

# The Southern Kikuyu

before 1903

Volume I

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.

RICHARD LEAKEY – NAIROBI, KENYA

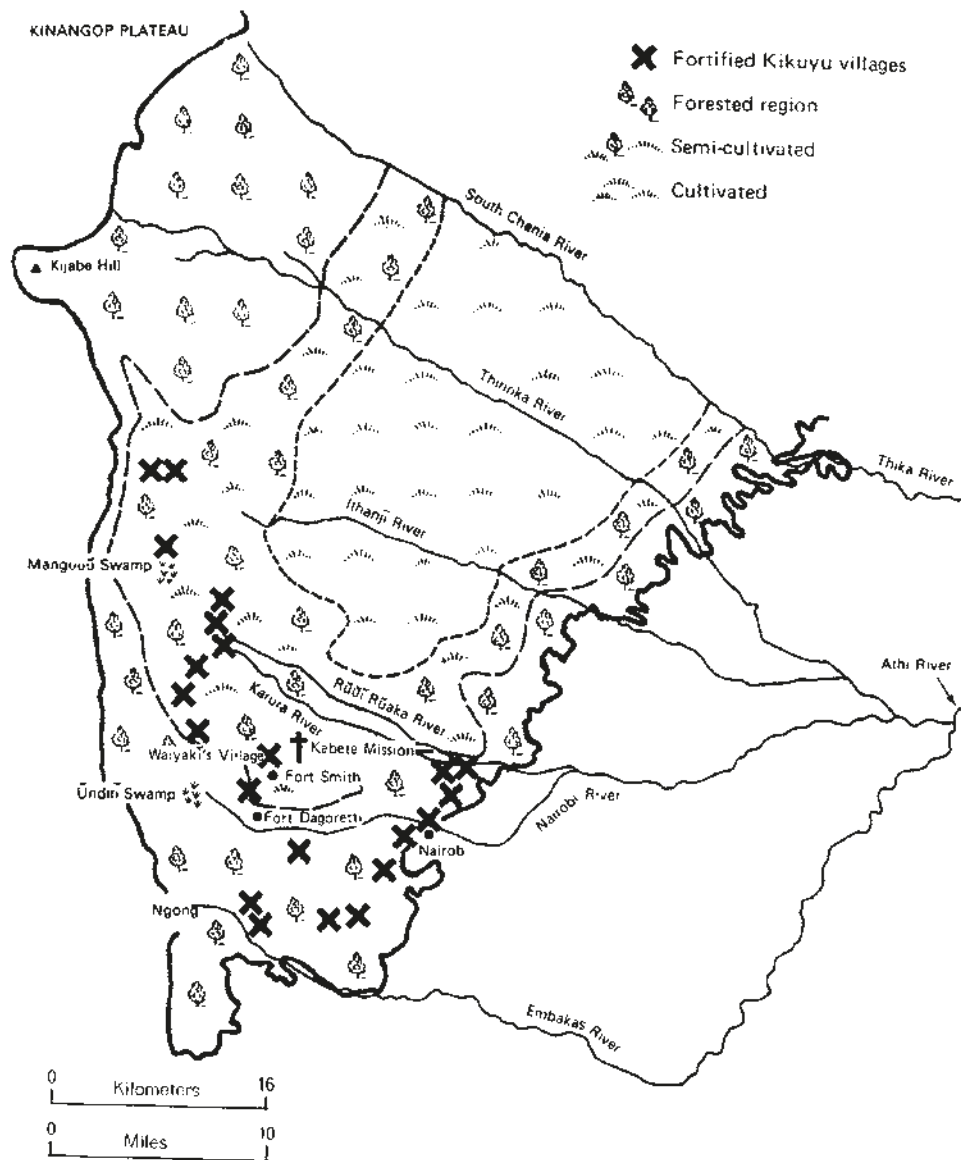
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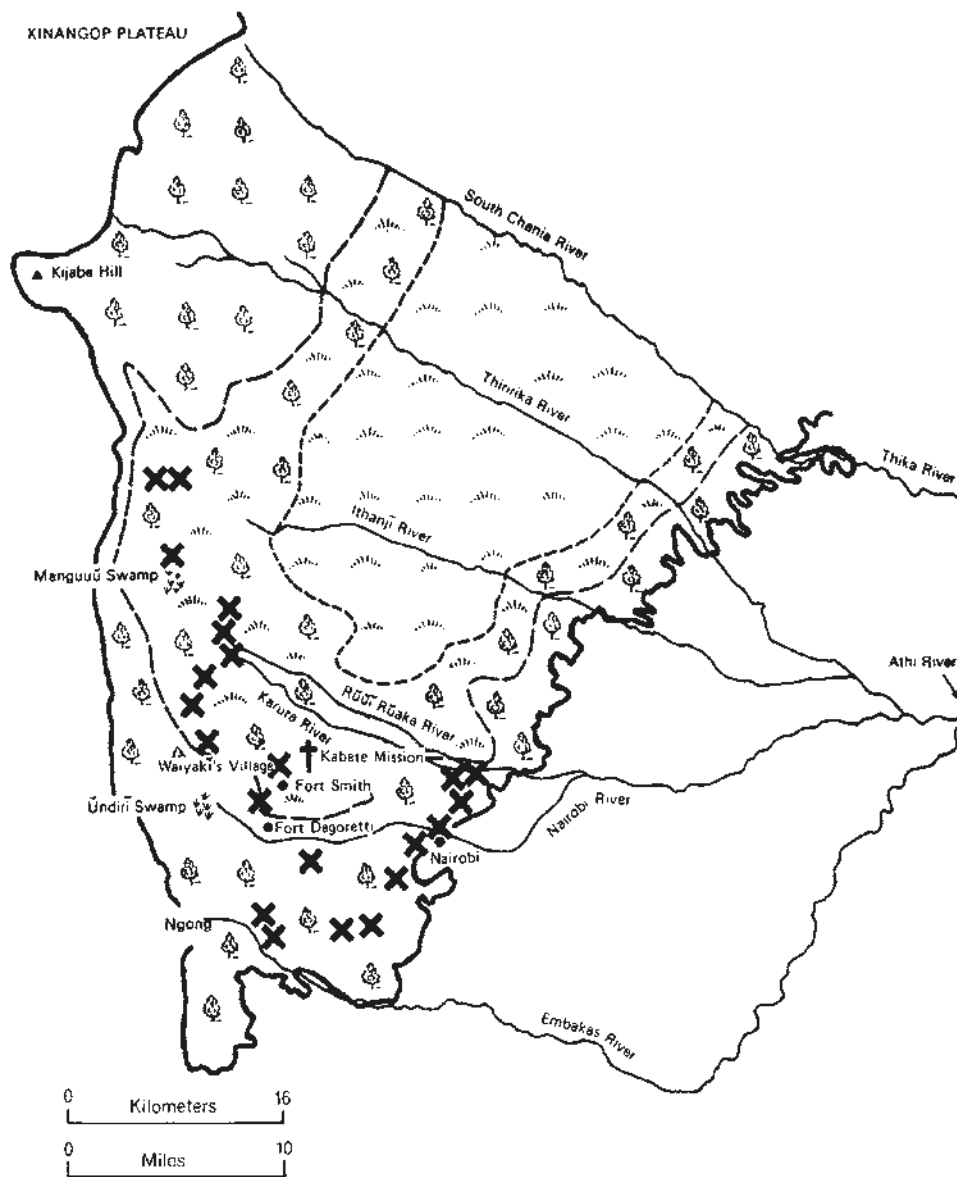


