garden. In the garden, the mother pretended to feed the baby on yams and porridge.

The mother later held a feast, to which she invited some children to come and eat yams and bananas, cooked with the firewood from the roof of the hut. The baby's hair was cut or shaved and burned at a fireplace. The children who came to celebrate the feast were asked to trample on the burnt hair singing "*naarua ni mutundu jwakana tukuria niuntu ni umwe wetu*" (today we are eating the hair of a baby for it is one of us).

The teething is the next ritual that was conducted for a newly born baby. The mother invited a few women friends who would come to stay with her. A goat was pierced at its neck and its blood was put into a pot. Some fresh honey was prepared and kept in a gourd. As soon as the guests started to arrive, the mother dipped her hand into the pot containing the goat blood and smeared it four times on the child's gums; she would sprinkle some of the blood outside to keep away evil people. She did the same with honey by dipping her hand into a gourd and ibleed the baby's gum with honey.

Four days later cowries' shells were put around the neck of a child with two strings of lead. Charms were hung at the entrance of both the hut and homestead. These were to keep away the witches, people with evil eyes or evil tongues and sorcerers. In addition, they were to keep away evil spirits. Once the child had been weaned, the woman who acted as a midwife was given a gift to show that the child had been accepted by the society.

**Initiation to adulthood:** The initiation in Meru was the circumcision of males and females. This initiation took place after the initiates had gone for a time of preparation. During this period of initiates or *mwiji* would go to the cousins and relatives collecting the gifts, which were called *mathaga*. After gathering, they were taken to the river the day of circumcision very early. From there, they were taken to an initiation place called *kigirine*. Those who took them there were the past initiation graduates together with their tutors (*mutiri*). John Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religions* says that:

Circumcision involves Cutting off the foreskin of the male organ, while initiation of girls involves cutting some portion of the girl's female organ. In both cases, the blood is spilt, and the operation is very painful, since often no pains – killing herbs or other preparations are used.<sup>120</sup>

After circumcision, the boys and girls were dressed with curing herbs to reduce their pain as well as checking the bleeding. The tutor covered the candidates with a dress. They were led to specified prepared huts where they could sit on a bed prepared purposely for their stay waiting for their healing. In this seclusion, the tutor or the sponsor cared for the initiates and washed the wounds daily for quick healing. The tutors and initiates began to go home, after initiation. At that time, there was a lot of singing, eating by the family members and friends. Mugambi and Groenewegen in their book, *“Christian Religious Education volume one”* says that:

The ceremony is done on an even day from the day of circumcision, to avoid bad omens. On the appointed day parents gathering the circumcision homestead carrying presents of beer, bananas, and vegetables. In this ceremony a sheep is killed and its skin cut into

many strips called (nyuaro), which are put around the  
whist's of the initiates<sup>121</sup>

The elders and parents formed two lines facing each other and called the initiates to come before them. As these initiates passed between the rows, the elders could utter some words of blessing and brush them with sacred leaves. The initiates proceeded to the hut of the homestead where the tutors placed the tag on their waists as they entered one after the other.

When they stayed in the hut, their tutors would go to sleep for a holy ceremony. There was a total silence, and in bed, a woman could groan as somebody who was in great pain. The man could come from bed, open the door and call for a midwife. She came with the intestines of the sheep. The other elderly women could come to help her to cut the intestines. This symbolised the cutting of the umbilical cord after birth. It showed that the initiated were reborn or became newborn. Afterwards, the initiates stayed for a few months. They were called for the purification ceremony. This was also called a transitional period. A day was proposed of all the initiates to come together in a *kigirine*, which was a place where they were circumcised from. Many people, who wanted to see their transition mark, attended this ceremony.

The ceremony was marked by shaving the hair of the initiates discarding old clothes, and ornaments and putting on the new clothes. They used to paint their bodies with the soil *rondo*, charcoal and the women worn beads. After that, they could join the adult dance as their parents went on taking beer or other drinks.

**Marriage:** In Meru, it was the duty of the parents to look for a good girl in character for their son. If they found one from the suitable homestead, they could marry. They could ask their son whether he liked the woman. If the son liked the woman, they could advise him to visit that family. During these visits, the man could ask for marriage from the woman. If she accepted, the parents of the man could visit the parents of the girl under some arrangement. In that meeting, they could discuss about the marriage of their children and specifically the dowry. The

parents of the girl would visit the parents of the boy still trying to create a relationship. After the discussions of the dowry which generally consisted of a debe of honey [gimped kea niche], three goats [mate], a ewe, heifer, a ram and a bull. If one had paid three goats, he was allowed to marry and pay the rest slowly. Bahemuka presents an equivalent statement concerning the marriage to Akamba. These are like for Meru tribe. She says that:

The parents of the suitor brew beer called *uki wa kwitya mwiitu*, the beer for claiming the bride. The beer is for blessing the bride and groom. While the elders are drinking The beer, the girl went out unnoticed and is taken away by a suitor.<sup>122</sup> .

This suitor was to go with two women or women who would pick the bride with her belongings. If they were close to the home of the bridegroom, the two women would leave the suitor with the bridegroom coming and could tell the people at home that the bride was coming. The mother of the groom would come out with prepared ghee or gourd of gruel or a sheep. As Bahemuka states it for Wakamba that as soon as the bride and groom arrive:

The mother comes out of the hut carrying some ghee and smears it on bride's neck. This is a sign that the bride is very precious and that she is now accepted as a member of the family. The bride proceeds to her husband's hut.<sup>123</sup> [Bahemuka, p65-68]

When they entered, the hut there was no coercion that night except the second day. However, in the cases where the wedding ceremony was conducted prayers and the giving of gifts to the bride and the bridegroom from both families were done. In Meru, a person is fully born when he passes through the rituals of birth, naming, puberty, circumcision and marriage. When he grows

old, he or she is said to have become like a child. He is never forgotten even when he physically dies. He was remembered if those who knew him are still alive. He could visit the old people in the family occasionally. This also agrees with what John Mbiti in his book *African Religion and Philosophy*:

The appearance of the departed, and his being recognised by name, may continue for up to four or five generations, so long as someone is alive who once knew the departed personally and by name<sup>124</sup>

When the person has been dead as above for four or five generations, he joins the living spirits. Those spirits are of the forgotten dead (*nkoma cia bajuju*) and those, which were created as spirits [*nkoma imbii*]. They can be dangerous and fearful to the living. These spirits are the ones who communicate to the intermediaries between God and man. Mbiti comments, "In reality these spirits of the departed, together with other spirits which may or may not have been once human beings, occupy the ontological state between God and man."

Burial ceremony: If an old and respected person was, about to die the relatives gathered and they came with brewed beer. The son slaughtered a sheep for his father. The meat was boiled and he was given a soup and meat after drinking the soup and meat and he would die. The relatives and family members could cry or mourn. They also prepared the grave and the body for burial. His children, family members and relatives could bury him. Before burial, the body was kept on the skin of the sheep that was slaughtered. If it happened that one died and had no wife or children, his body was dragged with a rope, which was tied on the neck by the special man called *mutheria*. This *mutheria* was paid some goats in return for burying. This person could not become a living dead for he never married and bore children who could take his traits. That is why Mbiti comments that: "procreation is the absolute way of ensuring that a person is not cut off from his personal immortality (Mbiti 1969:26).

**Death:** The Meru people believed in life after death. Death to them is not final but was the beginning of another life of the dead. When one died, he joined the world of the dead. He became the living dead according to Meru people. This person communicated with living members of his family through dreams, visions, and even verbal voice. These dead people would keep asking for their rights until there would be nobody living who knew them. Some of the living prays to God through the living dead. Last August 2004, one Meru daughter in law rebuked her mother in law when she prayed through her husband who passed away more than ten years ago although she is a Christian. The spirits are twofold – Those spirits, which were created as spirits, and those, which became living dead after those who are living forgot them. These spirits were said to be dangerous to the living.

The living persons had some connections with the ancestors who were in the stage of the living dead. It was believed that the people who died had remained in the neighbourhood of their human homestead. The living dead were considered part of the family. The remaining sister, children, relatives, and friends of the departed felt that the departed was so close to them since their grave was within. The indwelling place of the departed in Meru tribe was woods, forests, riverbanks or hills. Those areas were regarded as sacred and people were discouraged to build or cultivate there. Mbiti (1969) tells his readers about the manifestation of the departed in African tribes.<sup>125</sup> He points out that, manifestation occurred in “dreams, visions, possessions, certain illnesses or mental disturbances.”<sup>126</sup> The living dead were remembered up to four or five generations back.

The departed who could be remembered for those four or five generations were heads of living relatives who could use their names in prayers to God. Mbiti classifies them into two as the Meru also could classify. There were long dead (ghosts) and recently dead (living dead). The recently dead are those who can be remembered and long dead are those who cannot be remembered’<sup>127</sup>

## CONCEPTS OF LINKAGE AND GROUPING

Before the changes brought by the colonial government, we had no other groups except peer groups, age groups, married groups and so on. However, after Kenya's independence other groupings came in. They were alcoholism, drunkards, drug abusers; they were deviant groups. The good groupings included self-help women groups, which started in early eighties. The main aim of these groups was to develop the society. This was encouraged by the government and brought a lot of development. The deviant groups related to each other in a way that they always met. They hindered development and the government tried to discourage those groups by imprisoning those who were caught.

The kingship in Meru society is so strong that it determines all aspects of life. It is categorized in some cases by the blood linkage, clan, family, initiation and even marriage. When people meet as strangers in Meru, the first thing they do is that they discuss how they are related. Their relation can be by blood, clan, family, and initiation. Due to the above means of their relation, it cannot be a wonder to find that you are related with everyone. In fact, kinship makes people to be connected in all aspects of life.

In Meru tribe, the respect for the elders is maintained. All the people who are above you by age are given their due respect. The elders respected the juniors. The relationship in Meru tribe could include even the animals and plants. Commenting on kingship in African tribes and Meru tribe, Mbiti <sup>128</sup>(1969) says:

Indeed this sense of kinship binds the entire life of the tribe, and is even extended to animals, plants and non-living objects through the totemic.<sup>129</sup> many mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and cousins. The kinship in Meru unites people. Even Mbiti still pointed out that the African tribes had their own philosophy of unity. This was "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>130</sup> This shows how the kinship bound people.

Family, adults and all married people. They are remembered more than babies, children, and the unmarried. The living dead were even involved in the meals, drinks such as beer and milk. The living would pour some meals or drinks to the shrines for the departed also naming the children after them to remember them. They could also consult them through a medicine man, diviner, and mediums. They also used a ritual of naming and initiation to communicate. The living dead who have been forgotten join the spirits. Due to that, they are feared and expected to act as intermediaries.

