

The Southern Kikuyu

before 1903

Volume III

L.S.B. Leakey



The Southern Kikuyu before 1903

This online edition of my father's book "The Southern Kikuyu before 1903" is being released following the increasing number of requests for the second edition which I published in 2007.

My intention is to put returns from this version towards a further hard copy paper-back edition in future. Many people have indicated their wish for a "proper" book for their library and this is my plan going forward.

The three volumes remain an incredible and authentic record. That so many have demonstrated their real thirst for the information would have pleased my father and his age mates enormously and it makes the volumes even more worthwhile.

This is the first online unabridged edition.

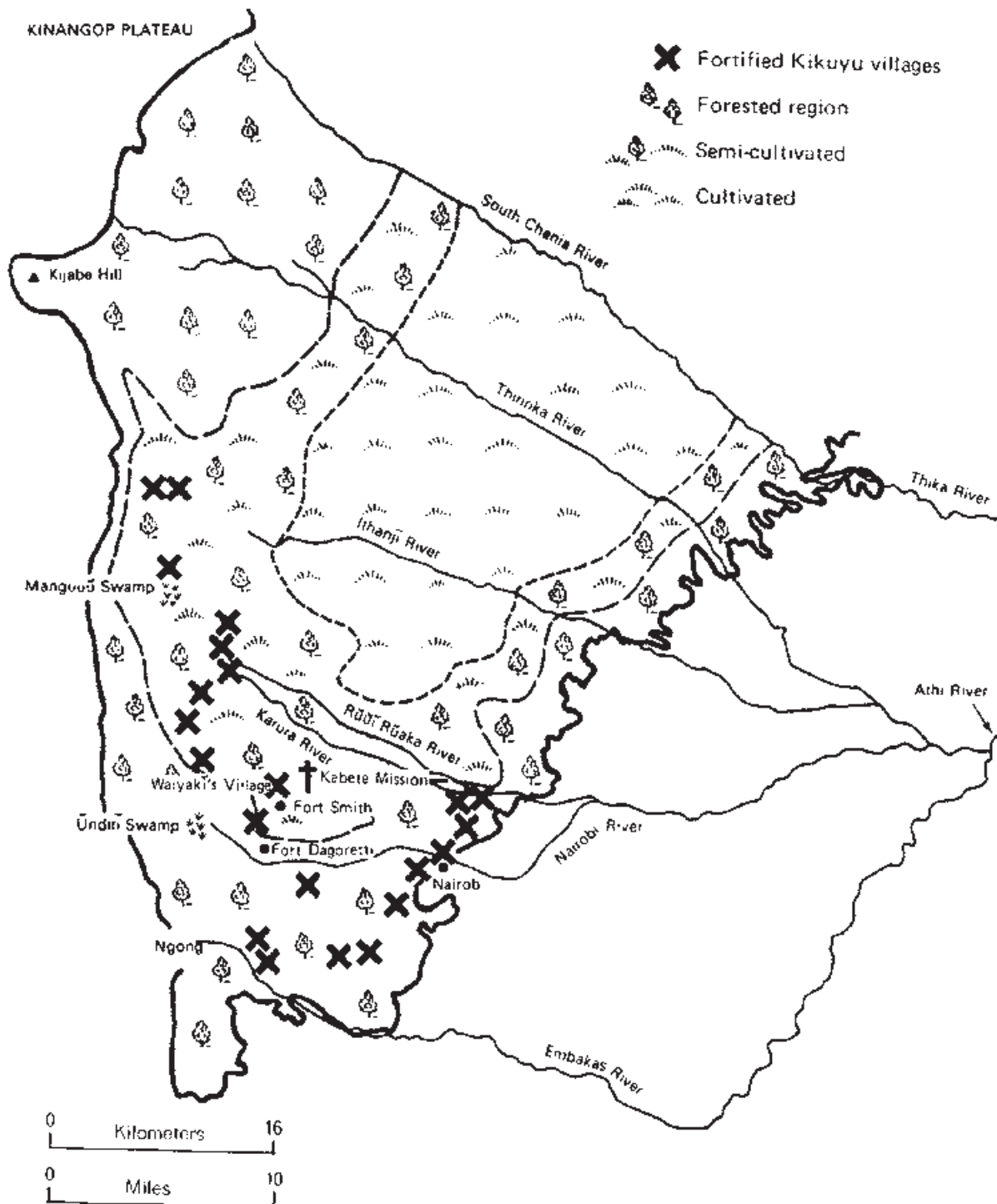
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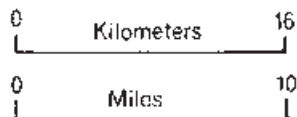
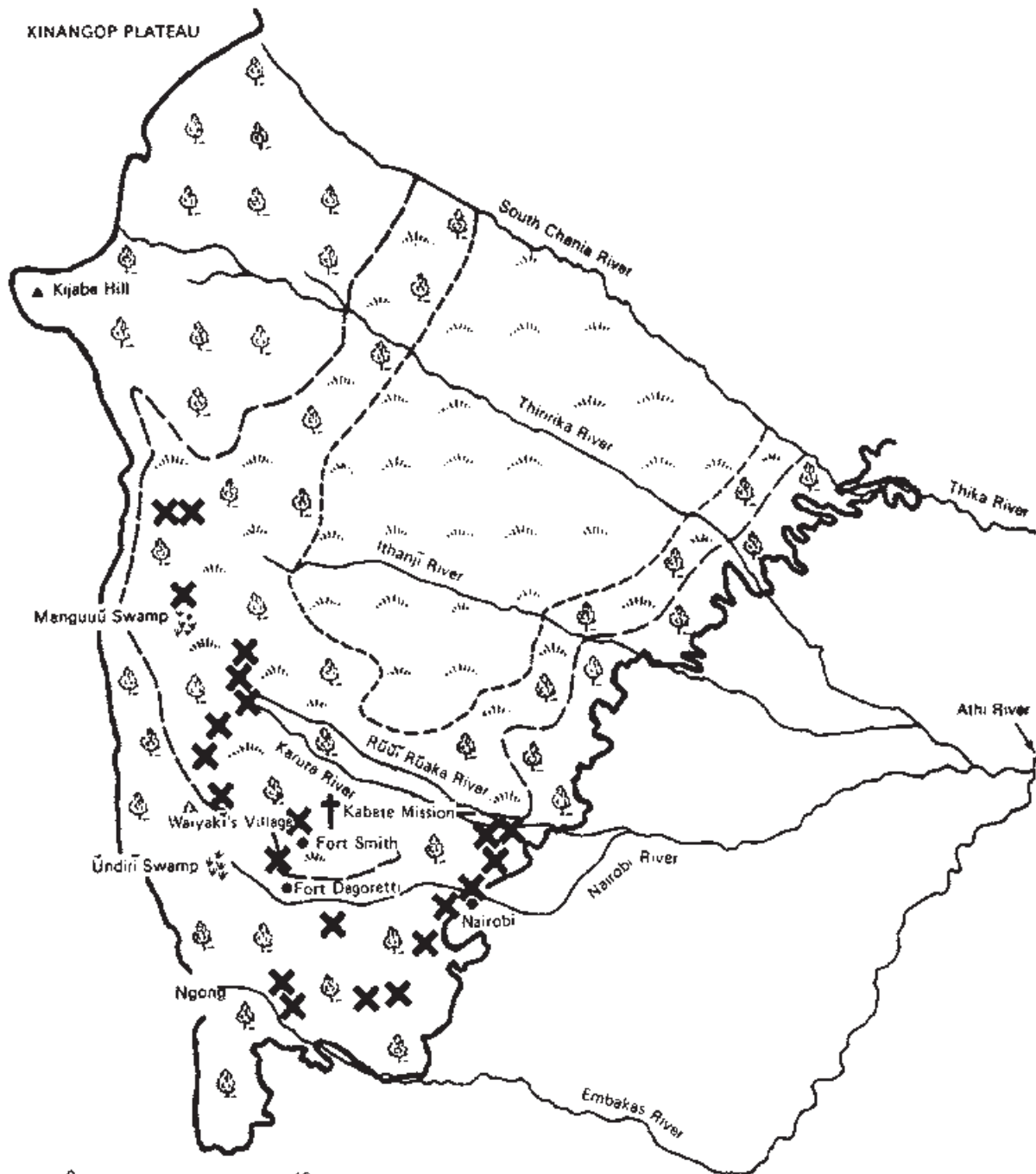
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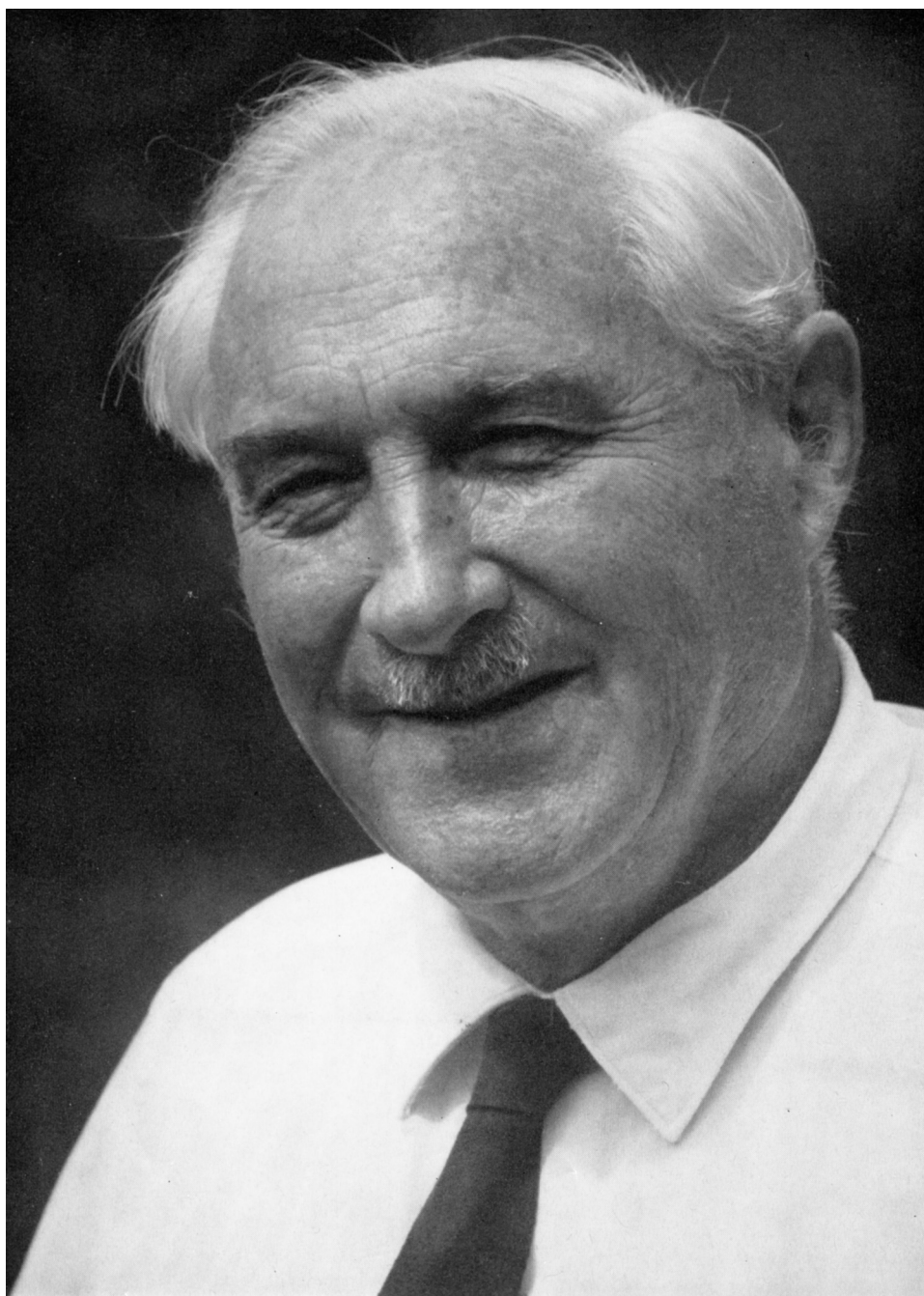
*The Southern Kikuyu
before 1903*

