

THE MERU
HISTORY AND SOCIETY

By Dr Catherine BAROIN
from the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research),
France

in collaboration with :

Esrom Aseri Sumari, Chairman of the Meru Supreme Council
Jacob Nathanael Kaaya, Secretary of the Meru Supreme Council
Ndesaulo Melita Akyoo, Father of the Kiloviyo age-group
Baltazar Zakayo Kaaya, Bishop of AMEC church
Moses Ndosu, retired medical doctor

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The Tanzanian people locally known as MERU, who live on Mount Meru, facing Mount Kilimanjaro in Northern Tanzania, are different and have no connection with the Meru of Kenya. They call themselves RWA (sing. Nro, pl. Varwa) and speak their own language, *ki-rwa*.

HISTORY OF THE MERU

BEFORE COLONISATION

1 - 400 years ago, Mount Meru was covered with forests and people started to come, one by one, to settle on the south-eastern and northern slopes of the mountain. Some of them came from the east (such as Chaga Machame of Kilimanjaro) and this is the reason why the Meru language, Ki-rwa, is close to Ki-chaga, but it also includes a few Maasai words.

2 - The Mbise and Kaaya are believed to be the first clans to settle on the southern slopes of the mountain:
- the first chiefs (*Mangi*) were Kaaya
- the Mbise were leaders who went up Mount Meru to pray for rain and cure diseases.

3 - In 1896, the two first German missionaries came but they were killed by Meru and Arusha warriors.

4 - New German missionaries came again in 1902 and established a permanent mission at Nkoaranga. They spread Lutheran Christianity and later translated the New Testament in Ki-rwa.

5 - This is why Lutheranism is now the most widespread religion among the Meru.

GERMAN RULE (1896 -1918)

The Germans were extremely ruthless. At first they killed many people and destroyed the crops. After Mangi Matunda Kaaya's death in 1896, the first chief (*mangi*) under German rule was his son Lobulu Kaaya but he was hanged in 1900 and his skull was sent to Germany. The following one, Masengye Kaaya, was imprisoned after one year. So the Kaaya clan did not want to provide any more chiefs. When the Germans asked them to designate a new *Mangi*, the Meru came up in a file and pointed to the last one, Nyereu Nasari. This is how Nyereu Nasari, from the Nasari and not Kaaya clan, became chief in 1901. He in turn was sent to prison one year later. The following one, Sambegye Nanyaro, continued as *Mangi* up to 1925, long after the Germans had left at the end of the First World War in 1918.

BRITISH RULE (1920-1961)

After the Germans, the British took over colonial rule until the independence of Tanganyika in 1961.

Coffee cultivation was introduced by the first missionaries and taken up by Meru Christians. It was a lucrative source of income for everybody. But in 1947 an important land conflict started, leading all Meru to oppose the British. A project was drafted to expropriate Meru land in the Ngare Nanyuki area, for the benefit of white settlers. All Meru fought against this project and launched a case against it, called the *Meru Land Case*. Kirilo Japhet Ayoo was sent in 1952 to New York, to defend the case of Meru against the British at the League of Nations, which later became the United Nations. Kirilo's mission was not successful at this time, but he convinced an American, Anton Nelson, to come back with him to develop coffee industry in Meru. He founded the Meru Cooperative Union, which became so prosperous that it bought back the land in Ngare Nanyuki. Many people evicted from Ngare Nanyuki settled south of the mountain down to Mbuguni.

LIST OF CHIEFS (*MANGI*)

NAME :	CLAN :	DATES :
1 – KAAAYA	Kaaya	
2 – KISARIKA	Kaaya	
3 – MALENGYE	Kaaya	
4 – SAMANA	Kaaya	
5 – KYUTA	Kaaya	
6 – RAARI 1	Kaaya	
7 – SOLA	Kaaya	
8 – RAARI 2 (also called NDEMI)	Kaaya	- 1887
9 – MATUNDA	Kaaya	1887-1896
10 – LOBULU	Kaaya	1896-1900
11 – MASENKYE	Kaaya	1900-1901
12 – NYEREU	Nasari	1901-1902
13 – SAMBEKYE	Nanyaro	1902-1925
14 – SANDI	Nanyaro	1925-1930
15 – KISHILI	Kaaya	1930-1945
16 – SANDI	Nanyaro	1945-1952
17 – ISMAEL SYLVANOS	Kaaya	1953-1963

AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Independence of Tanganyika started in 1961 with Julius Nyerere as its first President. In 1963 Nyerere abolished chiefdoms all over the country. In Meru the last *Mangi* was Sylvanos Kaaya. The *Nshili Nnini*, leader of all clans, replaced the *Mangi* system. The leaders of Meru clans and age-groups make up a Supreme Council which meets at Poli. It is called *Kamati Kuu ya Mila na Jadi za Wameru*, or *Mringaringa*, the name of a big native tree, which grows locally, under which people used to meet, discuss matters and solve social conflicts. The *Mringaringa* is recognized by the Tanzanian government because it helps to maintain peace. The *Mringaringa* also has a written constitution (*Katiba*) setting the rules of Meru social life.