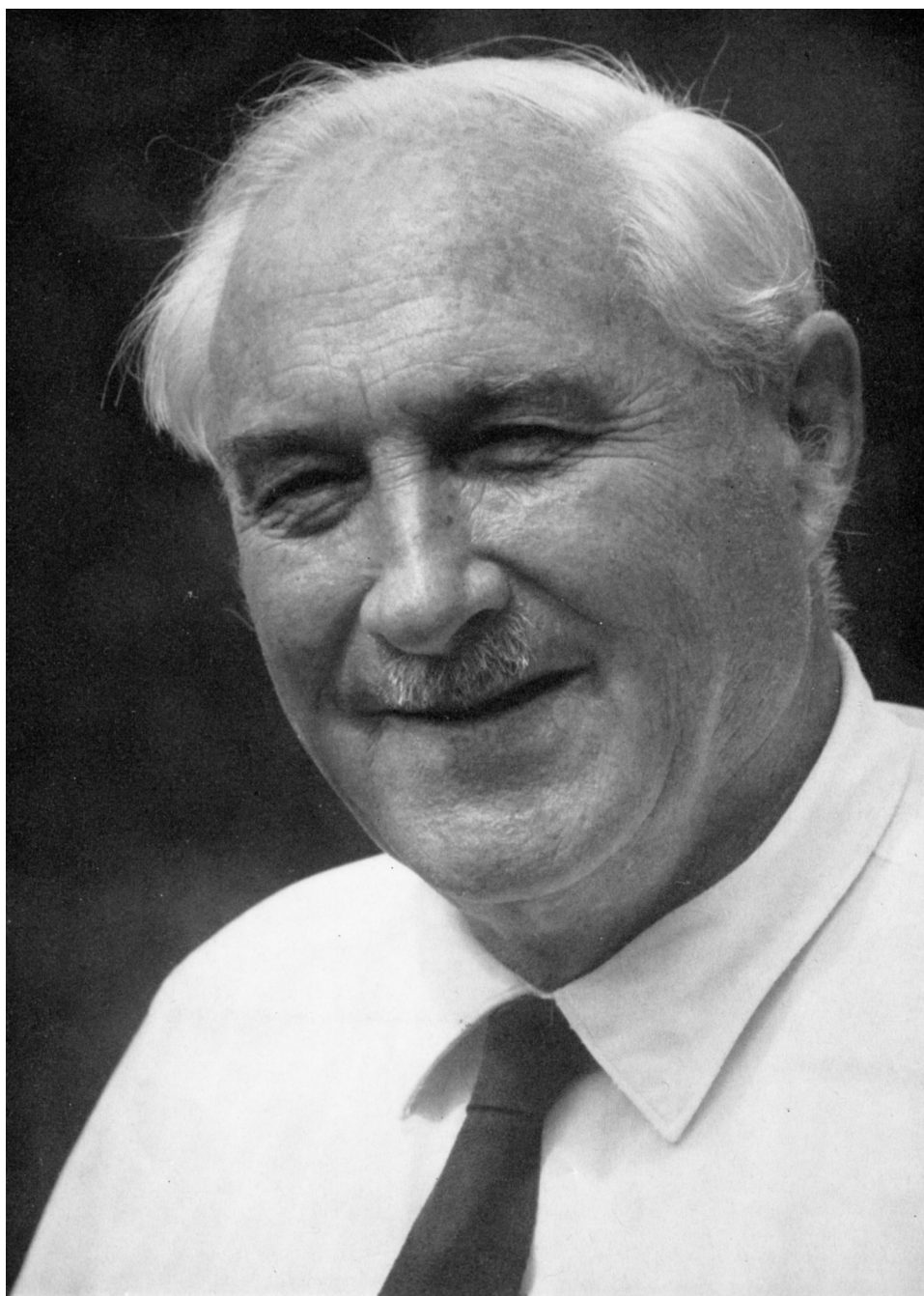
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*The Southern Kikuyu  
before 1903*

