

## **A Social Narrative on Tharaka People in Kenya, Africa**

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Meru, a Bantu tribe whose place of origin is *Mbwaa*, meaning the Coast; lives on the Eastern Highlands of the Mt. Kenya in Kenya, Africa. The Meru community call God, *Murungu* and Mt. Kenya, Kirinyaga shortened from *Kirima kia Nyaga* ("The Mountain of Ostriches"). It was their paramount traditional sacred place; because that is where the Murungu resided and revealed himself to the community. Meru community had other small sacred places of worship and sacrifices called shrines. From *Mbwaa*, all Meru sub-tribes had briefly settled in the present day Tharaka Area. When this community arrived in Tharaka, it is said they met a native community of a people called Gumba, which they assimilated into Meru culture and language. Some Gumba latter generation is said to be traceable in Tharaka even in the present day. For example, it is speculated that one sub-clan of Kanyaki Clan in Tharaka are Gumbas. They are sometimes referred in derogatory language as, "*gumba*" or "*rumbeere*" which is translated as 'the alien gumbas' and 'the insignificant people of Mbeere'.

A narration goes that the Meru sub-tribes had eventually to disperse to different locations they reside today, according to each sub-tribe; because their increased population could no longer be accommodated at the place. They therefore dispersed from Tharaka at a place called *Igaironi*; which means a place of sub-division of inheritance to the current locations. It is believed that it is from there the sub-tribes dispersed to different locations they reside today.

The seven sub-tribes of Meru stretch from River Thuci in Chuka to the South, and Nyambene Ranges to the North. On the West is the Imenti and to the East is Tharaka. The sub-tribes are Chuka, the Muthambi, Mwimbi, the Imenti, the Tigania, the Igembe and the Tharaka people who live in the lowlands of the mountain.

This article is trying to analyze the Aatharaka from traditional and contemporary backgrounds. The analysis is however not an exhaustion of every information concerning the people. It serves as a means of opening up new 'gates' for further study and analysis. This article will provide background information to anthropologists, historians and social researchers on who the Aatharaka are and how they live. The focus is geography, infrastructural development, origin, language, culture, family life and their legend.

In summary, Aatharaka live in semi-arid parts of Tharaka Nithi County and their livelihood is mainly agri-pastoralism. They have common history and origin with other Meru sub-tribes. Their culture is dynamic and they hold clans in great regard. Some Aatharaka are aware of the Legend of Kibuka and others are ignorant about it.

Many people across Kenya call a Tharaka person, Mutharaka a Mumeru (a Meru person). However, some Tharaka people (Aatharaka) view themselves as an independent entity from the Ameru and others regard themselves a sub-section of the Meru community. There has been insufficient information both in hard and soft prints on Tharaka as a sub-tribe of the main Meru tribe or as an independent unique entity outside the Ameru. Very few publications have information concerning this people, while some researchers and anthropologists have written wrong claims concerning Tharaka people and other ethnic groups.

The historical origin of Aatharaka is enshrined in the Ameru legends and folklores. Many readers across Kenya therefore have little clue who a 'Mutharaka' is, including the news reporters who misreport on the people because, they lack background information concerning the area and the people. Many have gone to an extent of destroying the cohesion of Aatharaka with their neighbours because they rely on the background information relayed to them by people who are

not from Tharaka. To support my claim, I can demonstrate an article by Fowkes (2008); who claims Chuka people are a tribe different from Meru Tribe. Such is a common mistake made by researchers and writers with little information about a community. I may be right to think that the information he has was gotten from someone who is not even a Mumeru. This reliance on “outsiders” is detrimental to new learners because they are likely to acquire inaccurate information leading to their being misled.

Tharaka Constituency consists of Tharaka South and Tharaka North districts in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. Tharaka Constituency straddles in 1,513 square kilometers land mass and has a population of 130,098 persons according to 2009 Kenya National Census. In its West is Imenti, to the South, Chuka, Mwimbi, and Mbeere. To the East is Mwingi and to the North is Tigania. The largest River that forms Tharaka boundary with the Mwingi is River Tana which they call *Thagana*.

It is an arid and semi-arid area (ASAL) in the Eastern part of the larger Meru Region in the former Eastern Province of Kenya. Due to climate change, rains have become erratic in the area. The area experiences a bimodal rainfall pattern with annual rainfall averaging between 500 - 800mm per year (GOK, 2009). The short rain season occurs in March/May while long rains are received in the October/December period. The rain seasons in Tharaka are very unique from the rest of the country. Unlike other parts of the country, the long rains in the area are experienced from October to December (*Muratho Season*) and the short rains are from March to May (*Nthano Season*). Harvests for the seasons are done in January and June respectively. Food crops cultivated in the area are millet, sorghum, maize, pigeon peas, green grams and cow peas and they serve as the staples. Domestic fruits prevalent in some parts of Tharaka are mangoes, bananas, oranges; and wild fruits such as tamarinds, *ntwana*, sycamores, *ntungu*, figs, *mbiru* and many others. Cash crops are hardly cultivated but if done, they comprise cotton, sunflower and castor. Aatharaka keep goats, sheep and cattle too. General temperatures in Tharaka are hot ranging between 29°C - 36°C, though at certain periods they can rise to as high as 40°C (GOK, 2009).