The whole of Meru formed groups called tribe, society, clans, family, extended family and nuclear family. The family (large family) was also regarded as a sub-clan. In the tribe, we had also deviant groups such as sorcerers, rainmakers, medicine, witches, diviners and mediums. These were deviant because they were usually connected with immorality, witchcraft and were generally feared. They could meet at night except for the rainmakers. However, we shall follow the commonly known groups in a tribe. A tribe in it self was a group, which consisted of big societies. These societies also consisted of clans. The clans consisted of four to five generations. After a clan, we had extended families or families and nuclear families.

#### WAYS OF SOLVING PROBLEMS

If a dispute occurred over a land, adultery or any other, there was a way to solve it. If for example in a nuclear or extended family, there were conflicts of any kind, these could be solved by the elder who was a grandfather or father. He could solve that problem or a dispute by calling all younger men together for discussion. However, some minor problems of a man and his wife and children were solved within a family.

In case it was difficult to solve in the nuclear family, the crime extended to the extended family. If the extended family did not solve the dispute, it was forwarded to a clan. If a clan failed to solve, it took it to the council of elders. This was final



for all cases were solved here regardless of how hard it could be. The Njuri Ncheke was very powerful for it could discipline the evil doers, executed judgement over them, such as death penalty, paying of fines called in Kimeru (*ndinje*), and excommunicate people from the society if they misbehaved. In fact, adultery, fornication and raping were common problems and their penalty was death. An adulterer, fornicator, a rapist and a traitor was put to death by putting him into a beehive and rolled to the riverbank.

The council was overall as far as keeping peace and order was concerned. After the society, Meru people did not have another, administrative system you could follow except the national council of Njuri-Ncheke. This made the people feel in oneness for the elders joined them. As far as women were concerned, the society did not consider them involved in talks there. However, if a case involving women was being solved, the women concerned were asked to be there although the men still solved it. Rosette gives us a similar society administrative system as that of Meru in her book *The New Religions of Africa* when she says that:

In a traditionalist system, it is clear, however, that what might be called “political” leadership was vested in male elders who directed and made decisions in relation to rights constituted by, and from, their relationship to females<sup>131</sup>

All men belonged to the society and they were bound to obey all the rules and laws of it. They felt that they were one in the sense that they belonged to the same clan, society, or country of Meru (*Mugongo jwa Ameru*).

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

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<sup>106</sup> Interviewed: M’Kibamga on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2004

<sup>107</sup> B. Bernard, *The Mugwe: ABlessing Prophet*, p. 53

<sup>108</sup> New International Version (NIV)

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- <sup>109</sup> D. Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of Meru*, p. 1  
<sup>110</sup> B. Bernardi, *The Mugwe: A Blessing Prophet*, p. 55  
<sup>111</sup> G. Muriuki, *History of Kikuyu People 1500- 1900AD*  
<sup>112</sup> H.S.K. Mwaniki, *The Living History of Embu and Mbere*, p.18  
<sup>113</sup> L. Thomas, *Religions of Africa*, pp. 12-14  
<sup>114</sup> G. Muriuki, *A History of Kikuyu People*, p. 44  
<sup>115</sup> *ibid*, p. 50  
<sup>116</sup> P.R. Bennett, *Dah's Law and Thagicu: African Language Studies*, pp. 130- 135  
<sup>117</sup> K.R. Dundas, *Notes; Kikuyu and Dorobo Tribeman*, pp136-138  
<sup>118</sup> H.S.K. Mwaniki, *Living History of Embu*, p. 18  
<sup>119</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 92  
<sup>120</sup> *ibid*, p. 92  
<sup>121</sup> J.G. Mugambi and Groenewegen, *Christian Religious Education*, p. 55  
<sup>122</sup> J.Bahemuka, *Our Religious Heritage*, pp. 65-68  
<sup>123</sup> *ibid*,p. 93  
<sup>124</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 25  
<sup>125</sup> *ibid*, p. 26  
<sup>126</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 104  
<sup>127</sup> *ibid*  
<sup>128</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosoph*, p. 104  
<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, p.104  
<sup>130</sup> *ibid*, p. 108  
<sup>131</sup> B., Rusetle, *The New Religions of Africa*, p.105

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE MERU AND THEIR TRADITIONAL GOVERNMENT

#### THE MUGWE

The Meru people like other Bantu peoples like Zulu, Kikuyu had their own government and had its own leader. Mugwe also called Mukiama headed the government in Meru. Mugwe ruled assisted by councils of elders called Njuri Nceke. Lawson Thomas in his book *Religions of Africa* observed that, “the Zulu like the Meru did have the headman who in Meru was called *mugwe*.<sup>132</sup> The Meru after crossing the Red Sea (Iria itune) were under the prophets. When they crossed, they did not have a leader and so they took it as a serious issue to be settled before any further migrations. Rimita D. Maitai in his book,” *The Njuri Nceke*, says that, “the elders of Ameru were still disturbed by the fact that they had no leader. Prayers were said and a decision was made to sacrifice a lamb to ask God to help them choose a leader.<sup>133</sup>

When the Meru prayed and sacrificed to God, they received a voice. Maitai noted that,” A voice came from heaven and said, “ you will find a flat stone under kiroo plant, whoever steps on it and leaves a foot print he and his descendants will be leaders of the a Meru.” A young man sat near enjoying what others were doing. He tried and made the print. He was immediately carried by the others and made the leader. That is how the mugwe or mukiamama was chosen.<sup>134</sup>

When the boy was chosen, the elders ruled until the boy grew up. The Mugwe or Mukiamama of Meru continued up to today. The Mugwe is now born by Mugwe. He comes by birth. Mugwe had his headquarters at Nciru where they have their temple up to now. Mugwe ruled with the elders from different societies in Meru. His central legislature has made new bills laws issued orders and advised the king. Mugwe had two organizations that he used as his solders to rule with alternatively. They were Kiruka and Ntiba. The two organizations are like today's political parties. Every party ruled for two terms seven years each term. When a

particular party ruled for fourteen years, it left for the other party. The king did not change with the shift of parties because he was a king by birth. Each organization had its own army regiments, when one of them took over power the army of the group in leadership stepped down, and the military units took over control. This was celebrated in an elaborate ceremony known as (Ntwiko). The members of Njuri Nceke were representatives from all the sub tribes of Meru. They assisted Mugwe in all administration but religious matters Mugwe did by the help of prophets also called *ugwes*.

## THE GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE OF MERU

The country of Meru [Mugongo jwa] Meru headed by Mugwe and elders as follows:

1. Elders and Mugwe: they formed the national council.
2. The society (*mwiriga*): the society representatives formed the national council headed by Mugwe.
3. Clans – many clans formed the society:
4. Large family – some called it *murango* or door nciari.
5. Family extended – [nyomba].
6. Nuclear family. The council of elders [Njuri Nceke] or njuri impere: The community (nation) was the topmost in the chain of Meru government. It was ruled by Mugwe.<sup>1</sup> the society representatives however supported Mugwe. Every society gave one representative.

***Elders Njuri Ncheke and Mugwe.*** This was the topmost council in the country of Meru. They however ruled the country with help of the Ntiba and Kiruka. These were like today's political parties. Every party ruled for at least fourteen years and another party took over. The change of the government from party to another one was known as ntuiko.

The clans: A member chosen from all the large family representatives headed the clan. The clan was very important for it was by it that people identified themselves within the tribe<sup>135</sup>. Mbiti points out that, “they (Kamba) dispersed throughout the country but each Mukamba knows his own clan. He identifies himself when he meets another mukamba by his birth certificate, which was his clan. Meru people had the chronology of age groups, and through them, they had a sense of belonging. They were the age groups of circumcision. Those circumcised together called one another [baete]. The age had a name, which would go for a period. Some would go for twenty years. When the circumcision period approached the boys and girls from the age of twelve to thirty years old were circumcised. The following is the lists of my informants who narrated all they knew about Meru age groups

M’Mungania from Isiolo of the age group of mbaya

M’Mucai ---Njukinjiru----*Kiruja*

M’Ncebere ----Tigania----Mbaaya

M’mukindia-----Meru town—Mbaaya

M’Thuranira----Tharaka----Mbaya

List of age groups

- |             |            |                       |
|-------------|------------|-----------------------|
| a. Ratanya  | f. Kaburia | k. Mbaya              |
| b. Thamburu | g. Memeo   | l. Kibabu             |
| c. Kiruja   | h. Murungi | m. Gichunge           |
| d. M’rutimi | i. Miriti  | n. Guantai            |
| e. Kubai    | j. Kiruja  | o. Mungatia jwa kiiri |

They above age groups were used once but some would be repeated although they were supposed to be fifteen in all. Those were miriti, kiruja and murungi. Every age group had its own age set. These are *ndinguri, kobia, and kabeeria*. Clans of Meru are namely Njiru, Njeru, Ntune antu beguma and the most recent Igoki, Nkwene, Voncege, and Voruku-also called Ngirani clan. The main clans of Meru came into being after they crossed the Red Sea. The people were clanified according to the time they crossed. Those passed during darkness were called Njiru, similarly those crossed before sunrise were named Ntune and those after sunrise were Njeru. Antu beguma [This clan consisted of the group of people separated themselves on their way from Canaan but later they realized they could not succeed without the others and they came back]

Under the clan was the family (Nciari) also called door (*Murango*). Every person belongs to that family. It was the leader of every large family, which goes to meet or share even problems with other large family representatives. In Kikuyu, the large family is called (Mbari). Salvador Cynthia in his book, *People and Cultures of Kenya*, says, "A Mbari is a descent group which may be of considerable depth (7 or 8) known generations."<sup>136</sup>

**The family-** [Nciari]: This is a larger family and it consisted of many extended families. The leader of this represented the whole family at the clan level.

**Extended Family:** After a large family, there was another administrative part called extended family. They called (Nciari) other tribes as if Embu and Kikuyu used it to mean *Nyomba* (house). Mbiti (1970) says:

In either case, the family number may range from ten persons to even hundred where several wives belonging to one husband may be involved. The family also includes the departed relatives whom we have designated as the living. It included the unborn members who are still in the loins of the living.<sup>137</sup>

**Nuclear Family:** Parts of the Meru community such as Tharaka, Chuka and Mwimbi refer to this one as (mucii). Contained in a family are parents and children born and unborn. The husband heads it. The Meru people call it a household; Mbiti calls it “the family at night, for it is at night that the household is really itself.”<sup>138</sup>

## THE MERU AND THEIR SPECIALISTS

The dreaded groups of people in Meru are Sorcerers (Murogi wa ithitu), magicians (Murogi wa ciama or biama) and Witchdoctors (Mugo or Muga). The Meru people considered these specialists as the enemies of the community. All misfortunes that took place, other than diseases or natural calamities were attributed to them.