*Volume I*







*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

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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 wide-spread tribe, but old expressions often retain the old form.

## *Chapter 1*

# *I: Introductory Study of Kikuyu Social Organisation*

### ***Introduction***

It is commonly believed among those who know nothing of African peoples, that the so-called primitive tribes lead a “simple life,” and it is to be hoped that those who read this book will begin to realise that the life of the individual Kikuyu before European contact was just as complex as that of any so-called civilised person, even if the complexity was of a different type.

A Kikuyu individual's life was punctuated by what are known to anthropologists as *rites de passage*, ceremonies which mark the passage of an individual or group of individuals from one stage of life to the next, at which time new responsibilities are undertaken towards each other. In fact, a complex social structure was clearly demarcated on the basis of these stages of life, with each individual having well defined responsibilities, according to his stage of life, not only to his family, but to his village, his territorial unit, the people of South Kikuyu district, and the tribe as a whole.

Before turning to a detailed discussion of each of these specific topics, it may be helpful to give a broad summary of Kikuyu social organisation, followed by a Kikuyu elder's reminiscences of his life before the turn of the century.

### ***The Importance of the Family in Kikuyu Social Organisation***

The most fundamental basis of Kikuyu social organisation was the family. Many of the most important religious and social ceremonies were invalid if any member of the family was absent, and individuals,

the life of their parents. Girls learned to do agricultural work and to cook by helping their mothers do this work, and in turn they learned to be mothers by looking after their small brothers and sisters. As boys grew up they learned to take a large share in the work of herding goats and sheep. They were taught that an important part of their job as young men would be not only to defend the tribe against the Maasai, but to raid the Maasai and capture goats, sheep, and cattle so as to keep up the supply of these animals, which were an essential element in the functioning of Kikuyu society. The possession of stock was essential for the observance of innumerable customs, from birth ceremonies, to initiation, marriage, and death and burial rites.