Volume III



XINANGOP PLATEAU





Frontispiece : L. S. B. Leakey

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Preamble

One of the often unnoticed tragedies of an era of technological advance and improving communications is the passing from living memory of customs, language and beliefs as small insular pockets of culture are overtaken by the sweep of modernization.

This impressive book is a complete record of the ways of the Kikuyu people, before and during the period of European influence which accompanied road and railway building and political and economic changes in the late 19th century. It is the major anthropological achievement of the late L.S.B. Leakey, my father, and the culmination of his lifelong study of the people among whom he was born and raised. Written in the graceful, readable style characteristic of scholarship in the thirties, it draws on the memories of the Elders whose confidant Dr. Leakey became. A once rich source of tradition and culture, passed on intact from generation to generation, was in danger of drying up without trace. This study revised and republished now, some ninety years after it was first undertaken, will secure this fascinating collection of information for posterity now that all the last inheritors of the old Kikuyu way of life are dead.

Thanks to Dr. Leakey, and to the collaborators who worked on the manuscript after his death, the Kikuyu customs and traditions have been set down - from descriptions of the daily activities of the people, digging, planting, harvesting, care of animals, trading, marriage, tribal raiding, dancing and lawgiving, to the customs connected with sex, clothing and food, and the details of ceremonies linked with *rites de passage*, religious beliefs, magic and medicine. It is a picture of successful self-regulating community, in which a strict set of rules and punishments established order and enabled the tribe to survive within its environment.