**The sorcerers:** A sorcerer (*murogi*) used substances like charms (*ithitu*) to poison a troublemaker within the community for instant a witch. He was called to poison a thief or any unrepentant wrong doer. Gehman in his book, *African traditional religion* defines a sorcerer as “one who uses magic and medicine against others. Any individual who buys specially prepared charms may practice sorcery and then places near some ones house.”<sup>139</sup> A sorcerer could also poison a person’s food, or wine using medicines, charms, and black magic. Gehman also comments that:

All kinds of other harmful magician’s medicines were used by the sorcerer. These may be placed in the victim’s food, water or beer. It is secretly placed in his house or sprinkled around the house. He may use animals such as snakes or leopard to destroy an enemy.<sup>140</sup>

The sorcerer may have become so by birth (inheriting the trade from the parents]. One however, would become a sorcerer by being oriented into it by a

professional sorcerer. The root power was to destroy a person or even a community. In Kimeru language the name for those powers are *Biama*. Gehman points that:

“Witches are thought to be able to do extraordinary things beyond human abilities. By merely looking at someone or wishing evil at someone, the witch will bring harm. The act of witchcraft is a psychic act.<sup>141</sup>

Gehman adds that, “one may be born a witch or introduced into the secret community of witches in order to practice witchcraft<sup>142</sup> One became a witch by birth. That is by being born by a witch. Mbiti in his book, “ *African Religions and Philosophy*, says that, witches are mainly women with an inherent power by means of which they can abandon their bodies at night and go to meet with similar people (other witches) or to “suck or eat away” the life of their victims. Some witches do not realize that they are witches; this makes witchcraft an infection or hereditary tendency.<sup>143</sup> The above quotation shows how witches function. Causes of one becoming a sorcerer were envy, jealousy and even hatred. This could be because of disputes like land disputes, if one was a rich person (Gitonga) and so on. According to E.H Winter, one who lived among the Amba of Uganda:

“Sorcery is set in motion by ordinary motives of envy, jealousy, hatred. It is activated by social situations, which give rise to feeling.<sup>144</sup>

As we will see later, sorcerers in Meru were to face death penalty if they were responsible for killing of any Meru person.

**Witchcraft person:** The other name of witchcraft is wizardry. In Meru, a witch is called (murogi wa biama). He was dreaded by Meru a lot. Evans – Pritchard an



author known for this subject says that, a Witch acts without rites, spells, and uses hereditary psycho – psychical powers to attain his ends.<sup>145</sup> The witch is believed in Meru to work through superhuman. Their functions are superhuman and in a sense, show why they were feared a lot by the Meru community. Okot p'Bitek in his book called *African Religions in Western Scholarship* divides witchcraft into two:

The evil eye (layir) is a rare power possessed by people with blood spot eyes. By merely looking at a person, he can unwillingly bring harm. Lalala one who can cause death by causing a person to dry up and waste away.<sup>146</sup>

The division above was also very common in Meru for they attributed every thing to witches. If a child fell sick or got skin disease or goes into a comma it was said that it was because of an evil eye. There was also an evil word (kugwetua). A good thing can become bad because of an evil word. All deaths in Meru were attributed to witches. They were believed to be the cause of death. A witch of an evil eye or word brings misfortune but not death. A witch would cause death or destruction of property. Although there was no difference between a witch of an evil eye, an evil word, and death, the witch who was the cause of death was feared more.

Characteristics of witches: Gehman gives characteristics that are similar to those of Meru witches. <sup>147</sup> We give at least five of those characteristics.

1. The first characteristic is that witches are mostly men and women. The number of female witches however supersedes that of men.
2. A female and a male witch are naturally evil. They are wicked and seem to be abnormal in their operation and this made them a threat the society.

3. Witchcraft feared greatly by the Meru society. They were anti-society and always dangerous to children, young and old people.

4. Witches and witchards did not use medicines or herbs, nor does she or he perform rites. All he did was what Gehman spells as, "innate act of the mind."

5. A witchcraft person would leave the body in bed and gather with others at night. They operate naked and would eat human flesh and suck their blood. Gehman comments that hunger for human flesh is a characteristic of witches. All misfortune evil and In fact all deaths are attributed to witches and witchcraft.

**Magicians:** There were two kinds of magic, good and bad magic. Many anthropologists and sociologists call them white and black magic respectively. The good magic is called white. Good magic is for protection and even revoking witchcraft encase of those who are bewitched.

The bad magic is also called black magic for it is used to harm people. The magicians were also feared people in Meru because they had a tendency of using bad magic. They used charms to bring misfortune. A bad magician together with a witch and sorcerer were, if discovered, killed. They used herbs to harm or poison human parts of the body. On differentiating black and white magic, Parrinder speaks of "offensive magic" to describe the attacking quality of "black magic" in contrast to white magic, which is usually "defensive" and protective from the attacks of witchcraft and sorcery.<sup>148</sup>

A black magician can be called a wizard. The work he does is evil but through bad magic. In fact, most wizards did both works. At one time one would practice black magic but another time white magic. It depended with a customer and his needs. Mbiti in his book *Introduction to African Religion*, gives a positive note of sorcerers, witches and bad magicians. He observes that :

Beliefs in these mystical powers help people to find explanation when things go wrong. They are not satisfied with knowing only how misfortunes occur or diseases are caused. They want to know who caused them to happen as they did, when they did and to whom they did. People are able to reach an answer, which appears to them satisfactory.<sup>149</sup>

Mbiti also gives another positive thing about them. He notes that the fear of sorcerers, witches and bad magicians would make the offender to withdraw from the offences. He says, "Another positive aspect of the beliefs is that once people fear that their neighbours or relatives may apply magic and witchcraft against them, they are likely to refrain from certain offences like stealing, rudeness, committing crimes or deliberately offending their neighbours and relatives. Thus, the belief becomes a factor for stability relations among relatives, neighbours and members of the community."<sup>150</sup> As much as, we agree with the above Mbiti's positive notes, we should know that what sorcerers, witches and bad magicians' cause have more harm to people than good. They create more fear, trauma, and deaths than good. In Meru, death penalty inflicted upon anybody caught being a sorcerer, witch and bad magician. To determine one who had done a killing one was to vow avow called (muuma). Father Daniel Nyaga(1997) records that:

A suspected poisoner. (Murogi), holding three items tied together, namely an arrow, along needle (mutumi) and a black necklace, was required to clear himself of guilt by touching with this bundle, the gushing blood of a goat which had been placed on the throat (a part he had to touch), and after licking it, to swear and say, (muuma ndia nkeja kwithirwa ndina urogi kana mbiji kiria kirite ngania) (may I die like this goat if I have poison or known the cause of so and so's death)<sup>151</sup>.

It was very hard for a witch, sorcerer or even a magician to accept that they were. They knew the consequences of their evil work. It was death by stoning, hanging on a tree by the back, left to die, and crucified on the ground. Those

respected groups were A diviner – Murigia, a prophet – Kiroria, herbalist – Gitari wa dawa cia, mugo or muga and medicine person –medium

**A diviner:** My informants told me that a diviner had three responsibilities: The divination, medicine person, and a medium. This person as a medium would detect the problem. A kind of a spirit would come and one behaved like possessed and even fell down and one woke up to tell the problem. The next step was determining the medicines of a problem. The diviners only determined the problem but referred one to a medium to provide the solution.

A diviner in Meru had the following: a leather bag with small gourd with some special seeds inside called (mbugu). When he is at work, he takes the gourd and holds it by the right hand and shakes it vigorously, making a noise like (hiii hi) repeatedly. He had also (nkobia) helmet of leather or skin, a horn of dik dik and (bangiri) armlets. The clothing was also of skin. Mbiti<sup>152</sup> writes that the main function of a diviner, oracles and seer is to find out hidden secrets or knowledge and pass on to other people Normally, the diviners were both men and women. They dealt with the cause of the problem. They would point out the problem or that evil to a person or community. They would tell the spirit responsible of the problem. If bad magic, sorcerer or witchcraft brought the problem, he referred the victim to a medicine person for medication although some acted on both divination and medication. Mbiti adds, “this is a method of finding out the unknown, by means of pebbles, numbers, water, reading the palms, throwing dice and many other methods.”<sup>153</sup>

A person would become a diviner by birth (being born in a diviner’s home) or trained as a trainee. Whether one was a diviner by birth or orientation, it was normally a very tough undertaking whereby, some took three years of training. They learned through seeing and other times acting. Some would avoid pleasure when in training. After training, there was a graduation done in the public where

their family members and relatives came to witness and gave various gifts. Mbiti comments that, it takes a long time to train in the different methods.<sup>154</sup>

**A prophet (kiroria):** The Meru prophets were the ones who foretold the future. They were the ones who advised the Meru warriors on how to win the battle. The prophets were also specialized medicine men who acted as priests. They became mediators between the spirits and the people. Gehman in his book *African Traditional Religions in Christian Perspective* observes that:

Many times a prophet was a medicine man devoted to the specialisation of prophecy. Usually, he was a medium who served as a mediator between the unseen realm of spirits and living humankind.<sup>155</sup>

The prophet was also referred to as a seer. This is because they claimed to see revelations, dreams, visions, and other cases through intuitions. Meru prophet foretold the coming of a very big and long snake connecting towns. This was railway line that came later. My informants deny seeing any occasion where a prophet was initiated into work. They saw that it was God (Murungu) who raised them up. These prophets in Meru became the deputies of the Meru king [Mugwe].

**Herbalist – (ndagitari wa miti):** This person was a specialist of Meru especially in the area of herbal medicine. This person is called Muga or Mugo. He used to get medicine for those suffering from diseases, sickness and so on. They also used to help those who were troubled by witchcraft. They were both herbalists and witchdoctors. Gehman points out that these medicine men were not pure herbalists but the mediums who use their powers with the spirit world to help those troubled by witchcraft.<sup>156</sup>

An herbalist came into that profession by birth where one was born by a medicine person. One learnt through experience or even seeing. Another way one became an herbalist or medicine person was through initiation. The person would take up to three years still training. The doctor used to take herbs and chew and force the initiate to do the same. This was one way one became an herbalist. One of my close relative, who is under training to be an herbalist, told us how he was initiated into learning. He said, ' the medicine man took us round and showed us herbal medicine. He took it, chewed and caused us to do the same.'<sup>157</sup>

A medium: They are the ones who used to communicate with the spirit of the dead. (Nkoma cia bajuju). They are the determinants of particular ancestors who are unhappy and causing trouble. Mbiti <sup>158</sup> says that most of communication through a medium comes from the world to a human being; people rarely have messages to deliver to the spirit world.