### ***Individual Rites de Passage***

The birth of a Kikuyu baby was the signal for the first of many *rites de passage* that would mark the child's whole life. A new individual had become a potential member of the tribe, but it was realised that in its early years the child was really little more than a part of its mother, and wholly dependent upon her. Therefore, the ceremonies that marked the birth were designed to emphasise the child's connection with its mother, and until the child underwent the next *rite de passage*, he or she was identified with the mother in all respects. If its mother became ceremonially unclean, the child was also rendered unclean, and if its mother had to take part in any ceremony, the child took part as well.

There was no hard and fast rule which fixed the age at which a Kikuyu child took part in the next *rite de passage* (the re-birth ceremony), save only that this had to take place before he or she could proceed to the following stage. Ordinarily it was performed at about the age of five, but among members of the Ūkabi initiation guild it took place earlier. The significance of the second birth ceremony as a *rite de passage* is that it marked the severing of the special ties which bound a child to his or her mother and identified the child with her. The child passed, in fact, into a wider life, in which he or she became an individual member of the family in his or her own right with responsibilities towards all members of his or her father's family, or in the case of children of matrilineal marriages, to all the members of the mother's father's family. During this stage of life, however, there was no responsibility to the community beyond the family, except that all boys, after the second birth ceremony, had certain duties towards the members of the warrior regiment that was in power.

mittee who were responsible for all religious ceremonies that affected the territorial unit as a whole, as well as such ceremonies as those which took place in times of famine and pestilence.

All the territorial units of South Kikuyu, that is to say, from the Chania River to the southern Kikuyu boundary, were together ranked as a *būrūri* (country). Within the *būrūri*, law, justice, tribal custom, and religion were unified, each adult male having definite responsibilities for law and order and religion, which he exercised through delegates.

In all matters that affected the country as a whole, the direct responsibility rested with one or two central committees. The first of these was a committee composed of delegates of the warrior regiment that was in power, these delegates being chosen in each territorial unit by the territorial committee from among their own number. The second central committee was composed of delegates of the council elders of each territorial unit, and chosen in like manner.

These two central committees, one representing the warrior regiment that was in power and the other representing the elders of the generation that was in power, always worked in consultation with each other. They were not standing committees, however, and were called together only when there was some matter affecting the whole country, as, for example, if the Maasai tribe wished to make a peace treaty with the Kikuyu, or if new laws were to be made or old laws repealed.

In only one matter did the Kikuyu tribe as a whole act together, and that was in connection with the *ituika* ceremonies which marked the handing over of power from one generation to another. All the preliminary arrangements for an *ituika* ceremony were made separately in South Kikuyu, Central Kikuyu, and North Kikuyu, as three distinct *mabūrūri* or countries, but for the final ceremonies delegates from each of the three countries met together at the traditional centre of origin of the tribe.

### ***The Position of Women and the Division of Labour***

Although the Kikuyu women had no political rights, it would be utterly wrong to assume that they had no influence and no status in the tribe. In a superficial examination it is true that the life of a Kikuyu woman seems to have been unbearably hard and dull. She appears to have had to shoulder the burden of all the hard work, much of her time being spent drawing water, cultivating the fields and carrying

## *Chapter 2*

## *Kikuyu Country*

### ***Introduction***

For the reasons outlined in the Preface of this book, I have confined my study to that section of the Kikuyu tribe which lives on the south side of the Chania River. We must now examine, briefly, the nature of the country with which we are concerned.

### ***The Boundaries***

Having thus limited our study, the Chania River becomes automatically the northern boundary. The Chania rises on the south-western slopes of the Aberdare Range and flows in a south-easterly direction until it joins the Thika River near the present Thika township. The head waters of the River are in dense forest, and not in Kikuyu country properly speaking, but the Southern Kikuyu definitely regarded the whole river, from its source to its junction with the Thika, as their northern boundary.

From the head waters of the Chania the old south-western boundary ran towards Kijabe Hill and thence followed a somewhat irregular line in a southerly direction up to a point a mile or two south-west of the Ũndirĩ Swamp, near Kikuyu Railway Station. The line of this boundary is not easy to fix exactly, since its position varied from year to year.