The autonomy of tribal life all over the world is now being eroded, for better or worse. But this well-rounded study, intricate in its mass of detail, yet straightforward in approach, seeks to make no assertions or comparisons with other cultures. It will thus be an important unbiased primary source for social anthropologists, ethnologists and social scientists, as well as being of great value to all those interested in Africa and its history.

By popular demand, I am publishing the Third unabridged Edition in high quality paperback format.

Richard Leakey

September, 2019

Printed and published in the Republic of Kenya.

Foreword

This study of the Kikuyu people as they were in the past is being published forty years after the manuscript was completed and four years after Louis' death. That it has finally seen the light of day is due to the dedication and unremitting hard work of my sister-in-law Gladys Beecher and of Jean Ensminger, now a postgraduate student of anthropology at Northwestern University, to whom both my sons and I are deeply grateful.

In spite of his absorbing interest in the prehistory of East Africa Louis had long been interested in recording the customs of the Kikuyu people since he had been brought up among them and knew their language as he did English. He also felt the urgency of recording their traditional customs for the benefit of their descendants before contact with Europeans had altered them beyond recognition.

This project was made possible during 1937 by an unexpected two-year grant from the Rhodes Trust, in Oxford. Louis had some hesitation in accepting, since he was deeply involved with prehistoric research, but the opportunity seemed too good to miss and was unlikely ever to be repeated. Accordingly, we moved to Kenya and after a preliminary stay with Chief Koinange at Kiambaa, not far from Nairobi, where Louis negotiated with councils of elders, we settled into camp at Nakuru, 100 miles north of Nairobi. Louis was accompanied by two Kikuyu elders who had been designated to give him information; while he worked with them I excavated a Neolithic site.

The methods Louis used to record the mass of information he obtained and to check and verify it are described in his Preface. It was a gargantuan task, if it was to be carried out with the thoroughness and attention to detail that Louis considered essential. The work finally ran into three volumes and amounted to 650,000 words. Louis steadfastly refused to abbreviate the manuscript and insisted that it should be published *in toto* or not at all. This led to it being rejected by a number of publishers who would have been willing to publish a shorter version.

The manuscript was stored away for years when some parts were lost and some destroyed by insects. During this time Louis made spasmodic attempts to find a publisher but it was not until 1968 that

negotiations with an East African press promised success. These negotiations also broke down in the end, and eventually Academic Press undertook publication. Louis then began revising the manuscript with the assistance of Jean Ensminger, who was considering taking up anthropology as a career when she returned to U.S.A.

When he died in 1972, Louis had revised some chapters but by far the greater part had to be corrected and reorganised before the manuscript could be published. I then approached my sister-in-law Gladys Beecher and we agreed that the work could not be submitted to the publishers until the Kikuyu words and phrases had been corrected for spelling and checked by someone with her expert knowledge of the language. Gladys most kindly undertook to tackle this aspect of the work, but at the time, neither she nor I had any conception of the monumental task ahead of her. As it turned out, not only was her familiarity with the Kikuyu language of inestimable value, but her knowledge of botany enabled her to check and correct the names of plants and trees used by the Kikuyu for ceremonial and other purposes.

Jean Ensminger was still in East Africa at this time and continued to work on some chapters of the book, but we realised that to reorganise, correct and retype the whole manuscript would require at least six months. Jean most generously agreed to devote her time to the work and delay her postgraduate study for one year, provided she could receive a minimal subsistence allowance. This was made possible by the kindness of the L.S.B. Leakey Foundation, of Pasadena, California, who voted a grant to assist both Gladys and Jean. In fact, Jean did not complete the correcting and typing for just over one year.

It gives me immense pleasure to see this work in print; I believe it to be one of the best studies Louis ever carried out and I know that its eventual publication was one of his most cherished ambitions. I thank most warmly Gladys Beecher, Jean Ensminger and all those who helped them to bring it to fruition.

M. D. Leakey

June, 1977

Editors' Preface

In this book Dr Leakey tried, with the help of his committees of Kikuyu elders, to paint a complete picture of life as it was lived in South Kikuyu country in the last century. His picture is of a tribe living, as doubtless many other tribes did, within its own area, very much to itself, and with few outside contacts.

Within the tribe, so long as it kept to itself, everyone was provided for in one way or another. Individuality was discouraged. There were rules and regulations governing every aspect of life and the rules had to be obeyed. Those who kept all the rules were good and righteous, and those who broke them were evil, as they might bring ceremonial uncleanness and bad luck to their families by so doing. Purification ceremonies were frequently performed to put right anything that had gone wrong, and law breakers were heavily fined. A habitual offender, however, could not be tolerated and became an outcast.

The detailed rules of behaviour are set out in this book. The countryside is described and the daily avocations of its people—digging, planting, harvesting, clearing new ground when this was necessary, the care of flocks and herds, the planning and building of homesteads, tribal raiding, trading, marriage, dancing and the administration of justice. All these are set out along with customs connected with sex, clothing and food, and the ceremonies performed in connection with *rites de passage*, when a person, or group of persons, passed from one stage of life to the next, and took on a new set of responsibilities. The old Kikuyu religious beliefs are described too, and the work of medicine-men, both in making magic and in dealing with sickness. The overall picture is of people going about their business in a community that provided everyone with a place and an occupation, and that made use of the natural resources at its disposal.

At the end of the nineteenth century the railway to Uganda was built, and it passed through the edge of South Kikuyu country. The Protectorate of British East Africa was established, and later Kenya became a British Colony. Kikuyu country became linked by road as well as by rail with other areas; towns were built, many people left home and went to work in other parts of the country, and the Kikuyu people no longer lived as an enclosed community.

With changed conditions many old customs have, of course, become obsolete. Many could not be practised, anyhow, in urban or semi-urban society, and many of the Kikuyu people have become Christians, and no longer practise the old religious ceremonies. Moreover, now, since Kenya has become an independent state, the Kikuyu are part of the Kenyan nation, which is internationally recognised, and which plays a part in international affairs. They have become, as it were, citizens of the world, but they will be interested in this record of their tribal past. Dr Leakey had meant to write another book describing how life has changed for the Kikuyu people from last century to modern times. It is our loss that he was never able to do so.

When we began work on this manuscript we had no idea of the magnitude of the work that remained to be done. We were working from a draft of a three-volume manuscript written nearly forty years ago, but never fully revised, proof-read, or organised for publication. Our first task was to familiarise ourselves with the text, at the same time indexing all of the Kikuyu words and Kikuyu names of trees and plants, as many still needed to be translated or identified. As with any manuscript, there were a great many editorial corrections to be made for spelling and grammar, as well as repetitious passages to be deleted.