A medium like others goes through training of medium ship. This will continue until he graduates and works on his own. The mediums will however consult their teacher or tutor whenever they encounter a very challenging issue. You can hear the trainee calling his tutor (baba) father.

## MERU PEOPLE AND DEVIANT GROUPS

Criminal offences faced death penalty e.g. rapists, murderers, traitors, adulterers, thieves or robbers, all crimes that threatened people's peace. Moral propriety-personality misconducts punished through shaming.

Criminal offences: The Meru people had specific offences, which they regarded as crimes (criminal offences]. These criminal offences were namely raping, sorcery, adultery or fornication. In fact, some crimes had a lesser penalty twice and the third time was final. They never forgave without a fine. One who was caught in any crime was first charged, and later if it was difficulty to prove one

guilty, he was to undergo a vow procession. In this procession, elders responsible for judging told one to produce a goat. He was to carry the live goat on the shoulder and they would cut part of the goat one by one, blood would pour on his body. In Kimeru, he would vow *tiga nkue ta mburi iji kethira unii ndi murogi ninni mburagite ngania, nini mamite Na mwekuru wa ngania* meaning let me die like this goat if I am a poisoner or I am the one who slept with a wife of so and so.

This vow is called *muuma*. The people feared it because they would die the same way they vowed before Murungu. (God).

If for example one accepted the charge, one was warned by the elders but had to pay a heavy fine called (nyamburu). This was like paying eight cows and dozens of goats. The clan would assist him to pay. If the criminal repeated the second time, a heavy fine was on him but the third time it was death penalty. The parents or brothers, sisters or family members would pay a ewe. This ewe was to be sacrificed so that those who will kill that person will be cleansed or propitiated. The death penalty was done in the following ways: crucifying the criminal on the ground-using a peg, binding one on a tree to be left there to die, and death penalty through stoning. In the later penalty, the family members were supposed to throw the first stones followed by the extended clan to the family and the entire society. They would stone the criminal to death and bury the criminal with stones.

**Moral Offences:** In Meru tradition, these were minor offences, which were punishable through minor fines. These fines could shame a person before others. The circumcised boys were not supposed to chat with their mothers. Those who had reached the age of the majority were expected to respect their mothers. If a young man broke that law, one was to face serious beating called *giatu*. In Tharaka, it is called *kirimo* (a beating), which they used to say swallowed the victim [*kirimo nikimeragia muuntu bai*].

If even a married man misbehaved by insulting his parents, one was asked to pay a bull. If he did not, have a bull, it was reduced into a billy goat but the elders had to be beseeched. If a woman misbehaved, she was to prepare or grind gruel

for the whole community (mwiriga). If an initiated girl broke the customary etiquette, the others through beating would punish her. A small-uncircumcised boy who broke the customary law would be forced to bring the whole pot of *irio* (food) for boys. If a small child broke the rules of children, he had to bring calabash full of *ikie* (grinded flour of millet mixed with water). The whole community of Meru had a series of disciplining the undisciplined people and that made them to stay in peace. This is one of the reasons which my informants which made them blame Christianity. They said that Christianity had interfered with their maintenance of moral standards. They are out to revive Meru tradition for they claim that their people are not perpetuating traditional discipline.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

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- <sup>132</sup> L. Thomas, *Religions of Africa*, p. 19  
<sup>133</sup> D.M. Rimita, *The Njuri-Nceke*, p. 13  
<sup>134</sup> *ibid*, p. 13  
<sup>135</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, p. 10  
<sup>136</sup> S. Cynthia, *People and Cultures of Kenya*, p.1980  
<sup>137</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, pp. 139-140  
<sup>138</sup> *ibid*, 140  
<sup>139</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 72  
<sup>140</sup> *ibid*, p. 74  
<sup>141</sup> *ibid*, p. 72  
<sup>142</sup> *ibid*, p. 72  
<sup>143</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 263  
<sup>144</sup> J. Middleton, *The Kikuyu and Kamba of Kenya*, p. 280  
<sup>145</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 21  
<sup>146</sup> Okot, p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, pp. 121-144  
<sup>147</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 73-74  
<sup>148</sup> *ibid*, p. 74  
<sup>149</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 167  
<sup>150</sup> *ibid*, 167  
<sup>151</sup> D. Nyaga fr., *Customs and Traditions of Meru*, p. 1  
<sup>152</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 154  
<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, p.156  
<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, p.156  
<sup>155</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p.77  
<sup>156</sup> *ibid*, p. 75  
<sup>157</sup> Interviewed: David Kimathi- *Aherbalist trainee*, 2004  
<sup>158</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 176



## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCEPT OF SUPREME BEING IN MERU

#### THE NOTION

The knowledge of the Supreme Being in Meru was there from time immemorial. All my informants agreed that Meru people knew God right from the creation. As we saw earlier, God created Meru people. They knew God right at the beginning. If you asked them the time, they even look at you as if you are a fool. One quip that he or she cannot for they have always known God. In fact even in *Mbwa* where they say they were in captivity, they attributed their deliverance to God. They even say that God through a mystery staff of *Muthurui* God parted the Red Sea (*iria itune*) so that they could pass. How did they know their God or Supreme Being?

The Meru people say that even if God parted with them when they called him He answered. They added that if there was no rain and they sacrificed to God (*Murungu*), He brought rain by the time the elders officiating reached home. When there was an outbreak of diseases, they sacrificed to God and God healed them. On the way from where there was an outbreak, they put and smeared blood on the post of both sides and that disease died down. If there was something like the spirit-causing calamity to a family, they would slaughter a ewe of one colour and went round pouring blood praying to God and the trouble disappeared. If you asked any one of them, 'how did you know God personally?' The answer would be through my parents, others say 'through the sacrifice of elders,' and yet another says that it was inborn. If you asked them, 'how do you compare the knowledge of God in Meru traditional religion and in Christianity?' They answer that nowadays people do not know God than before. (We will get more of this in chapter five). When I asked them about religion, they differed in

their response. Those who talk in favour of Christianity say that the tradition will get finished owing to Christianity and civilization. They say that civilization is eroding the Meru tradition in an alarming rate.

'*Njuri Nceke*' elders felt that Meru tradition religion would never disappear. They say that even their songs, which were sung in Protestant churches in Meru namely Methodist churches, were borrowed from the elders' songs called *kirarire*. They are optimistic that it will continue because of the failure of Christianity. They also say that even the religious change now is just the marriage of tradition and Christianity. The Christian owes them a lot. Some of those who are Christians want to revive Kimeru fully but in a reformed way. Some of them appreciate that Christianity has added something to their traditional belief for they will not sacrifice to God because they now know that Jesus sacrifice on the cross is enough. One Informant told me that the sacrifice would never end. He said that sacrifice would continue because they have to devote themselves in their traditional religion. I asked him 'why do you say that people are not as holy as before?' The answer was that there was a lot of laxity and hypocrisy. He said that they have to do something.

The future of Meru traditional concept of God: Almost all my informants expressed that Meru traditional concept of God will continue up to the end. On behalf of all my informants, Mr Stanley M' Mucai a Methodist follower [or believer] says that, 'God is not worshiped today more than before. Our people used to sacrifice and talked to God, and were good givers.<sup>159</sup> According to them, the worship of Christianity in Meru is so weak that it cannot measure up to that of Meru people. The Meru people had unity and did everything together. They prayed together and the answers to prayers were not for an individual but for the whole community.

On the question as to whether, the Meru traditional knowledge of God will continue Mr. Kibanga says, 'Yes!' In addition, all those I consulted hold the same view [all were optimistic that it would continue]. One of the strongest reasons that

they give is that their traditional knowledge of God did not end when Christianity came but rather married with Christianity. When I asked them, 'who is stronger in this marriage? They answered; it is Meru traditional religion but why? Almost all songs in Meru are a mixture of the two. Their syncretism is in worship, practice and many other parts of the Christian church there.

They feel that even if the church continues it has many carryovers, which to them is a benefit, it preserves their culture. The question as to whether they contributed something to them they said, that "they have benefited especially in development and the idea of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice which we did not know. They however, claim that they lost a lot through Christianity in the morality, which is in a disarray and lack of respect among others". What are you doing now? They say, "They are reviving the Meru traditional practices to save the situation. Right now we have identified the son of the former Mugwe [he is called Baikiao Ngunyura] and it is a matter of beginning to teach our youth Kimeru". Meru tradition will never end and if it will, it is when all others also cease.

Those who argue against the Meru tradition in favour of Christianity argue differently that Meru tradition was just a general revelation like any other and is incomplete without a special revelation. They add that the only hope of Meru is Jesus Christ who brings us the special revelation, which makes them to get salvation. They continue to argue that when special revelation comes, the old is completed and so it becomes ineffective. The conclusion of this point is that if as the elders are saying that there is syncretism the two religions are likely to stay. When there is marriage, the two become one and I think that in a religious marriage they become one and not two. If anything, the elements of the two remain up to the end.

## ATTRIBUTES

**Murungu wa Kunthe – God Who Is Everywhere At The Same time:** The Meru people believed that their God was everywhere at the same time. He was however having His shrines on mountains like Mount Kenya, Nyambene, and any big mountain. He had shrines also under evergreen trees called *mugumo* also called groves. The forest surrounding those trees was sacred and nobody was supposed to possess that land for it was where the blameless elders used to go to sacrifice to God.

**Murungu mwene inya-God who has all the power:** God according to them has power above all. No body could supersede God's power. Even the spirits they were weak but stronger than the living. All the same, God is the one who gave power even to those who had. When praying to *Murungu* this attribute of God was involved. He says, *Murungu mwene inya yonthe, twigiirwe – kiao* 'God who has all the power have mercy on us'. All are powerless without God. God according to them is the owner of all the power.

**Murungu wa umenyo:** The Meru people believe that they had wise people amongst them. However, no one ever supersedes the knowledge of God. They even rebuke those who are boastful saying '*utiji taka uri murungi,*' (you never know, you are not God). In this, they show that only God knows every thing even the secrets of men. Others say, '*ukauga ou tika wiji ta Murungi.*' (Do not say that, you do not know like God or you never know). The Meru people attributed all knowledge and wisdom to God. He is our consultant as far as knowledge and wisdom are considered. Mbiti <sup>160</sup> notes that, 'God knows everything and hears everything without limitation and without exception.