At the time with which we are concerned, the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Kikuyu were rapidly expanding their borders in this direction by buying land from the Ndorobo landowners. As new estates were bought by individual Kikuyu or by family groups, they were incorporated into the area which could properly be described as Kikuyu country (see Chapter 4).

As the Kikuyu were an illiterate people, they possessed no documentary evidence as to the extent of boundaries at any given time. I have been forced, therefore, to seek some other means of ascertaining the

## Chapter 3

## Tradition and History

### *Introduction*

As a people without a written language, the Kikuyu had no history in the strict meaning of that word, so the story of their origin and development can be obtained only from their traditions, which become more and more vague the further back they go. A brief summary of these traditions is, however, necessary before we pass on to study the history of the coming of the white man. This we can consider both from the written records of early European travellers, and from the stories told me by Kikuyu men and women who were still alive in 1939 and who retained a vivid memory of the events of major importance.

### *The Origin of the Tribe*

According to Kikuyu tradition, the whole tribe is descended from one man and one woman who were created by God, and who were set down by their Creator at a place called Mũkũrũwe wa Gathanga. This is the Kikuyu version of the "Garden of Eden" story (*mũkũrũwe*, or *mũkũrũe*, is the Kikuyu name for *Albizzia gummifera* and *Albizzia coriaria*), and the place is identified as being in the district now known as Fort Hall, north of the Chania River. The names of the Adam and Eve of the Kikuyu version of creation are Gĩkũyũ and Mũũmbi. The word Gĩkũyũ means "The Big Fig Tree," and it is from this that the Kikuyu tribe derives its name. The woman's name, Mũũmbi, means "The Creator".

Mũũmbi was the wife of Gĩkũyũ and had nine daughters, but no sons. These nine daughters are regarded as the ancestors of the nine main Kikuyu clans, which are still named after them. The oldest daughter was Wanjirũ, the second Wambũi, the third Njeri, the fourth Wanjikũ, the fifth Nyambura, the sixth Wairimũ, the seventh Waithĩra, the eighth Wangarĩ, and the ninth and last Wangũĩ.

These nine daughters each bore children (there are various versions

***Contacts with Arabs and Swahilis***

Prior to the coming of the first European expedition into Kikuyu country in 1887, the tribe had been in contact with both Arab and Swahili traders for some time and had been in the habit of selling them large quantities of food for their porters. The recognised custom was for the traders to make their camp near the north end of the Ngong Hills, close to the source of the Mbagathi River, and then to fire off their guns to let the Kikuyu who were living in the fortified villages in the forest belt know that they wanted to trade. As soon as the gun reports were heard, news was sent by messengers throughout the land, and people from all over South Kikuyu made their way to Ngong, taking with them maize, millet, sweet potatoes, and other food stuffs, to exchange for beads, copper wire, and cloth. The Kikuyu name for these Arab and Swahili traders was *thūkūmū* (slave dealers and people who employed paid labour).

On one or two occasions the Arab and Swahili traders tried to penetrate Kikuyu country, but on each occasion they were attacked, their party more or less annihilated by the Kikuyu warriors, and all their trade goods and other possessions stolen. Slave raiders never succeeded in making Kikuyu country a field for their activities.

From the evidence of von Höhnelt it seems that the Arabs occasionally bought a few slaves from the Kikuyu, but it is not clear whether these were prisoners whom the Kikuyu had captured from the Akamba, or whether they were poor Kikuyu who were sold by a wealthy man who had had them as his serfs or dependants (*ndungata*, see glossary). On the whole, it seems more probable that they were people of another tribe, for the Kikuyu liked to have a large population and would have been unlikely to sell their own people as slaves. On the other hand, the Akamba made a definite practice of raiding Kikuyu women and girls with the intention of selling them as slaves to the Arabs, and not a few Kikuyu were, therefore, taken to the coast as slaves through the agency of the Akamba.

Long before the Kikuyu established trade relations with the Arab and Swahili caravans, they had established the practice of trading agricultural produce with the Maasai in exchange for cattle, sheep, and hides. They also acquired from them beads and cloth, which the Maasai had obtained from the coastal traders, because of this, it was a well established Kikuyu practice to cultivate more land than was needed for local use in order to have surplus food for trade purposes.

few goats and sheep, which were called *mbūri cia ūgendi*. These corresponded exactly to the sheep and goats which were called by the same name, and which a man had to give one of his brothers when he had married off a daughter and obtained stock from her husband's family as a marriage insurance for her.