LEADERS OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL

NAME

AGE-GROUP

1 – Thobias Nasari Ayoo	Ulutareto
2 – Yesaya Ndemera Kaaya	Kisali
3 – Moses Laroi Nnko	Sitimu
4 – Betueli Kimananga Kaaya	Stelingi
5 – Esrom Aseri Sumari	Roketi

AGE-GROUP LEADERS

NAME

AGE-GROUP

1 – Mbarare Kaaya	Kisali
2 – Ndefiywa Lakweni Maturu	Sitimu
3 – Gamaleli Aseli Kyungai	Stelingi
4 – Marco Siyoi Pallangyo	Roketi
5 – Yusto Urío	Kakisha
6 – Akundaeli Terevaeli Mbise	Kiloviyo
7 – Elinami John Sarakikya	Ulutuwati

RECENT HISTORY

Religion

In 1990-1993, there was a conflict among the Meru Lutherans. They were part of the Northern diocese of the ELCT (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania) with the Chaga, but wanted to have their own independent diocese. The Northern diocese refused but after much debate and conflict, the Meru diocese was created within the ELCT, and a new independent Lutheran church was created, named AMEC (African Mission Evangelism Church).

Today the ELCT is the major church in Meru, AMEC exists and Pentecostalism developed with many different denominations.

Economy

Coffee cultivation declined because of high costs of inputs and low prices in the world market. In recent years it was replaced mainly by carrots, tomatoes, potatoes and other vegetables sold inside and outside Meru. Bananas and milk remain important productions, together with chicken. Women started to have more and more important activities outside the family holdings, thanks to micro-credit (VICOBA) started locally in 2008. The income brought by women, who are the only ones to sell products at markets, now replaces the income once produced by coffee, which was administered by men. Thus some men nowadays depend on their wives to provide the family income.

AGE GROUPS (*MARIKA*)

Age groups (*Marika*) are a defence and marriage discipline system.

- Through circumcision followed by seclusion, young men are taught the social rules, they learn discipline and how to respect their elders. They maintain discipline among themselves, by fighting against bad behaviour. Members of the same age group will help each other.
- They are warriors, and their duty is defence. Until now, they fight the Maasai who steal their cattle in such areas as Ngare Nanyuki and Kingori. This role of defence can be seen in the symbolic holding of the spear.
- Besides defence, they are responsible for local development activities, such as maintaining irrigation canals and roads. They work physically for weddings, burials and catastrophes such as fires or floods. A machette and a hoe are now also sometimes symbolically given to them for this purpose. For example the Kiloviyo age groups of Mulala and Kilinga villages gave kitchens to their village schools when they retired in 2022.
- When the age group of warriors becomes too old for defence, they retire (« go to sleep ») at a big ceremony where a new age group of younger men takes over.

List of age groups since the beginning

1. Kiboron
2. Kiwandai
3. Ulkuwai
4. Kisawai
5. Nginana
6. Ulumara
7. Kisaruni
8. Kisetu
9. Aremu
10. Marishari
11. Mirisho
12. Soori
13. Siyoi
14. Dung'uri
15. Mangusha
16. Ulutalala
17. Ulutuwati
18. Ulutareto
19. Kisali
20. Sitimu
21. Stelingi
22. Roketi
23. Kakisha
24. Kiloviyo
25. Ulutuwati

WOMEN

Promotion through religion, education and recent economic developments

1) Before Christianity

Meru men were polygamists: each wife was given a farm to cultivate, bringing more wealth and increasing the number of children for the husband. Thus polygamy increased a man's social status.

2) Christianity

Women were considered as God's creations, just like men. Lutherans fought polygamy, which finally disappeared. Some women got a religious education and became pastors.

3) Education

Through education, some women became nurses, school teachers or administrative officers (10 cell leaders for example). Thus they got their own salary, and economic independence.

4) Economic developments

Men used to get high profits from coffee, but coffee is hardly cultivated any more. Bananas and milk go to the family or are sold by women, but now women may have new sources of income, such as a salary or a new economic activity started through microfinance (VICOBAAs). Moreover, access to land property is now open for women, due to changes in the Meru Constitution and the world-wide move towards gender equality.