**Gitije or even kini kiiru this means 'God who is transcendent:** The Meru believe that God is far away and even some of His shrines are believed to be beyond human reach like on mountaintops like Mt. Kenya (kirimara), Nyambene Mountains and so on. Man cannot reach God for according to them, He is *gitije* (transcendent). Mbiti clarifies the transcendence of God in African context when

he points out that, “for most of their life, African people placed God in the transcendental plane, making it seem as if he is remote from their daily affairs.<sup>161</sup>

This transcendence of God among Meru people seemed to be like a theory. We say this because they knew very well that even if God was far he was also so near. Mbiti observes that, “in theory God is transcendent but in practice he is immanent. (Very close). On the transcendence of God, Jesse Mugambi and Nicodemus Kirima in their book, *The African religious heritage* Also noted that, the universe is one without compartments God is so powerful and perfect that no one reach his home that is none can claim to have travelled the whole vast distance between God and human beings.<sup>162</sup> All the same, God is away but still actively involved among Meru people.

**Baba weetu – immanent:** when the Meru people are in a problem or crisis they believe that God (Murungu) is so near. Even if God is far he is involved in their situations. This makes them pray not to a God far but in practically he is involved in their situations. They call him (*Baba weetu*) our father. In prayer they say, [*Mwathani, Muruungu Baba tharima*] Lord God may you bless. This shows that even if God is Gitije (transcendent) He is also immanent. In their daily life, God is actively involved in the affairs of Meru people. Mbiti also says that African people know that besides God being so far and even remote, they know that he is near. He added, “However, they know that he is immanent (so near) being manifested in natural objects and phenomena, and they can turn to him in acts of worship at any worship place and any time.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, it seems that the farness of Meru God from His creation is not a proof that He cannot operate but He can still work with His creation. That is why Mugambi and Kirima note, consequently most African people do not leave the worship of God until the end of the week, or month, or season. Every a religious aspect followed action and God was included all.

**Murungu wa ntuire – eternal God:** The Merus concept of God does not change. He has ever been living and he will ever live. We human beings according to our African tradition, do live, die and become a living dead and after we are forgotten, we move from the living dead to a spirit being. We have the beginning and the ending but it is not so with God. He has no beginning and ending. He out lived us before birth and after death. Down in his book, “*African traditional religion*” records that it is generally theologically provable that the divinities have no absolute existence. They are in being only in consequence of the being of the deity”.<sup>164</sup> This shows that even the so-called divinities have their beginning in God (Murungu). God (deity) is the one before divinities and if divinities will ever end God will not

#### THE MORAL ATTRIBUTES

**Merciful – bai kiao:** The Meru traditional religion did recognise God as merciful. They cry for God’s mercy when there is crisis or suffering from a very serious disease. They entitle God as God of mercy (Murungu wa kiao). Therefore, there was also a feeling that even if you are in a problem and people seem not to care one could say, [*Murungu mbigirua kiao*) God have mercy on me. This is a statement of comfort. The person comforting himself with the fact that God is able to have mercy. One of my informants Gideon Karani M’ Mungania told me that Meru people cried to God for mercy when one is in danger, pain and when attacked by the (Kirimarimu) spirit personating itself.<sup>165</sup>

**Good God ( Murungu Umwega) –** The Meru people also attribute goodness to God: They say that, ‘Murungu Ni uumwega Ni aranditire dwarine inene,’ ‘God is good he delivered me from the great illness.’ Good actions like bringing rain in the time of famine, delivering the community from the attacks of spirits (*nkoma imbii*) and other great and good works are from God. The Bad actions came from spirits or even ancestral spirits except rare cases where they did to God. God would allow

his intermediaries to bring trouble but in some cases, Meru people revoked the situation by sacrificing to God or even spirits. Mbiti observes that:

the goodness of God is seen in his averting calamities supplying rain, providing fertility to people, cattle and fields. However, in situations when calamities, misfortunes and suffering come upon families or individuals for which no clear explanation. Societies would then consider these to be brought by God, generally through agents like spirits or magic workers or as a punishment for contravening certain customs or traditions. <sup>166</sup>

So at all, time the God of Meru people were expected to be good because he is generally good to them. They even say, [*'no withdrew- turi babai indi Murungu wee no uumwega*) we may be bad but God is always good to us.

**God's will prevail (kwenda Ni Kwa Ngai or Murungu).** The will of God always receives the first preference when we are defeated. A witch doctor who was given a patient and he tried medication and there was no change. He say's, (*uu ni weetu Na Ngai*) This patient is God's and ours. This is like saying; now let God's will be done. It was a belief that above human defeat – God's will, will be done. Nobody according to Meru people goes against God's will and succeeds. Whether we like it or not God's 'Murungu' will prevails. If a Mumeru wanted to do something he said, 'if it is God's will (*kethira nikwenda Kwa Murungu*) I will do this or that. All the future belonged to the will of God. The way He has predestined it will always be like that, [predestination was common in Meru traditional religion]. Mbiti notes, "God has a personality and the life there is a will, which governs the universe and the life of humankind. It is an immutable will, and man generally has to invoke it or accept it in situations that seem beyond human power. <sup>1671</sup>

**Just – (Mugitaniri igamba).** The Meru people have always considered God as just God: They say that, [*Murungu Ni wa gitiyo*] God is right or just. They also add, [*Murungu Ni we ugitanagire igamba Na gitiyo*] God is the one who judges justly. He does not discriminate people for He treats them fairly. They also say that '*Murungu niwe ugananagia nkia Na itonga,*' God is the one who equalizes the poor and the rich. To God they are all equal in his treatment. In Meru, you do not have to be poor or rich to cause God to be partial. The justice of God, as Mbiti says, is felt or invoked often in judicial situations, taking oaths, and pronouncing curses, all of which are taken seriously by African peoples. <sup>168</sup>

**Holy God -- Mutheru: The Meru God is the holy one:** This was partly the reason why Meru people used to sacrifice to God. The priest was supposed to be an old man that had all his children married. He must be above reproach. This means one who has never had a dispute with his neighbours above reproach [*kimeru -uria uti Na igi*]. The holiness of God (Murungu) can also be seen in sacrifice, which was to be a lamb (*nturume ya rangi imwe*) without blemish. It was black, red, white and any other colour. Mbiti also noticed the same requirements, which shows God's holiness among African peoples. He writes:

The concept of God's holiness is also indicated from the fact that African people have strict rules in performing rituals directed to God. Sacrificial animals, for instance, have to be of one sacred colour and priest officiating elders must refrain from sexual intercourse and certain food before and after ritual. These ritual formalities clearly show that people regard God as holy. <sup>169</sup>

**Love – God is love:** Meru tradition religionist portrayed their love through actions. The Meru love for example not always expressed through the mouth but it is much more with actions. They say that, 'actions speak louder than words.' (*Kuthithia Ni gurukite kuuga*). Meru people with that kind of traditional upbringing also see that God loves them. They even connect God's love with their



deliverance from Mbwa people the red clothed peoples. God created a passage through the Red Sea so that they could escape from those red clothed people who were their masters. They mistreated as slaves. The treatment was so severe that their life was threatened. God by delivering them from those people they feel it is because He loves them. Another action that portrays God love is God's provisions like rain victory in wars and healing from outbreaks when they sacrifice or pray. To Meru people, God's action speaks louder than his words so God loves them.

The cause of evil began after the creation of man. As we saw in previous chapters above, God created the first man [a boy] and later a woman [girl]. They stayed with God in peace. My informant M'Mucaï says that God created the boy and the girl and kept them in paradise [Gikenero]. This shows that something bad happened for man and God to be apart. Edwin W. Smith in his book, *Africa Ideas of God* says that, "It appears to be a very wide spread notion in Africa that at the beginning God and man lived together on earth and talked one to another."<sup>170</sup>

#### SEPARATION WITH GOD:

Meru people seem to blame both mole and man for the fall, and that became the source of evil. Some blame the woman. According to Bernardi in his book entitled "The Mugwe—A blessing prophet" shows that, "God separated with man because of man's mistake". He added,

"God came and said now I shall go and I shall give you food, but you should not taste of that tree. A wise creature [Mugambi] that crawls on the earth as a snake came and asked them 'Don't you want to eat of those fruits? 'No, our chief [Munene] told us not to eat of that tree. He rejoiced: If you eat of those fruits, you will have intelligent as He has. Therefore, the woman climbed on the tree, picked a fruit and ate it. She picked a second one and gave it to the husband. The

man refused. Nevertheless, the woman said, If you refuse, I will leave you alone. The man on hearing that he would be left alone took it and ate. Having eaten it, his throat apple [Adam's apple] came out. It is since then that man has a throat apple.<sup>171</sup>

The source of evil according to what Bernardi has written is the snake [*mugambi*,] for it came to make the people of God to disobey God. Man is to blame himself for failing to keep God's law therefore evil came to man. When evil entered in Meru man, he got the immediate consequences of his sin. There was the development of Adam's apple. This according to Meru tradition was because man was unable to swallow the fruit and it refused to go into the stomach but stuck on the throat.

The consequence of man's action of disobedience was the separation of man and God. After separation of man and God, God used the mediator to man. He began by using a mole for man and God were not together. A mole was sent to tell man that he would die and rise again, but deceived on the way by the hyena who forced to tell them that they would die and not rise again. It was after this separation that man lost his closeness with God. God was in peace with man but [after sin] after man's disobedience, He left. How do they try to recover from that?

Sacrifices: The separation between God and man made man to think of alternative ways of appealing to God. One of it is through sacrifices to God. Old men who were blameless, and had all their children married or man without blame did the sacrifice done to God. The animal for sacrifice was of one colour (if it red, white etc the animal was without blemish. All this shows that man is remorseful of what they did before separation. They realized that God is Holy and to approach him we need to offer holy sacrifices.

The sacrifices according to all my informants were done when there was a great need like lack of rain and hence famine, also when there was outbreak of diseases. Sacrifices were however, done for the spirits which threaten the peace of people like when spirits visited Meru people in a dream or began to stone the

living with stones. The animal sacrificed to spirits (*Nkoma imbii*) or living dead (*Nkoma cia bajuju*) differed with that which was sacrificed to God. This animal did have many colours in some cases with blemish.

The priests who conducted the sacrifices were not supposed to sleep with their wives four days before the sacrifice. The animal of the sacrifice was a lamb. They took the lamb and went to the shrine, which was normally a grove or a fig tree. When they went there, they sat down under the tree, and the priest would ask his supporters to hold the animal and the priest would lay his hand on it and prayed and after praying to God, he said, God (Murungu) we offer to you this animal so that you may give us rain, or remove this outbreak. He continued, 'let its blood cover our sins, forgive us our sins and cleanse us.'