Also, after a Kikuyu had adopted a Ndorobo, when any daughter of that Kikuyu married, he had to give the *mbūri cia ūgendi* from that marriage not only to one of his physical brothers, but to the Ndorobo, whose rights in this respect actually took precedence over those of a physical brother.

If a boundary of a piece of land that a Ndorobo was selling marched with the land belonging to some other Ndorobo family, he had to insure that their representatives were present. Moreover, when he was showing the boundary he had to indicate points at which the boundary was the limit of his own land. If the Kikuyu slightly overstepped the new boundary on to land belonging to the man who had sold him a portion it would not be a serious matter. If however, he trespassed even slightly upon the land of another Ndorobo, there would be serious trouble.

### *Sale of Land by One Kikuyu to Another*

When a Kikuyu went through an adoption ceremony of the type already described, not only did the Ndorobo become a Kikuyu while still also retaining his own nationality, but the Kikuyu on his part became a Ndorobo, or, as the Kikuyu called him, a *Mwathi*, while at the same time retaining his Kikuyu status. The Kikuyu who had bought a large tract of forest from a Ndorobo also became a *mwathi* in a different sense, since he was now the owner and ruler over the area of land he had bought, and was in the position to sell it if he so desired.

Since the rules governing the sale of land which a man had bought in his own life and owned privately differed from those for land inherited by him as a member of a sub-clan (*mbarĩ*), which normally could be sold only with the consent of the other members, we will consider these two aspects of land sale separately.

Sometimes after a land purchase the Kikuyu or his family found themselves in dire need of stock for payment of blood money for a man killed by a member of the family, or for a marriage payment. In such cases, they could legally dispose of a portion of their land by sale, or

***The Planning of a Homestead (Mūciĩ)***

As we have seen, each village, whether on the border or in the interior, was made up of a number of homesteads called *mūciĩ* (singular *mūciĩ*), and the head of each homestead was its founder and *pater familias*.

The size of each homestead depended upon the status, wealth, and age of its head. A man who was wealthy and had a number of wives and several grown-up sons and other dependants had a large homestead, often running to ten, 15, or more individual huts (a homestead of as many as 40 huts was by no means rare), while a young married man who had recently left his father's homestead and decided to start on his own often had only two or three huts. In our discussion we will take the case of a man who had four wives and a widowed mother dependent upon him, and after describing the arrangements of his homestead, we will turn to the way in which it would expand as time went on and his sons reached marriageable age.

A man wishing to build a homestead selected two or three places that he liked, and then went to a medicine-man to ask which of these was the most favourable. He did not necessarily tell the diviner where the sites were, but took sticks to represent them, and asked the diviner to say which stick represented the most favourable site. The details of the method of divining are dealt with in a later chapter and need not concern us here.

Once the site was chosen, the man proceeded to clear the ground with the help of his friends, and the homestead was built in the form shown in Fig. 1. The position of the *thome* (entrance pathway) depended entirely upon the custom that prevailed in the family to which the man belonged. Some families always had the *thome* facing east, others faced it to the west, others faced it to Mount Kenya or one of the other sacred mountains. Beyond the *thome* area a rough circle was marked out for the courtyard (*nja*), and around this the huts were arranged in the following fixed order. As you stood in the entrance and faced the courtyard, the man's own hut (*thingira*) was to the right centre; straight ahead and facing the entrance was the senior wife's hut, the hut of the wife known as Nyakiambi. The huts of the second, third, and fourth wives followed round the circle in the order of their precedence, and the gap between each was filled by a fence (*rūgiri*). The arrangement of the huts was always counter-clockwise, with the men's hut (*thingira*) first, the first wife's hut second, and other wives in succession after that.

big one, and this was a safeguard against total loss of food supply. It was a case of not having “all one’s eggs in one basket”, for, if cattle got into a cultivated area, or if locust swarms came, all the crops of one field would probably be damaged, but the other fields which also had food belonging to each woman might escape.