A great deal of reorganisation also had to be done, as the manuscript was still basically in the form it had taken during Dr Leakey's discussions and interviews with the elders. In the course of this reorganisation and cross-checking we discovered some minor, and a few important, contradictions in the text, probably because the notes for different chapters came from different discussions with the elders, and in some cases from entirely different elders. Such contradictions are, of course, to be expected in research of this kind, and can in some cases be attributed to local variations, or alternative modes of behaviour. What made the contradictions unusually difficult to resolve in this case was the fact that all of the elders whom Dr Leakey had consulted in this work, as well as Dr Leakey himself, were no longer living. In fact, there are no elders living today who are old enough to have participated as adults in the ceremonies and social life of the 1880s and 1890s, which is the era with which this book deals. We were extremely fortunate, however, to have had the help of two elders (now in their seventies and eighties) who had made themselves familiar with these traditions, and who felt that they ought to be recorded. They were able, in almost all cases, to help us sort out the contradictions, to clarify confused passages, to correct Kikuyu mis-spellings due to typographical errors, and to translate difficult Kikuyu passages, especially those in the songs, which have all but been forgotten today. We tried, when a

meaning was doubtful, to get confirmation from more than one person before deciding what we ought to say, and this was usually possible. We regret that a few words remain untranslated, and that some passages are vague or ambiguous.

Dr Leakey wrote his book in the present tense, and this has been changed to the past tense. The present tense, where it is used, refers to the time of publication, and not to the time the manuscript was written (unless so indicated as 1939), but beyond this, little effort has been made to "modernise" the book from an anthropological standpoint. Whatever Dr Leakey might or might not have done along these lines, we were not able, nor did we desire, to make any vast alterations of this nature. The methodology, research and theory of this book, therefore, stand as written in 1939.

We are most grateful to all the people who have so kindly helped us. For the many hours which they spared us, we wish especially to thank Ex-Senior-Chief Josiah Njonjo and Mr Ishmael Ithong'o, and the people whom they consulted. We are particularly grateful to Mr Kirika, and also Mr Kanuri, Miss Kabuye, Dr Gillett, Dr Bally and Dr Ojiambo, who all helped us with the botanical section, to Dr Kariuki and Dr J. Cooper who helped us with veterinary terms, and to Dr Mwathi for his help with medical ones. Thanks are also due to Mrs D. Bolnick, Mrs E. Ensminger, Mr J. Mead, Miss I. Sedgwick, Mrs O'Meara, Miss A. Thurston, Mr C. Trapnell and the Church Missionary Society for other assistance.

Working on another person's manuscript is not easy, but we hope that the result of our efforts will be of value, and that Dr Leakey would have given his approval to it.

G. S. B. Beecher and J. Ensminger

Nairobi, 1977

Preface

Having been born and bred among the Kikuyu tribe and having grown up speaking their language as easily as I do English, I had long planned to write an account of their tribal customs, but my archaeological researches from 1926 to 1936 caused me to postpone undertaking this work. Ever since my childhood I have taken every possible opportunity to learn the details of Kikuyu life and customs, and much of this information has been collected in notebook form.

Since early childhood, I was always painfully aware that many matters were withheld from me, partly on account of my youth and partly because I was a white man. Even the fact that I took part in modified initiation rites in company with boys of my own age and became a recognised member of the *Mūkanda* initiation age-group did not open the doors to all the information that I wanted. There was much which, by age-long custom, could be imparted only to those of the status of *kīama* elders (council elders).

In 1934 I paid the requisite fees and was admitted as an elder of the first or junior grade, and in 1938 I became an elder of the second grade. In this way I became entitled to information that I could not otherwise be given.

As I could not become a third grade elder until I had children of my own attaining the age of puberty, and as I could not become a fourth grade elder unless I wished to have initiation ceremonies centred on my own homestead, it was clear that I should not get all the information that I needed through my ordinary means of contact with the tribe.

Therefore, when, in 1937, I came out from England with a grant from the Rhodes Trust to start writing my account of the customs of the Kikuyu tribe, it was clear that I first had to find some other means of obtaining and checking certain categories of information. Through the medium of Senior Chief Koinange, I was able to explain the position to a large number of senior and influential tribal elders. I pointed out that inevitable changes were accompanying European civilisation and education, and a great many of their ancient rites and ceremonies had already ceased to be practised; it seemed likely that when the present generation of elders died much of the information would be

lost for ever. I then pointed out that the ancient Britons were living in much the same state of culture as themselves when the Romans brought their civilisation to Britain, and that we, the descendants of the ancient Britons, knew little about the customs of our forefathers because the Romans had not left any detailed accounts of ancient British law and custom. I stressed that their own descendants would be in much the same position of ignorance if a detailed account of Kikuyu law and custom was not prepared now, while there were still elders living who could describe the position as it was at the end of the nineteenth century, when European influence first began to make itself felt. I urged that for the sake of their own descendants, if not for any other reason, I should be allowed to have information which, as a white man, and as one who was only a second grade elder, I was not really entitled to receive. I further asked to be allowed to prepare this information in book form.

In due course I was given the necessary permission, subject to certain minor exceptions, and I set to work to obtain the information I needed with the full consent and co-operation of the elders.

My method of work was as follows: using the information that I already possessed as a basis, I sat with groups of senior elders and took down from them detailed notes on the various subjects I wished to deal with. After obtaining notes on, for example, birth customs, from such a group, I worked over these notes with a small committee of selected elders and prepared a first draft of my chapter on that subject. My small committee consisted of the four following elders: Rūhiū wa Rībīro, Mbatia wa Gatūmūga, Gaturu wa Mūrīthi and Macaria wa Kamau. Fresh information was obtained, for we were able to work slowly with ample time, whereas when working with the larger group, I had to work fast because they were men drawn from a wide area who wished to return to their homes as soon as possible.

Having obtained a satisfactory first draft of a chapter, I collected a second large group of elders distinct from those who gave me the first set of notes. I and the four members of my small committee met them and presented the facts to them as I had recorded them in my first draft. They were asked to comment on them. This process resulted in a certain amount of correction, and many new details were obtained. Moreover, by checking with an entirely different group, I was able to discover which facts were local variations and which were customs of much wider application.

Having obtained a first draft and these additional comments for most of my chapters, I took the two best members of my committee to Nakuru, where I prepared my second draft with their continual

guidance and help. For the more complicated chapters, the data in the second draft were presented once more before a small group of senior elders back in Kikuyu country, and approved by them, with occasional minor corrections, as representing the facts.

Certain chapters in the book were not dealt with in this way for special reasons. For my chapter entitled "Magic", as well as for the accounts of magical ceremonies conducted by a medicine-man (*mündũ mügo*), I obtained my information from a special committee of eight elderly members of the profession, including some who were general practitioners, and one specialist in each of the following matters: herbal remedies, divination and magical protection. Working with this committee I obtained my preliminary notes and then, under the guidance of the whole committee, I prepared the first draft of the chapter on these subjects. I then asked them to appoint two of their number to assist me in preparing the still more detailed second draft.