After prayer, the priest slaughtered the animal and the blood poured on one place. They separated the meat and prepared the fire. They roasted the portion of the meat, ate, and then collected all its bones. They collected the meat for God and all those bones. They put everything on fire and the big smoke went straight to the sky. This was a sign that God has eaten. When they came out of the forest, the rain came immediately if they prayed for it.

If it was an outbreak, they put some blood after slaughter in a special horn prepared from a castor tree stem (*biau bia miariki*). After sacrifice, they went all the way, up to where outbreak had reached. On the entrance to the place, they put two posts on the gate both sides of the road. They put a rope to connect the two posts and smeared blood on them. The horns with the blood were hanging on the rope both sides. It was after that the elders went home. The disease like Cholera or any outbreak died down.

M' Ncebele Jonathan from Tigania in Meru also narrated to me how the elders prayed and sacrificed to God when the outbreak struck. A single household of the village here is its narration. Our ancestors used to pray to God when a house or family had the outbreak, which was suspected that it would extend to the families of the village. Those who went there were old people without any blame;

their number was between ten and fifty. They came adorned themselves with costumes (*Muungi*) a carf of skin from a monkey called (*Nkima*). They carried some beautiful flowers from a (*Muroo plant*). They would come and assemble outside the affected house. They later sat down in a circular form and the house was at the centre, while seated they began to pray one elder after another.

The prayers were for blessings (*Murungu twaikia mata mucii juu jwa ngania, juroothongoma junthe*). We bless this house of so and so let it be blessed the whole of it o God). The group replied “ *Haye (Kurokara huu!*). The “*haye*” meant either,” let it happen like that or peace (*Thiiri*). The elder prayed again,” *Tugukuromba Ngai ya Kirimara na ya Nyambene untu buu burobua kana burothongoma*. (We pray you God of Mount Kenya and Mount Nyambene let this be good, let everything be okay. The group answered, “*Haye*” (*Thiiri*) let it happen like that or peace. They prayed like that three times and after that, the leader asked for a lamb (ewe) of one colour (white, black, red, or yellow). The affected family normally gave the animal for sacrifice. The priest prayed for the animal [*Murungu tugukunemkera ngondu ututharime!*] ‘He prayed this when his hand was on the head of the animal. He continued [*Murungu tharima nyomba tuiji na twari.*]’ The group answered, “*Haye,*” (May you) God bless this whole house, bless both men and women, girls and boys and the group said “*Haye*”.

The animal was sacrificed on the gate of the affected house. Before that, they took pieces of the skin of the animal and attached to the affected members of the house garments. It was after that the animal was slaughtered and its meat was roasted and eaten by every old man. The blood was put on the castor stem vessels and poured bit by bit on the compound. The priest prayed as he sprinkled blood, “*Murungu jwa Kirimara Na Nyambene! Twigue utue kwora, kuonoka kuumania Na Mirimo*”. The group answered, “*aye*” (God of Mt Kenya and Nyambene hear us and give us healing, deliverance from all these diseases. The group said,” *Haye*” let it happen like that. They put the remains on the sacrificial place and all passed through it and every one going to his place

expecting the answer and in fact, God answered them. These sacrifices and prayers took place from three to four hours.

**Copping with evil:** Most of the offering was to the intermediaries like the living dead. If a member of the families like the grandfather, mother, even one of the parents died, they took the body as family members and buried it. Those who touched the body became unclean and they went through the cleansing period. Men were cleansed by a special woman called [*Mutheria wa muka*], the women involved were cleansed by a special man called [*Mutheria wa muntu murume*]. The cleansing involved shaving of the hair, sleeping with the specialist. The dead person was to go to the stage of the living dead (*Nkoma cia bajuju*). These spirits are members of the family as long as there is any one living in the family who remembers the departed ancestor.

The living dead will claim their rights just as the living person would. Due to that, the living used some shrines in every home where they would take offering to the living dead. One of my informants Mr M'Mucaï Kibanga, the former Njuri Nceke Chairman says that, the living dead (*Nkoma cia bajuju*) who would talk to the living through dreams, visions claiming their rights.<sup>172</sup> The offerings were done every morning, lunchtime and evening as long as people were eating meals.

**Offering to God [Murungu] :**The offering to God in the normal circumstances was like when people wanted to sow and before harvest. The offering was started by a section of the community and others followed later. The elders permitted the first group to offer the sacrifice to precede the others members of the community in sowing.

During the time of harvesting, the same order as above followed. The above offering were officiated by the representatives of Mugwe, commonly known as Kiroria or Iroria [A prophet or prophets]. They were respected a lot in the Meru community. In fact, every sub-tribe had its own prophet. However, thanksgiving and first fruits were collected and given to God through Mugwe. Mugwe thanked God on behalf of the whole nation of Meru. In the same prayer, Mugwe blessed

the people [Mugwe used to bless the warriors before going to war]. After the success, they would bring the spoils to him for thanksgiving to God. If it was a defeat, he consoled the warriors and encouraged them].

## NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

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<sup>159</sup> Interviewed: Kibanga, on 7/7/ 04

<sup>160</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 33

<sup>161</sup> *ibid*, p. 33

<sup>162</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi and N. Kirima, *The African Religious Heritage*, p. 128

<sup>163</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 33

<sup>164</sup> Down, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 168

<sup>165</sup> Interviewed: M'Mungania, 07/06/2004

<sup>166</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 37

<sup>167</sup> *ibid*, p. 37

<sup>168</sup> *ibid*, p. 38

<sup>169</sup> *ibid*, p. 38

<sup>170</sup> E.W. Smith, *African Ideas of God*, p. 7

<sup>171</sup> B. Bernardi, *The Mugwe: Ablessing Prophets*, p. 54

<sup>172</sup> Interviewed: M'Mucaï, On 7/7/ 04

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INTERACTION OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION WITH CHRISTIANITY

#### PRESENT MERU TRADITIONAL RESPONSE TO CHRISTIANITY

When the missionaries met the Meru people, there was a great friction. The Missionaries and the early converts got a lot of tribulation. The question of concern here is “Why did the Meru people who knew God persecute the missionaries who were also preaching about God?” The missionaries came when divided. There were those who were Catholics, Protestants like Methodists, Presbyterians and later Pentecostals. When they came divided this way, they found the Meru people united. Z.J. Nthamburi in his book, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya* records about the attitudes of Meru people to the foreigners. He noted that Meru people were united. He says that, “The Community was organized as an extended family. The clan and the tribe had a central place to ensure harmony and people, essential elements of human experience”.<sup>173</sup>

The foreigners with their own way of life became a threat to the people. Their message was condemning anything traditional and made the people resentful. The missionaries preached the Trinity of God, which was contrary to the Meru concept of God. The traditional concept of God is that God is one. He has no wife or even children. This made them to question the God of the foreigners. My informant says that the God of our people has no division and has no wife or children. Nthamburi also found a similar thing when he says that:

The idea that God could be concerned as having a son was repugnant to the Meru people. God could not have a son since it was not the nature of the deity to get a consort. God was neither a father nor mother; he was the great one ‘Gitiije’. The idea of Trinitarian was difficult to convey to the Meru.<sup>174</sup>

Besides their message, being contrary to Meru beliefs in God, they also condemned the whole of Meru tradition. To express their refusal they mistreated them. One of my informants called M'ncebere, Jonathan from Tigania says that, the Methodists (from Kaaga) came to our area of Mikinduri (Kigucwa). However, they were expelled and ran to Miathene [one of the locations there]. (M'ncebere). The resistance was so strong that those who wanted to believe or believed were considered as people who were culturally dead. Nthamburi adds that, Traditional authorities (Kiama and Njuri) felt that their religion, which knit all the people together, was being eroded.<sup>175</sup>

The Meru people did not only feel threatened but feared to lose their culture through Western civilization. Due to that, they had to respond harshly. That is why Nthamburi notes that "the hut accommodating the first school was set on fire, after the door has been fastened from outside to prevent their escape. This was supposed to serve as a strong deterrent to any one who dared question traditional authority and the accepted order."<sup>176</sup>

The missionaries did not give up even if they got opposed. They had to keep the adherents separately to protect them from the traditional influence. To do this, they had to provide all for the followers. They brought education, dispensaries and all other social facilities. Those who followed them were regarded to as learned (*athomi*) and one elite was called (*muthomi*). My informant argues that when the Missionaries came they used divide and rule. Those who followed them were some how deterred from all traditional ties. However, some mixed tradition with Christianity for their survival. Nthamburi in his interview with Kornelio Mukiira noted that:



Those who accepted a new way [of life] had to cut themselves off from the rest of the society, including their relatives, and live at the mission station where they were protected from the influence of the traditional expectations.<sup>177</sup>

As the church continued to expand, the Meru tradition, practices continued to disappear. My informants namely, (M'ncebele, Jonathan, M'Mungania Gideon, and M'Muthuri) agree that most of Kimeru traditional practices were discarded. This was because it was referred to as devilish. They however, claim that it did not disappear but they mixed it. It is still there but inside Christianity. They claim also that Meru tradition is now stronger than before. Nthamburi wrote about one convert of 1914. He names him as Philip M'inoti who believed that, "Christ came to fulfil the spiritual pilgrimage already under way through tutelage of national religion."<sup>178</sup>

## MERU DENOMINATIONS AND MERU TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Meru people received the Gospel with much reluctance but many years after the missionaries came, the reception was very high so much that they presumed the death of Kimeru. This was however not to be because of syncretism [a mixture of Christianity and the Meru traditional religion in disguise]. They received it but it was just like saying bring it also. Our recent research in Meru churches [Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholics and Pentecostals etc] after about one hundred years of Christianity in Meru, shows the following. Meru Christian churches borrowed a lot from Meru traditional Religion like songs, instruments of worship, sitting arrangements, singing actions and service programmes

**Hymns:** The denominations like Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterian and Pentecostals use some of the Meru traditional religious songs. A song sung by the elders known as *kirarire* is still in use in some of the Methodist congregations.

Other churches use those songs in fellowships, ceremonies like singing for

initiates [during their graduation], marriage, and dancing for the visitors [political leaders in their rallies].

Today they change songs a bit to sound spiritual and biblical although the content is the same. If the song has any word which they consider unbiblical it is replaced with a better term which can sound spiritual. It is not just taking the Meru traditional songs that they have taken but also English Christian songs have been traditionalized to suit the Meru tradition religion. The song with the word that is insulting meaning when translated in Kimeru was changed and replaced with a better term. What we see here is that as far as songs are concerned, there is give and take. They take the Christian songs and translate in Kimeru language after modifying them to suit them and also take those of the tradition after rectifying them to suit Christian teaching. In our findings, the traditional songs are sung more in their homogenous Meru congregations. For example, the Methodist congregations use the English Methodist songs in Kimeru. The Pentecostal churches use the kikuyu [kiroho] spiritual songs for their services because they share many things in common with Kikuyu people. Besides that, the Meru people claim that they have the common origin with all Bantus in Africa. Due to modernism spirit, the Western culture songs have overtaken most of the young people and dancing whose origin they are not aware.