### *The Kikuyu Calendar*

Before proceeding to consider the Kikuyu methods of crop planting and harvesting, we must briefly examine the Kikuyu calendar to see how the year was divided up into seasons and months. The Kikuyu year was not divided into lunar months at all, although the passage of lunar months, which had no names, was noted in connection with various ceremonies. The Kikuyu word *mwaka*, which is now applied to an English year, was formerly the word used for the period from one rainy season to another, a period of about six months; thus, to each year in the English sense of the word there were two *mīaka*. One of these was the *mwaka wa njahĩ* (season when one grows *njahĩ* beans), followed by the *mwaka wa mwere* (season when one grows bulrush millet). (An alternative word for *mwaka* was *kīmera*, but this word, in its strictest sense, was used only for the beginning part of each new *mwaka*).

According to some Kikuyu, each *mwaka* had nine divisions roughly corresponding to lunar months, but they were in actual fact considerably shorter, varying from 20 to 30 days, with an occasional division missed completely. The divisions recognised by those Kikuyu who divided a *mwaka* into nine parts were as follows:

*Kihu*

*Wathima*, also called *Mūringo*

*Gathano*

*Mūthaatũ*

*Mūgira-njara*

*Gacicia*, also called *Gathano ka Rūgũru*

*Muoria-nyoni*

*Kagaa*

*Mūgaa*, also called *Mwania-thenge*, or *Mūratho*.

Most Kikuyu agreed that a *mwaka* should have nine divisions corresponding to the nine months of a woman’s period of gestation, and it was equally agreed that every *mwaka* started with the division called

tree. The fire, too, was kindled with dry wood from the sacred tree, and this sacrificial fire was lit with fire sticks or with embers from a garden fire.

When the ceremony was over, each elder took one of the *mũthakwa* sticks that had been cut and dipped into the stomach contents, enough rawhide strips for all the women of his village, and a few *mahoroha* leaves which had been rubbed over with the stomach contents and took these home with him. When he arrived at his village he gave the women the *mahoroha* leaves to use for ceremonially sweeping out their beds. These leaves were then put at the head end of the women's bedrooms. Each woman and adult girl was given a strip of rawhide to put on her left arm above the elbow, and the senior woman of the village was given the *mũthakwa* stick.

Early next morning all the senior women had to go out with these sticks and use them as digging knives to plant the first few seeds of the new planting season. Then they came home and put the *mũthakwa* sticks on their beds, and all the other women and girls could go out and start planting in the normal way, except that they had to be wearing the strip of rawhide on their left arms above the elbow.

### ***Rain-making Ceremonies***

In connection with rain-making, it is necessary to differentiate between the power to make rain fall on special areas, as practised by the members of the clan called *Aĩthaga* (*Ethaga*), and the ceremony for asking God for general rain, as performed by the Kikuyu as a whole.

In the case of the complete failure of the rains, making it impossible for the people as a whole to plant their crops, there was no thought of going to ask the *Aĩthaga* clan to make rain, nor was there any thought of going to a medicine-man or magician to ask him to make rain, for the power to give and to withhold the whole of the rainy season belonged to the supreme being, God, and not to any individual person, or to any clan or family. A plea for rain in this case, therefore, could be directed only to God.

When it became obvious that the normal month for the rainy season to start had passed and the rains had been withheld, the elders of every territorial unit (*rũgongo*) got together to offer sacrifices and make prayers for rain. Messages were sent from one territorial unit to those that bordered it, saying, "We are preparing for a sacrifice to pray for rain; do likewise", so gradually preparations were made all over the

### ***Bleeding***

Goats and sheep were bled from time to time by means of a special bleeding arrow (*ndīa*). The *ndīa* for bleeding sheep was different from that used for bleeding goats, while that used for cattle was of yet another type. In bleeding an animal, a leather strip was tied tightly round its neck until the jugular vein swelled up under the pressure of the blood. Then the bleeding arrow was shot from a special bow into this swollen vein and the blood caught in a half-gourd as it spurted out. The blood was consumed in a variety of ways: mixed with fat, mixed with milk, boiled up in water, mixed with honey, etc. but this will be described further in Chapter 8.

The bow used was made of *mūkarakinga* wood, and was only about 18 in long. If possible, it was strung with a strong string made from the sinews of a he-goat. The special bleeding arrows were always kept in a length of hollow bamboo (*kīrangī*). Male goats and rams were never bled for the sake of their blood, but only as a treatment for illness.

### ***The Slaughter of Goats and Sheep***

The number of occasions when the slaughter of a goat or sheep was required in connection with purification, ritual, and religion was so great that the Kikuyu seldom went long without meat. Thus, the killing of goats and sheep simply for the sake of their meat was a rare occurrence.