As far as the chapter on "The *Itũika* Ceremonies" (handing over of tribal responsibility from one ruling age-group to the other) is concerned, I had to work on a less satisfactory basis. Although there were many men alive who belonged to the generation which took over the authority at the last *itũika* ceremony of the nineteenth century, only a few were left who actually took part in the ceremonies as delegates representing their generations. Of these I was able to find only two who had sufficiently clear memories to be of value. In addition to this, there was some political objection to my receiving more information, and I believe, frankly, that the account in that chapter is far from complete.

The chapter on "Witchcraft" is the least satisfactory in the whole book, for no one who in the past had been a genuine dealer in witchcraft (*ũrogi*) survived, or, if any were still alive, the ever present risk of being found out and put to death made them unwilling to admit to it.

Readers will note that my chapter on "Crafts and Industry" is little more than a catalogue of the Kikuyu objects of material culture with the briefest of descriptions. For this I myself am solely to blame. The time available to me for obtaining my material and for writing the book was limited, and I judged it (rightly or wrongly) to be more important to obtain as full an account as possible of law and custom. I should have liked to expand the chapter on "Crafts and Industry" into a whole book, had this been possible.

I feel sure that there are people who will be critical of the fact that I confined my account to that section of the Kikuyu tribe that lives south of the Chania River; I will therefore meet this criticism in advance. The laws and customs of the Kikuyu of the Fort Hall and

Nyeri districts are basically the same as those of the southern section of the tribe, but in matters of detail they differ so significantly that a generalised account could only be misleading. It would be necessary, in a book dealing with the whole tribe, to add greatly to the length of each chapter and show what the differences in each custom were in different areas. This would in turn have required a much greater length of time than was at my disposal.

Another criticism that will certainly be levelled against my book is that it is a straightforward description of customs, without a critical analysis and without any attempt to compare and contrast the customs with those of other tribes. I plead guilty. I frankly believe that my first duty in writing this account is to lay the facts before other social anthropologists, and record them for the descendants of the Kikuyu who have provided the information. It is not without fear of being accused of false modesty that I state that I am fully aware that this book is both wholly inadequate and incomplete. Any book that is based completely upon second-hand information instead of upon a combination of information and personal knowledge is inevitably bound to be incomplete, and this book deals mainly with Kikuyu customs as they were up to the end of the nineteenth century, before I was born.

I have made the account as full and as complete as my time and opportunities would allow, and it is my sincere hope that in the few years that still elapse before the old generation of Kikuyu pass on to the spirit world, some of the young, educated Kikuyu will take my book, and, using it as a basis, obtain and record much more information from committees of elders called together by themselves.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to all those who have helped in this work. The Trustees of the Rhodes Trust generously provided the funds which enabled me to devote my time to this task, and words cannot adequately express the measure of my thanks to them. The Kikuyu elders, once the reasons were explained to them, co-operated with me wonderfully, and have made possible an account which would otherwise have been impossibly superficial. Government chiefs, headmen and, more particularly, Senior Chief Koinange, did everything in their power to help me, and Chief Koinange added to his other kindnesses by placing his guest house at the disposal of my wife and myself whenever we wanted it. The Kenya Government, and especially the officials with whom I came into contact in Kikuyu country, gave me every possible assistance, and I particularly want to thank Colonel Anderson, who put a Government bungalow at our disposal when we most needed it.

It is with regret that I have to record that, although they gave me every assistance, some Government officials expressed the view that this study was of "purely academic interest and had no practical value". From this view I differ very strongly indeed. I believe that it is impossible to study and understand the present day problems in the Kikuyu tribe without a knowledge of what their laws and customs were before the impact of European civilisation.

Special thanks go to Mrs Spiers of Nakuru, who very kindly undertook the original typing of my manuscript, a task made doubly difficult, I fear, by the illegibility of my writing, and I cannot thank her enough.

Finally, I extend my warmest thanks to all those elders who gave so much of their time to help me record the facts correctly, and in particular to Rũhiũ wa Rĩbiro, whose able mind and clear way of expressing intricate matters made the work infinitely easier.

L. S. B. Leakey

Nairobi, 1939

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Plate in Volume III

Plate (appears between pages 1278 and 1279)

Frontspiece: L. S. B. Leakey

16 Group of Elders

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Orthographical Notes

The Kikuyu spelling used in this book is that which was recommended by the United Kikuyu Language Committee, and is what has been used in A. R. Barlow's *Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom*, T. G. Benson's *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* and A. R. Barlow's *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*, edited by T. G. Benson and the Kikuyu Bible.

The Kikuyu alphabet used is that in T. G. Benson's *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, with *mb*, *nd*, *ng*, *ng'*, *nj*, *ny*, and *th* treated as separate consonants, as they represent, in fact, specific sounds; the alphabet, therefore, is in the following order: *a*, *b*, *c*, *e*, *g*, *h*, *i*, *ĩ*, *k*, *m*, *mb*, *n*, *nd*, *ng*, *ng'*, *nj*, *ny*, *o*, *r*, *t*, *th*, *u*, *ũ*, *w*, and *y*. (*D* and *j* are never used without an *n*, and Kikuyu has no *f*, *l*, *p*, *q*, *s*, *v*, *x*, or *z*.)

Pronunciation

The Vowels

a, *i*, and *o* are pronounced as in Swahili and French.

e is pronounced as in Swahili, and like the French *è*.

u as in Swahili, and like the *o* in the English word *who*.

ĩ is half-way between *e* and *i*.

ũ is half-way between *o* and *u*.

All these can be either long or short. This sometimes is shown in writing by the use of two vowels (e.g. *aanake*), but only if there is a grammatical reason for it (*aanake* is *a-anake*, where the first *a* shows that the word is plural), or where two words are differentiated only in length, so that there would be confusion if they were written the same.

The Consonants

b is pronounced with the lips not quite touching; *c* is usually pronounced in Southern Kikuyu as *sh*, though in some parts of Kikuyu country it is pronounced as *ch*; *g* is as in the English *get* (never as in the English *gem*), but with the back of the throat not quite closed; *h* and *m*

as in English; *mb* as one sound, like the *mb* in the English words *tremble* and *humble*; *n* as in English; *nd* as in the English word *and*; *ng* as in the Southern English words *hunger* and *anger*, or the Northern English pronunciation of *singing*; *ng'* as in the Southern English *singing*; *nj* as the *nge* in the English word *tangerine*; *ny* as in the name *Sonya*; *r* as in English, but with the tongue not quite touching the teeth or palate; *t* as in English; *th* as in the English *the* or *this*; *w* and *y* as in English.