**Singing actions (gestures)** The singing actions in all Meru people subgroups within the church worships are the same with that of the traditional religion. This also evidenced in other African people groups. A Maasai always sings jumping ups and down and even when it comes to dance, he does the same. In worship services in towns like Nairobi, singing actions has collected the singing actions of all the people represented in the church. Sometimes the worship leader led people to sing the actions of these people groups in the church. The singing of the Meru people has not changed in the churches and it is more less the same. There is therefore no possibility for the Meru people to loose their traditional actions.

In the research tour, I noticed that some of the programmes in the services were similar with those of the Meru traditional religion. They began everything with prayers and ended with the same. In their programmes, they sang together but later on groups within the church also present the song. The only difference that was found up sent from the tradition programme was that of .the bible study [since the traditional religion did not have any written scripture instead all was oral] and preaching [the same had more of teaching than preaching]. The rest does not seem to differ with that of the tradition.

The personnel of the churches in the services were generally old people who includes elders, deacons the pastor or the priest. In churches like Methodist, Presbyterians and other churches in Meru the old people performed most of the duties in the churches. The Meru traditional religion accepted only blameless old men in its religious duties. The boys however, of about four to seven years were allowed sometimes to participate in some religious duties such as sacrifice, otherwise the rest were old men who had all their children married and blameless people before the community. These qualifications from the traditional religion were also part of what the church looked for when appointing their church leaders in Meru.

**Musical instruments:** The churches in Meru do have the combination of Meru and Western musical instruments. In most places, drums are common in the churches. These drums were in use in the traditional ceremonies and now they are part of the church instruments in Meru. Some of the churches may not have the musical instruments, which are imported, but they have drums instead. Along drums is fiddle [wandindi], a Meru traditional guitar but they used it in the ceremonies and other entertainments. Young boys commonly used it in the traditional ceremonies but today it is not in use in many churches. However, the subgroups of Meru people used it for entertaining leaders.

Besides *wandindi* is the diviner's musical instrument known as *mbugu* [it consist of a small gourd with beads inside] which he used for entertaining his customers.

Today, it is the most used in the churches although they have modified it similarly with the traditional sisal strings but the shape is like that of the traditional gourd. Other instrument used is the traditional costume [nbere] used mostly by the circumcised mature young men. They use them during the big occasions of the Meru country [*mugongo*] and more on the initiation periods. It is worn on the legs and makes entertaining voice when the legs are shaken vigorously. It is not used in the church regularly except when there is a big ceremony which involves the community in general example a political rally or ordination in the church.

**Sitting arrangements:** The sitting arrangements of the people in Meru churches are similar with that of the Meru traditional religion. In their tradition, men never used to sit together with women. In a case, which required women to attend, they sat separately. Ceremonies, which involved women, were for example graduation of the initiates, marriage ceremonies, and other communal ceremonies. The women sat together and all men did the same but separately. Where there were talks, in which involved women to be present they called to give witness but their decision left for men to decide even if the decision was unfavourable to them.

This is reflected more when the families are coming to the church. In many cases, the husband goes ahead of the most probably ten to thirty metres away from the wife. They do not go together to the church chatting or talking. In this they will take little bit more time to do that. Those who are staying in towns are trying to undo it but when they go back [ushagu or njaa] home area, they go back to the routine. This traditional practice has affected church leaders like elders. When I was in college one of my colleague from Kijabe serving God with African Inland Church caused laughter when he told us that one of their pastors was accused by the church elders of teaching the youth bad manners because of going to church with his wife in amusement mood. This is also a problem to the other African communities. In the big towns, this practice is changing bit by bit.

To conclude, we can say that they presumed that Meru traditional religion was dead but in the research, we found it to be alive in and outside the church in Meru. The impact it had over the people was and is very powerful that even when

it came in contact with other religions instead of dying completely it neutralized those religions and became right inside them.

Apparently, Meru traditional religion is coming up very strongly and precautions should be taken by the churches to unite and speak unanimously and determine what to retain and what not to be incorporated without which they stand to lose members back to the tradition and modernism. Some churches are however, too cool for they began with fire but now they are very cool and their leaders are no longer charismatic. All combined with too much backsliding of many members might end up into Kimeru successful upcoming. This will be a problem because as we saw that in African traditional religion lacks the eschatological aspect [like eternal, judgement heaven, hell, and personal beliefs], which is clearly given by the Christian church.

Christianity according to this research is very important for as we saw earlier that the African traditional religions and indeed Meru counterpart gave the people partial knowledge of God [general revelation] and therefore, the coming of Christianity brought Jesus Christ who the special revelation of God. The African and Meru man has no better option but to receive Jesus as personal saviour and Lord in order to have hope of the eternal life now and the future. The traditional good practices may continue in the churches but the sinful ones they should eradicate and replace with the good ones.

The question about those who died before the coming of Christianity and their fate remains but we know that they are in the hands of God who revealed Himself in their traditional religion and he will judge them according to their traditional knowledge, which He exposed to them. Just as the Judaist need Jesus' Christ for his personal salvation so is an African regardless the concept of God they had. The missionaries as human beings can error, in the terms and attitudes that they had toward the Africans and Meru people. Jesus Christ and His Gospel however, did not error. We need him in our culture and traditions,

country continents and future. We can then say that the future of Meru people is Jesus Christ who is also the future of Africans and the whole world.

#### PRESENT MERU TRADITIONALIST RESPONSE TO CHRISTIANITY

The following informants do feel that Christianity has failed in Meru. They are: M'ncebere – from Tigania, M'Mungania – from Meru Central, M'Mukindia – from Meru Central, M'thurania – from Tharaka, Kathenya – from Tharaka BTL (Bible Translation Literature), M'Ngara – from Meru South, M'Aburi - “and M'Mungania – Igoji. They claim that Christianity came and condemned the whole of Meru tradition but with time, the people accepted it. They however did not control the people and so almost the whole community has gone astray. The Christianity in Meru has been defeated as far as discipline is concerned. They claim that Christianity is unable to compensate Meru tradition. The deviant people have developed into many communities. Prostitution, robberies have emerged while many girls were rendered single mothers. The illicit brew has been rampant and so evils have increased tremendously. The blame of all has been posted to Christianity for they are the ones who should keep up discipline. The above informants feel that something has to be done. They feel that they cannot tolerate their people getting lost.

The elders (Njuri Nceke) have already regathered themselves. They want to incorporate all the young generation in order to enhance the Meru tradition. This will include teaching them the right behaviour. They want the institution which was involved in teaching the children to begin doing that. They were the family members. The child was disciplined communally and so one was to show good behaviour to every one. This according to them is not so to Christianity. They have somehow lost the battle against immorality. Gideon Karani M'Mungaria comments that:

Now that there are evil people within the community, our people and we as Meru traditionalists are reviving Kimeru all over again because Christianity has been defeated and evils are getting out of hand and wickedness is increasing tremendously.<sup>179</sup>

In order for the informants to revive Meru traditions and religion effectively, they want to cooperate with the Christian denominations and the government.

### CHALLENGES CHRISTIANITY GETS FROM MERU TRADITIONALISTS

**a. False teaching and lack of unity: Lack of genuine believers (Nominalism):**

The elders of Meru say that when they accepted Christianity they lost in the first instance, that cultural power, to act on wrong doers particularly those in Christianity. They have observed over the years that Christianity although it added something to African culture, like stopping sacrifices, the idea of the triune God and much good teaching, it has failed. It is not able to counter hypocrisy within itself, nor does it provide a workable mechanism of eliminating it. Due to that, the believers mixed up in their beliefs. They claim to be Christians and at the same time do evils, which go unpunished. The people also use the grace of God, which they claim that they are living in. The elders (Njuri – Nceke) say that nominalism has become too much and needs to be curbed. They put it as a challenge to Christianity to do something on this before things are worse.

**b. Syncretism:** The Missionaries came, condemned our Meru tradition and ended up mixing our Kimeru and Christianity. This produced something, which is neither Kimeru nor Christianity. Those who are born in this kind of system do not want total identification with Christian and Meru traditional beliefs. They even call themselves do. Com [a word used to show that one is enlightened or civilized]. The elders feel that these people are not truthful in their journey (*Baba bati Na uma rugendone*). They challenge Christianity to bring these people on its

side or very soon, they are going to get them to the tradition. Let them stand one side.

**c. Indiscipline:** When the Missionaries came, they found a united Meru. It came and divided them in the lines of religion or denomination. The unity of Meru began to crumble. The Meru tradition that provided the means and ways of dealing with criminals and moral proprietors became ineffective. They blame Christianity for this division and indiscipline of Meru people. It is not easy now to deal with the criminals and immoral people culturally because they claim that they no longer belong to tradition but to Christianity. Christianity in Meru has that challenge of bringing order and discipline. The evil doers are hiding in their congregations. They have to do something. Moreover, we should do it together since these people belong to us.

**d. Rootlessness:** The Meru traditionalist challenge Christianity in Meru to give their believers roots in their beliefs. They say that Christianity in Meru does not teach their adherents what they should hold. In their Kimeru tradition, they used to teach properly their people and that is why they were able to have control over them. Most of Meru people do not seem to know what they believe and whom they believe. This is because of lack of teaching. The preaching has been too much without grounding. Christians in Meru should provide a way in which they will give the followers the doctrinal roots.

**e. False teaching:** The elders claim that Christian doctrine varies from one denomination to another one. This diversity was caused by what seems to be ant-Christian and anti-cultural. Due to that, false teaching misled the people. The false teachers have become more influential in their outlook. This is happening there and the Christians are doing nothing. Something has to be done otherwise people are getting lost. Traditionalist puts the blame to Meru Christianity.

**f. Unity:** The Christianity in Meru came divided and because of that, it is in disarray. The denominations have divided our people and even put boundaries. The Christianity should unite to overcome disunity. Many evil doers



have cropped up because of that disunity. Christianity should unite people otherwise; Meru community will be in greater mess. The elders tell them that, [*Bwatwithire turi kimwe*] you found us together. Therefore, we challenge you to keep us in unity. Meru is one community and we should be one particularly against evils. The boundaries of the government in Meru should not divide us but put us together. They therefore say this saying, united we stand, and divided we fall.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

All the above challenges seem to meet at one point. This point is “what next?” Many thoughts come to their minds. The elders themselves have already decided to take the action.