In fact, apart from rites and ceremonies, goat and sheep meat was eaten only in connection with a meat feast, when an animal died a natural or accidental death, or when an animal was killed by a wild animal. Meat feasts and all the customs connected with them are described in Chapter 8.

A goat or a sheep that had been selected for slaughter in connection with almost any ritual performance, such as when an animal was given to the elders either as a fine or as a fee, was always slaughtered, skinned, and cut up in accordance with a special ritual and custom which was practically never altered. This special ritual and custom will be described here. In all other chapters where the slaughter and cutting up of an animal is mentioned no detailed description will be given unless there is some divergence from the normal circumstances.

*Njohi ya Ūrata (Beer as a Token of Friendship or Esteem)*

A man sometimes took beer that he had brewed to the homestead of a friend simply as a token of esteem. In such a case he sent a message saying that he was coming to call on such-and-such a day if it was convenient. If the messenger returned saying that it would be convenient for him to call, the man then prepared the beer in readiness the preceeding day, and on the morning after it was brewed made the appropriate offerings to the ancestral spirits, and called in two friends to help him pour the beer from the big brewing gourds into the smaller gourds.

The pouring procedure was identical to that followed if the beer was to be consumed in the homestead: the sipping of beer by the *mūkerūri* (the man who poured it off), then the pouring of the *mahuti* (the first hornful), the filling of the beer gourds, the ceremony of *kwiūmbūra* (warding off evil), and so on for each gourdful. Then the brewer of the beer had to allot a gourdful for the council elders who had come to his homestead knowing beer had been brewed there the day before. He had also to provide beer for those who had helped with the preparation of the beer, and for the women. This done, he sent women off with the four, five, or more gourdfuls that were to go to his friend's home, and he followed later with three or four friends, after first seeing that the council elders and others were satisfactorily provided for. On arriving at the home of the man for whom he had brewed beer, he went with his friends to the men's hut, while the women who had carried the beer took it to the chief wife's hut, where they were given food to eat. The men gave the women time to eat the food prepared for them, and then the owner of the homestead invited the man who had brought the beer to go over to the hut with him. Here the owner of the homestead drank a hornful and filled it up again and gave it to the man who had brought it, after which the owner of the homestead accepted the beer and gave one gourdful back to the brewer and the friends who accompanied him. Of the remaining gourds he had to send one out for the council elders who would come from the surrounding homesteads, and a second for any special friends of his, other than the man who had brought it. The one which the two of them had drunk from first he kept for himself and his womenfolk.

*Njohi ya Gūthemba (Beer as a Circumcision Present)*

If a man had had a son or daughter initiated, any relation-in-law, elder brother, or member of the same age-group had to take a gift of beer to his

## Chapter 13

## Trade and Travel

In South Kikuyu, prior to the great famine of 1898–1899, organised markets for trade between the peoples of one district and another, or for trade between the families of a single district, did not exist. Barter of goods was a private matter and everyone in every district knew enough about the affairs of others to know who had such things as hides, soda, tobacco, ochre, iron, or trade goods obtained from the Akamba, to dispose of. Even in respect of trade from other parts of Kikuyu country such as the Muranga and Nyeri districts, the commodities such as *ira* powder and red ochre of good quality (*thĩrĩga*), were not brought to a market. Trading parties came south, established themselves at the homestead of a friend, and then spread the news that they had such wares for barter.

Before we examine details of internal trade, however, we will consider the Kikuyu organisation of foreign trade, that is, trade with neighbouring tribes—the Maasai and the Akamba—for, in spite of hostilities and raids, trade was never interrupted. All the tribes regarded trade as essential to their welfare, and as something that was quite outside the sphere of military activities, and therefore not to be affected by it.

### *Trade with the Maasai*

Between the Kikuyu and the Maasai there was a long-standing agreement that parties of women of either tribe could go into the territory of the other tribe unmolested, provided that they were on a trading expedition. In actual practice, this agreement meant that Kikuyu trading parties went continuously into Maasai country, but Maasai parties came very seldom into Kikuyu country, for the Maasai hated carrying loads, and a trade expedition to Kikuyu country involved not only carrying skins for barter, but carrying back food supplies. Maasai women, therefore, much preferred that the trade should be left mainly in the hands of the Kikuyu. Only when a severe drought had reduced the Maasai supplies of milk and blood so much that the children were starving, would Maasai women undertake a trade expedition and the hardships that it involved.