Archaic Forms

In many of the old sayings, old songs and old prayers quoted in this book there are words and expressions that are archaic in form, and the spelling of some of them is according to the pronunciation of North Kikuyu. This is because they have been handed down in their ancient form. Variations naturally arise in different parts of a widespread tribe, but old expressions often retain the old form.

connection with military organisation, or with the council of elders, was bestowed only according to merit, and no man became a *mũthamaki* because of his social rank. Further, no man automatically inherited the position formerly held by his father. The most that he could do was to inherit the outstanding ability of his father, and, through this ability, rise to the position his father once held.

In the study of Kikuyu law and justice we shall first of all consider the various grades of council elders and the qualifications for these grades, and we shall then pass on to a study of the judicial system, after which we shall study general matters of legislation and execution of laws.

The Four Grades of Kĩama Elders

Every male Kikuyu, when he married, was qualified to become an elder of the first or junior grade, even though he was still a member of a military regiment and was an active warrior. Most men paid the fee which was required of them in order to become a *mũthuri wa mbũri imwe* (elder of one sheep) as soon as possible after marriage. The fee had to be paid to the local *kĩama* council elders of the village in which the man lived, and it consisted of one ram. In addition to the local council elders, one or two elders from neighbouring villages were always called in on the day that the fee was handed over so that they might be witnesses to the fact that the fee had been paid.

On the day appointed for the man to hand over his fee, the local elders and those specially invited from other villages met together, the ram was handed over, taken out into the bush, and there slaughtered and eaten. The new candidate had the right to allocate the *rũcutĩ* (sacrum with the lumbar and caudal vertebrae attached) and the skin, to two elders of his own choosing. These two parts of the animal were known as *maringa* (allotted portions), and the two elders who received them became the principal witnesses should anyone at some later date try to deny that the man had duly paid his fee to become an elder of the first or junior grade. The new candidate was shown exactly how to cut up and skin an animal which had been given to council elders, and taught how the various joints were to be apportioned. He himself was given the following joints from the animal to eat with any special friends among the junior elders: a *guoko* (foreleg), an *ikengeto* (half-saddle joint), the *gĩtũngo kĩa mara* (a portion of the intestines), part of the *ini* (liver), the *kũga* (the first three ribs of each side with part of the sternum attached), and the *ngingo* (neck).

In all matters affecting a whole territorial unit, as distinct from a village, the local councils sent delegates to a territorial council, and it was the *athamaki* who were most outstanding within their own local council who were sent as delegates.

Similarly, in matters affecting several territorial units, or the country as a whole, each territory sent four delegates to a larger council, and a man who was very outstanding might find himself representing the whole of his territorial unit. His fame was then assured, and he would after that be in great demand in connection with appeal cases, as we shall see presently.

Judicial Procedure

One of the main functions of the local and the territorial councils was the administration of justice, and all third grade elders spent a lot of time hearing civil and criminal cases. The procedure in connection with both civil and criminal cases was essentially the same, but in civil cases the court had not only to come to a decision as to the facts of the case, but also to decide on the amount of compensation that had to be paid, if it was a case involving compensation. In criminal cases all that they had to decide were the facts, for the fines were fixed by law, and every council leader had to know exactly what the customary fines were for every type of criminal act.

Disputes and Cases

Two Members of the same Family

Any disputes arising between members of a single family were settled by the elders of that family, and the case was never taken to the village *kĩama* council to be discussed by people not related to the disputants.

Even in cases of murder or manslaughter within a family, for example of a brother, father, uncle, cousin, or any other patrilineal blood relation, the case would be discussed and settled by the elders of the family, and would never be taken to court. Moreover, one member of a family never had to pay compensation for a wrong committed against a member of his own family, even in the case of murder, "For how can a family fine itself, or pay compensation to itself"? All that

of the case, were made known all over the country to the other *kīama* councils so that it might in future be used as a precedent.

Legislation and Execution of Laws

New laws could be made only by the council elders, and they were made from time to time by the elders in council after much consultation. The elders of one territorial unit would perhaps decide that some new law was necessary and would send delegates to all the other territorial units to call together all the council elders to discuss the proposed new law with them, and bring back a report as to whether it was acceptable or not. After thus consulting the elders all over the country from the Chania River to the southern boundary, a meeting would be called of representatives from every territory, who would come authorised to make decisions for those they represented.

At this council of elders from all the territories, the whole matter would be further discussed, and when the details of the new law had been agreed upon, the delegates from each territory would return to inform the elders who had sent them of the new law or laws decided upon, and to take steps to make these known to the people.

In every territorial unit the elders called in the warrior leaders, and instructed them to arrange a series of *kībaata* dances. The *kībaata* dances were held only in order to make important pronouncements to the people, so when the news spread that a *kībaata* dance was to be held, everyone knew that some important pronouncements would be made, and every family made sure that at least one of its number, or, if possible, several, should attend. Once a law had been announced at a *kībaata*, no one could plead ignorance of it.

By means of a whole series of these *kībaata* assemblies new laws were published to the whole population in the space of a very few weeks. The details of how a *kībaata* dance was arranged, and the order of proceedings, has been described in Chapter 11.

The Warrior Classes as Tribal Police

The warrior classes, besides providing the military units of the country, which were responsible for defence and for carrying out raids and attacks on the enemy, were responsible for all of what we might describe as "police duties". If the elders decided that an inveterate thief was

to defend their stock, but even so they were frequently raided by the Kikuyu when they came there. The Kikuyu, as an agricultural people, were in a more vulnerable position because they had settled villages, and when their armies were weak they could not move out of the enemy's reach, as the Maasai could. For this reason, the Kikuyu adopted the practice of building big fortified villages (*ihingo*) within and behind the forest fringe that served as a barrier between the Maasai and themselves. These fortifications were made so that a small number of Kikuyu could protect themselves from the enemy for days while messages were sent into the interior of Kikuyu country to rally other warriors for help.

Military Organisation

For military purposes, Kikuyu country was divided into a number of territorial units, each consisting of one long ridge or *rũgongo*, many miles long, and the warriors of each ridge formed a fighting unit, which was subdivided into two regiments, the senior and the junior. The senior warrior regiment was always complete and composed of nine initiation age-groups. The junior warrior regiment consisted of more recently initiated age-groups, and would become the senior regiment only when nine such initiation age-groups had been formed. Once thus completed, the junior regiment would start taking over the duties of the senior regiment, and the former regiment would be allowed to give up military activities and retire. Actually, by the time the junior regiment had been completed and taken over power, the oldest members of the senior regiment were quite advanced in years, but until they were formally relieved of their duties and had handed over the insignia of leadership to the next regiment, they were responsible for all military matters (see Chapter 18).

Each ridge or territorial unit of several miles was further divided into smaller, less formal territorial divisions called *miaki* (singular, *mwaki*), each consisting of several villages. At this level too, the fighting units were subdivided into senior and junior regiments, and each of these groups had their own leaders, called the *njama*, or warrior's council.