One of their actions has been to revive the Meru elders all over Meru. They have also identified their present Mugwe (A son of the lineage of the Mugwe called Baikiao). Mugwe has been the King of Meru. The elders like Gideon Karani M’Mungania is the chairman of Njuri Ncheke Meru Central and Stanley M’Mucai Kibanga the former chairman of Njuri Ncheke) feels that they have already succeeded to get members of Njuri Ncheke all over Meru. After reviving Njuri – Ncheke, they will be instilling Meru tradition to Meru youths because they seem to be the most affected part of Meru community. They are urging the church and the government to unite and work together. The elders are after seeing a new revived Meru. They should fight immorality mercilessly and enhance teaching.

The church should unite and serve as one thing so that they can maintain harmony. The government cannot keep order alone they have to involve the community elders and people so that security can be intensified. Teaching should be done in all those bodies. The church, the traditionalist and the government teaching, are important for it will ground the people in the Bible culture and even the government.

The recommendation I can give is that if one is to preach to Meru people and indeed any other community one has to know first their culture and traditional

background. If personally, I go to preach to them I can use the language, which, is appealing to them. The condemning language or judgemental may result to rejection or even resentful to you and the message.

They need somebody who respect and the traditional beliefs. The old people have more say than women and young people. The evangelization targeting the elders if it is successful will easily bring the whole family. The language should be well refined. Any abusive language will be detested. At the same time terms used in your talk should be selected to fit them. Terms touching close to or private part example vagina, buttocks, penis, adultery and fornication just to mention a few [Circumcised men and even girls did have their own polite language for those terms example in Kimeru a penis is called *Muthiita*- the circumcised person is taught a polite term called *Muuti* literally a tree. If you use those terms it will be abusive to the people. It can also be interpreted as lack of manners to the community. New people should know that there is language for every group such as that of elders, women, girls, boys and warriors. As a young person addressing to the elders there should a lot of respect. Women of the age of your mother you do not talk to them anyhow and if you must you will do so from a distance of about ten meters although due to modernism the practice is ending in some parts.

When preaching in the open air it is advisable, to begin with what people know and then take them to what they do not know. The preaching should be done with a lot of wisdom, love and honour. If you are single and you are a missionary you may marry a Meru girl to win acceptance. If you can not, learn their language and do not despise their traditional beliefs and practices for you to communicate well. Also, use understandable language. If you know the Meru language well use it in preaching and in communication. If you use foreign language it is taken as boasting or as a colonial mentality. As I finish let me say that relationship toward everybody is very important. You should learn to relate well with different people. It is important to avoid carelessness, which bring blames and an obstacle to our self.

With the above, one can be accepted by the people and have a break through in preaching the gospel. Spiritual requirements are general having to pray, read the Bible and be charismatic. A gift prophecy will be an added advantage to pull multitude. Many of them like it because of their background of Mugwe [a prophet and a political leader] they like one who can prophecy.

## RESEARCH REVELATIONS

I now have a wider scope of the understanding of Meru people, which I did not have in my early ministry. I realized that the language used to evangelise them was not appealing and that is why they reacted to me inhumanely. If the words were appealing, I think they would not stone us as they did that time. In this research, I have understood the background of my people and trust that this research will help the people from Meru and any related communities.

I thought that they were pagans but realized that they had the knowledge of God whose requirements were similar to the God of Israel as we saw in the attributes. Christianity to them was a white man's religion. These white men, to them, were colonizers, intruders, and land grabbers and in some cases oppressors. When one became a Christian, he or she became a misfit or a betrayer of Meru traditional religion and his people.

Like other African ethnic groups, the Meru people were worshipers of their Supreme Being (Murungu) whose sanctuary was on the mountains such as Mount Kenya, Mount Nyambene and other places like evergreen bushes (groves) and under mugumo trees. They insisted that all their people should stay together for security purposes and for retaining the traditional beliefs, values, and traditional worldviews. The Meru people had the wrong concepts of the foreigners like rulers and missionaries because they thought that these visitors would eventually take all their ancestral lands and exterminate them from the face of the earth. Therefore, when the visitors started doing something close to what they had in mind about them, the Meru people started becoming violent and my

informant reports that some of the early rulers and missionaries faced the unexpected resistance. In Tigania, for example, the Meru people expelled the missionaries from Mikinduri who ran to Miathene and Kaaga the Merus put a blaze the missionary's house where their converts were residing.

## CONCLUSION

Meru people like any other African community had the knowledge of God even before the coming of the other religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The elders point out that, only three age groups that have been with the missionaries. They are *Kiruja*, *kibabu*, *Gichunge*, and *Mungatia jwa kiiru*. No others who mixed their traditional religion with any other.

Their origin is as we saw from what they call [*Rutere rwa urio*] on the right side facing north of Africa. This place was Mbwa (which means on the seashore or across the sea) and the people there are people of red clothes. One of my informants (*M'Ncebere*) told me that those *Mbwa* people resembled the *Warabu* or (*Arabs*). These people had turned Merus into slaves. The Meru people served their masters until their leadership became severe when Koome-Njue by the help of God led them out of captivity.

When the Meru people came, they came, together with all the Bantus in Africa. They claim that on their way, Uganda Bantu like Baganda, Banyoro and others there left the Merus and settled in Uganda. Abagussii, Abaluya and Abakuria settled on the western part of Kenya.

When they came to Meru-Arusha in the modern Tanzania, they stayed for many years and reproduced there a lot. It was afterward that other African Bantu dispersed from there. Some members' from their group left them and went to Tanzania and from there to southern Africa and others went to central and western Africa. The Merus moved to the east of Arusha and on Kenyan side Taita were left at Taita hills and preceded to Mombassa coastal place called (Kirindine, which means a place of many people in Kimeru). They settled there for some time, left some of them there in the coast, and went along the coast and

they found Tana River. They went through it and settled to Igembe side of Meru where all spread to their present places today.

The Merus beliefs in God, leadership and their social identity united them. Their traditions are similar to those of Jews. Meru initiation was a passage from childhood to adulthood. Murungu [God] of Merus had his own attributes, which look similar to that of Jews God. Although they mention them in Kimeru but in the final analysis it is necessary to conclude that they are attributes.

Like other African communities like Buganda, Meru had its own government. The leader of the government was known as 'Mugwe 'and had his own cabinet of elders called Njuri-Nceke. Mugwe took these elders from the clans or sub communities like Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Miutine, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka and Tharaka.

Mugwe had many functions, which included political, social and religious. In the religious functions, the Ugwes who were sometimes in most cases the prophets assisted Mugwe. The *ugwes* were from the sub groups of Meru shown above.

Merus had other people also serving in different capacities. They were specialist divided into two feared and respected. The feared were put to death if found or convicted because they were the enemies of the society. The respected were encouraged to go on with their work.

They were people of good morals. They put in place the punishment for lawbreakers. Those who broke the law of the Meru country got punished or penalized. Some crimes were penalised with death while others paid a heavy fine. They trace their moral decay from the time of white settlers, rulers and missionaries. It was from then that they began to see the Merus misbehave and because the visitors protected them from elders' punishment, they continued up to today. Due to the lapse of morality as we saw above the Njuri-Nceke elders have decided to revive Meru tradition in order to curb it in Meru, they want to have Kimeru back because they say that Christianity has failed them. They are

urging the support or the co-operation of the church and the government combat those evils.

The informants pose challenges to Christian denominations in Meru to organize their house for most of the people who are immoral claim to be their members.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN

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<sup>173</sup> Z.J. Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya*, p. 62

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, 63

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*, p. 63

<sup>176</sup> *ibid*, p. 64

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*, p. 63

<sup>178</sup> *ibid*, p. 64

<sup>179</sup> Interviewed: M'Mungania on 20/ 07/ 2004

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## APPENDIX I

### LIST OF INFORMANTS

Name, age and home area

1. Gedeon K. M'mungania Mbaya, 74 [From Ntakira].
2. Stanely K. M'mucaai Kiruja, 96 [From Igoki].
3. Gideon M'mukindia Mbaya, 75 [From Gikumene].
4. Amos M'thurania Mbaya, 78 [From Tharaka].
5. Albert K. M' Murango Gichunge, 48 [B.T.L.Tharaka].
6. John Muthengi Gichunge, 52 [B.T.L.Tharaka].
7. Micheki M'ringera Gichunge, 43 [Tharaka].
8. William Mutura Kiduano, 61 [Retire Teacher, Tharaka].
9. Micheki Marigu Kiruangi, 62 [Tharaka] .
10. Elastus M'mburi Mbaya, 83 [From Igoji Meru].
11. M'ngara Mbaya, 78 [Igoji]
12. M'mungania Kiruja, 107 [Igoji].
13. M'ncebere, Jonathan Ratanya, 67 [From Tigania Mikinduri].



## APPENDIX II

### A QUESTIONNAIRE ON MERU TRADITIONAL RELIGION

#### A. Background of the Meru People

- 1 Who were the Meru people?
- 2 Where did they come from and how did they come to Meru?
- 3 Where did the Meru traditional religion come from?
- 4 How did the government, social activities of Meru people begin and continue until to today?
- 5 Who was the king of Meru and whom did he rule with?
- 6 What were Mugwes functions?
- 7 Who is the present Mugwe of Meru?

#### A. Concept of God in the Meru People

1. *Where did God of Meru traditional religion come from?*
2. What are the names of God (or Superior Being and His divinities)?
3. What are the functions of the Superior Being and his divinities?
4. What are His attributes?
5. Is the God of Meru traditional religion knowable?
6. .Compare and contrast the knowledge of God between the Meru tradition and Christianity?
1. Does Christianity offer better knowledge than traditions?

#### C. The Fall of Meru Man and His Attempts at Recovery

- 1 Do you have any story of creation and the separation of God and man?
- 2 Did they worship God after the separation?
- 3 What were the places of worship?
- 4 Who used to conduct the worship of God or veneration of dead ancestors in Meru tradition? Did it involve every one?

5 Did it involve everyone? How did the community, come together in worship?

6 Now that Christianity brought the Idea of Christ as the only sacrifice, do you think there is need to continue with your traditional sacrifice?

**D.** The contact of Meru people with colonizers, Christian missionaries, and the effects they brought to Meru society.

1. When and from where did the white rulers come to Meru?

2. What happened when Meru people encountered them?

3. When did Christianity come to Meru?

4. What happened when the two came in contact?

5. How was the morality of Meru people before the coming of the white people?

6. What or who is responsible for the decline of the morality in Meru?