The warriors' leaders did not all have the same function. Some were *athigani*, whose task it was to scout in Maasai country and lead the armies into war, and others were *athamaki*, responsible for giving instructions, generally ruling over the other warriors, and acting as

Prisoners and their Treatment

From time to time, when engaged in raids into Maasai country, a Kikuyu raiding party would attack a Maasai village, and if they did so, they always killed the men, the older women, and the boys, but carried off as prisoners the girls and younger women.

It was absolutely taboo for any warrior to rape, seduce, or in any way have sexual contact with such girls and women during the raid or during the journey back to Kikuyu country, and any warrior who did so would be severely reprimanded by the others for jeopardising the raid. Moreover, once a man had brought a Maasai girl or woman back to his parents' home as his prisoner, he had to behave towards her as towards his own sisters, and having sexual contact with her would be counted as incest, "For the girl captured is as a sister or child to the captor". The normal procedure after capturing a Maasai girl or young woman was to send messages to the Maasai with the women who went trading (see Chapter 13), asking for a ransom. If the Maasai wished to ransom the girl they could do so, and they could safely come to Kikuyu country to negotiate if they brought *mũrica* (tokens of peace).

If no ransom was forthcoming, the girl prisoner became a member of the Kikuyu family, and when eventually some other Kikuyu wished to marry her and she was willing, her captor would receive the marriage payments, since she was his sister (or daughter). Thus in either event the captor profited by the affair, either in the form of ransom or marriage payments, but the idea that a warrior would take his own female prisoner as wife or concubine was utterly repulsive to the Kikuyu, because by capturing her he had become her guardian. Even in this century there were still quite a few Maasai women living in Kikuyu country who were captured as girls, and who still regarded their captors as their brothers.

Duels

Sometimes when the Maasai were raiding the Kikuyu or vice versa, the armies of the two tribes would come face to face ready for a pitched battle (*mbaara*). In such a case it was not an uncommon thing for the proceedings to start with a duel between the champion warrior (*njamba*)

Chapter 26

Magic and Divination

Like religion, magic was such an essential part of Kikuyu life that it is not really possible to divorce it from everyday life and deal with it completely in a single chapter. Moreover, the subject is so vast that a whole volume could easily be written on it.

For the purposes of this study, however, it is essential to attempt to summarise the basic principles of Kikuyu magical practices. In almost every preceding chapter, there have been references to the medicine-man or *mündũ mũgo* (professional worker in magic), and in most chapters there have also been detailed accounts of rites and ceremonies performed by a *mündũ mũgo*, or with his assistance. A large portion of this chapter, therefore, deals with this profession, and with those who practised it.

Definition of Mündũ Mũgo

It is unfortunate that there is no English word or group of words which adequately describes the functions of a *mündũ mũgo* (plural *andũ ago*). Such words as medicine-man, witch-doctor, seer, and diviner, all convey an incomplete impression of the varied specialities of *andũ ago*, and although we have used them synonymously throughout the book, in this chapter we will use only the Kikuyu, with the intention of clarifying the diverse nature of a *mündũ mũgo's* activities.

Taken as a whole, the *andũ ago* were of more than average mental ability. *Ūgo*, an abstract noun standing for the profession of the *mündũ mũgo*, was something far more comprehensive than mere magic, and the profession was one that could not be entered into light-heartedly, and moreover, one at which it was by no means easy to be successful. In fact, quite a number of those who were initiated into the profession failed to make a success of it and ceased to practice. The profession, like the medical profession today, was one that had a number of specialised branches, and once a man had been initiated and had served an

Divination and Prophecy by the Entrails of Goats and Sheep

Certain members of the *ũgo* profession had the special power of being able to see future events by examining the entrails of a slaughtered goat or sheep. This was called *kūragūra na nda ya mbūri* (to divine by the entrails of a goat or sheep). Men who acquired a reputation for being accurate in this type of prophecy were from time to time called in when an animal was slaughtered, in order that they might examine the entrails and foretell the future from them. Among the Kikuyu, however, this practice had not reached the next stage, that of deliberately slaughtering an animal in order that omens might be read in the entrails.

Quite apart from qualified members of the profession, a certain number of ordinary members of the public had this special ability to see the future in the entrails of an animal, but usually this was taken to be a sign that an individual was being “called” by the deity to enter the profession of *ũgo*, and sooner or later every man endowed with this special power became a *mündũ mũgo*.

*Andũ Ago as Specialists**In Magical Protection*

Another branch in which certain members of the profession specialised was in magical protection (*kūrigita*). General practitioners also provided a certain amount of magical protection for individual families, but the function of these specialists in magical protection was somewhat different. Their work included providing magical protection to whole districts lying on the Maasai boundary so as to prevent Maasai raids in that area, making magical means of protecting districts from disease (see Chapter 21) and locust plagues, and protecting flocks and herds from attacks by wild beasts. Very often they also specialised in the making of protective charms.

Other than their divining gourds, such specialists worked simply by means of their magic powders, of which they had a great variety over and above those which were common to all *andũ ago*. Like the specialists in divining, they were often called in to districts far removed from their own, therefore, they too, usually had two divining gourds, one for home

Chapter 27

Witchcraft (*Ūrogi*)

In the preceding chapter we have examined the practices of magic and divination as they were carried out by members of a recognised profession for the benefit of the community. This we may term the practice of beneficial magic, and there can be no doubt at all that the *andũ ago* (medicine-men) were people whose profession served an important function in the life of the community.

However, not all magic was with good intent, and there were people who practised a very different form of magic which we may call witchcraft. Whereas beneficial magic (*ũgo*) was practised openly, witchcraft (*ũrogi*) was never helpful to the person or persons against whom it was directed and was usually practised in secret.

In its extreme forms witchcraft was practised with the intent to kill those against whom it was directed. People who practised these extreme forms of witchcraft were regarded as public enemies, and whenever they were discovered they were put to a violent death. But by no means was all witchcraft of this extremely violent form. We shall therefore have to consider several quite distinct forms of witchcraft, distinguished on the one hand by their ultimate objectives, and on the other by the types of people who practised them.

Witchcraft Practised with Intent to Kill

Among the Kikuyu the practice of witchcraft with the intent to kill was forbidden by law, and strongly objected to by the public, and in consequence, those who practised it were in constant fear for their lives. It was therefore not possible to find people who could give me accurate details of this form of witchcraft, for even if I could have found such a person, he or she would never have admitted to being a *mũrogi*, and still less have consented to describe the methods employed.

There is no doubt whatever that a small proportion of *andũ ago* (medicine-men) turned to *ũrogi* (witchcraft), in some cases practising openly as *ago* and at the same time secretly practising *ũrogi*. It is most probable that these men resorted to poisoning, and thus, in part, the

punishment, if the victim did not suffer in the expected way, it was thought that he had a charm which nullified all such witchcraft, so faith in the *ũrogi* was not in the least impaired.

Preventative Witchcraft as Practised by a Blacksmith

Whereas the witchcraft that was made by warriors and members of the *Aĩthaga* clan was primarily used as a means of punishment, the form of witchcraft that was made by blacksmiths, was primarily preventative, although it was sometimes also, used as a form of punishment against an unknown person.

A blacksmith was usually requested to practice witchcraft in order to protect crops from thieves and prevent unauthorized persons from cutting down bushland and forest. Thus a man who had planted sugar-cane or another crop at a considerable distance from his homestead would call in a blacksmith to perform a ceremony of witchcraft cursing in order that any person who stole from that crop should suffer and perhaps even die. Any blacksmith was able to make witchcraft of this type, his spells and curses being potent by the mere fact that he was a blacksmith.

A person who wanted witchcraft of this protective type would brew beer and invite a blacksmith to come and drink it, at which time he told him of his requirements. No fee was payable at that time, but the blacksmith would appoint a day to carry out the ceremony with this man. The blacksmith took with him his hammer (*kĩriha*), his tongs (*mĩĩhato*), and some old bellow's nozzles. As they went to the area to be protected, the blacksmith called out loudly at every village and homestead they passed, saying that he was going to put witchcraft upon so-and-so's field or piece of land, and this information was, of course, passed on to all, so that in a short time everyone in the district knew that the man had called in a blacksmith to make witchcraft to protect his sugar-cane or yams, as the case might be. Having arrived at the plot, the blacksmith proceeded first of all to go round it counter-clockwise once, carrying his tools and the old bellows' nozzles with him. Having come back to the place from which he started, he held one of the old clay nozzles in front of him and seven times inserted his hammer head into the hole in the nozzles, saying out loud as he did so, "May any person who steals from this field (or who cuts trees from this land) be consumed by this *thenge* (curse—see Chapter 23)". The nozzles were then left in a conspicuous position on a stick. The cere-

Chapter 28

Ceremonial Purification

Throughout the preceding chapters there have been innumerable references to purification ceremonies and to ceremonial uncleanness, and we must now consider this subject in somewhat greater detail. There were several distinct forms of ceremonial uncleanness, some of which were contagious and others not. Each of these different forms could be contracted or acquired in many different ways, and while we cannot possibly consider all of these, it is necessary to discuss a wide range of examples in order to obtain a reasonably clear idea of what the Kikuyu ideas on this subject were.

The Different Forms of Uncleanness

There were five principal types of ceremonial uncleanness, each of which we must consider separately. Of these, that which was known as *thahu* was probably the commonest, uncleanness due to witchcraft (*ũrogi*) came next, uncleanness caused by dirt (*gĩko*) came third, then uncleanness due to misfortune (*rũruto*), and finally, uncleanness as a result of disease (*mũrimũ*).

Concepts of Uncleanness

Known as Thahu

Attempts have been made by earlier writers to see in *thahu* a direct connection with “taboo”, but the similarity between these two words is probably no more than a coincidence. The outward sign of the condition of *thahu* was a wasting away without visible cause, and this condition was seen in both human beings and in livestock. Any person or live animal that had been subjected to conditions which resulted in

Ceremonial Purification by Sex Acts

Although a great many of the occasions which required ceremonial sex acts were occasions for a sacrifice, rather than for purification, there were also occasions when the sex act was performed ritually as a means of purification from certain types of uncleanness. The chief idea underlying purification by sexual intercourse was that by sexual contact two people become more closely unified than by any other means, and the contagion which was inherent in all forms of uncleanness was completely transferred from the affected person to the other party. Since certain forms of uncleanness could affect only certain individuals, it was obvious that sexual intercourse with someone who was not subject to that uncleanness would remove it and render it ineffectual.

Thus a woman who had given birth in any unnatural way, that is, whose baby had been born feet first, or who had had twins, or had had a child with six fingers, or any other unnatural feature, was required to have sexual intercourse with some man other than her husband before she could again resume normal relations with him. The underlying idea was that the man called in to perform the act of purification could not be affected adversely by the uncleanness, although it would pass to him by the act of sexual contact with the "unclean" wife. Having passed to the stranger, the *thahu* became sterilised, whereas if the legal husband of the woman had contact with her, the uncleanness would pass to him and it would become immediately active, because he and his wife were legally one and the same person.

Another and different act of purification was that which took place between a husband and wife a month after she had had a normal birth, and which was called *gūtinia mīruru ya mwana* (the sacrifice for ending the uncleannesses of birth). In such a case, the birth having been perfectly normal, there was no sexual uncleanness on the part of the mother, but the child was unclean because of his or her contact with the birth blood (*mīruru*), and the mother was unclean because of her contact with the unclean child. The uncleanness of the child was removed by means of a ritual sex act between the mother and the legal father. The father in this case contracted the uncleanness of the birth blood, but as an adult male he was not subject to this form of uncleanness, so that once the *thahu* had been transferred to him it became sterilised and the child and mother were freed from it.

In the ceremony of *kūhukūra*, which was part of all death ceremonies, members of the Kikuyu initiation guild provided for ritual sex acts

New cycle begins:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Mūirūngū (wa Ithong'o)</i> | 1. <i>Mandūti</i> |
| 2. <i>Mūrigarū (wa Ithong'o)</i> | 2. <i>Mathaathi</i> |

Thus, every tenth generation started off a new cycle with the same inherited and the same specific name as the generation nine before it, and in each four successive generations the same name appeared twice, once as an inherited name and once as a specific name. As we have already stated, the generation that was in power in 1939 was that known as *Mwangi* (whose inherited name was *Iregi wa Ithong'o*), but had it not been for the presence of Europeans in the country, which upset all normal procedure, the generation known as *Mūirūngū* (or *Maina wa Ithong'o*) would by then have taken over control.

The older members of the *Mūirūngū* generation were about 70 years old in 1939, and not only had children who would form the *Mūrigarū* generation, but also grandchildren who would form the *Mandūti* generation that could have started off a new nine generation cycle.

There have been suggestions in two books published by Kikuyu writers, *An African Speaks for His People*, by Parmenas Githĩndu and *Facing Mount Kenya*, by Jomo Kenyatta, that the *ituika* ceremonies started only with the generation called *Iregi*, who revolted against the despotic rule of a king called Gĩkũyũ, who was the grandchild of the original Gĩkũyũ, the founder of the tribe. So far as my information goes there is not the slightest evidence that the *ituika* ceremonies started only with the generation called *Iregi*, and in fact all the senior elders with whom I discussed the matter disagreed with this.

The two writers above mentioned did not say whether they meant the *Iregi* generation of the present nine generation cycle, or that of the preceding nine generation cycle, but it may be presumed that they did not refer to the *Iregi* of the present cycle, since the whole system of the generation *riika* was based upon the *ituika* ceremony, and we know that there were four such generations before the *Iregi* within the present cycle.

The Ituika Ceremony

As a preliminary to the *ituika* ceremonies, which were the ceremonies carried out in order to complete the handing over of power from one generation *riika* to the next, the leaders of the generation *riika* that was