Although many Aatharaka live in their home area, others live in the Diaspora areas such as Chuka-Igamba Ng'ombe, Imenti South, Tigania and Mwingi districts. Tharaka Constituency is underdeveloped and remote. Since independent, there has never been a tarmac road in the area. To support this, as a resident of Central Tharaka Division in Tharaka South District, I got to see tarmac road in 1997 on my way to Meru Town for my form one shopping. It looked like a mirage beckoning at me. You may feel free to laugh if this is funny! All areas in Meru have at least a single tarmacked road. Electricity was first installed in the area by the Rural Electrification Programme since 2002. The project benefitted three towns: Chiakariga, Marimanti and Gatunga. Tunyai Market had an earlier supply of the electricity, courtesy of the late Brother John of the Catholic Diocese of Meru. He was the patron of Materi Girls' Centre and had connected the electricity, while supplying his institution Centre with power.

There are few irrigable projects in Tharaka South (Kithino Area) and Igumo Area of Marimanti Location in Tharaka Central. This is less than 10% of its land mass. The current needs of this people therefore are tarmacked roads, electricity and piped water. Due to lack of physical resources, Tharaka people have felt marginalized by the government for quite long.

From a personal point of view, it is arguable that due to the marginalization, these people have even been heard and seen advocating for their sole unique identity. Some of them say they do not want to be called, “Ameru”. They want their unique tribal identity. They view other Meru sub-tribes as having created an apartheid system upon them. Some of these rhetorical claims have been evident during political rallies, administration fora and other public functions. Some other people claim that the area is underdeveloped because it was cursed by the Tharaka Legend, Kibuka. Questions that clicks one's mind over this issue are, ‘does it require an effort from external influences to get a community out of underdevelopment or should Aatharaka believe they are cursed and have to accept their situation and move on?’ In spite of these community tremendous needs, there have been positive developmental transitions in the area.

The positive achievement reached in the 2000s than in the 1990s is a dramatic increase in girl child enrollment in primary and secondary schools. The influencing factors are the transition from female genital mutilation (FGM) to anti FGM way of life. Anti-FGM campaigns in the

community gatherings and in churches have helped alleviate tremendously the ultimate results of female circumcision, such as school drop outs and early marriages. Besides, the universal free primary education programme launched by the government of Kenya as from 2002 has seen children from poor families access primary education. Constituency Development Fund (CDF) Tharaka Office, faith based organizations and non-governmental organizations further assist the vulnerable and orphaned children get secondary education through school fee bursaries.

Creation of Tharaka-Nithi District in 1992 increased a feeling of “autonomy” by Atharaka. The district was edged from the main Meru District. The new districts were named Nyambene (later Meru North), Meru and Tharaka-Nithi (was to be named Meru South). Tharaka-Nithi District was not named Meru South; because it was felt that Atharaka needed a unique identity as a people independent of “Meru”. The opinion of the people is divided on this. Some people see it as a self-uplifting ego while others view it a sign of patriotism.

Further, Tharaka-Nithi District got sub-divided into two districts: Nithi District comprising of Chuka, Mwimbi and Muthambi, and Tharaka District composed of Atharaka only. It is during this sub-division that the Nithi District residents felt the need to pick up the chance for a name they had been “denied”. Meru South District resurfaced. Tharaka District mountainously stood out as a self entity; a self people with no mixture of blood and their desired name “Tharaka” District came by.

Currently, Tharaka people have cordial relationship with other Meru Sub-tribes. Modern political intrigues put aside, they relate with Chuka people as brothers. They believe they both were born of the same father but different mothers. The Chuka’s mother was called *Ciampandi* and Tharaka mother was *Ciangoi*. Atharaka are said to have blood relationship, “Giciaro” with the Muthambi community therefore are not supposed to intermarry. They also share some clans with the Imenti and Tigania peoples making them “blood” relatives but can marry.

With the advent of county governments in Kenya in 2013 from the provincial system of government, Tharaka is assimilating the changes in Kenya’s governance, and they are active players in the county leadership and political governance. Administratively, the community area is called Tharaka Sub-County and politically it is Tharaka Constituency.

Their trade is also majorly on farm produce such as green grams, cowpea, sorghum, millet, mangoes and some wild fruits like tamarinds. A small “chunk” of Tharaka South Division sells banana and maize. They sell livestock also especially in the time of famine. There are several market centres in Tharaka Sub-County jurisdicted by Tharaka-Nithi County (TNC) Government as trading centres: Marimanti, Chiakariga, Gatunga, Tunyai, Kathangacini and Mukothima markets. Formal education has changed the language dynamics of the community. A few persons can fluently speak in English, others especially school learners in Kiswahili and the tribal language is spoken by almost everybody.

The language of the Atharaka is Kiitharaka. It is a dialect of the main Meru Language. There are slight intra-language variations depending on a community bordering with them. Those adjacent to Mwingi may have a slight difference in intonation or even the use of words from those bordering with Imenti. This can be exemplified by the vernacular name for water. The sub-dialect of the people near Mwingi is called Gatue, in Central Tharaka is Ntugi and in the South is Kathundini. Politicians have often been seen or heard extort these sub-divisions to their advantage or detriment of their opponents. A person near Mwingi will call water “*kigwu*” almost similar to Kamba Language of Mwingi people who call it *Kiguu*; while the one near Imenti will call it “*ruuyi*” almost like *ruuji* by Aimenti. The language and names are influenced mostly by common Meru words.

Other influencing languages are the Kimbeere and Gikuyu. Some people argue that Kitharaka is a unique language on its own standing and it is not Kimeru. The standard Kimeru Language is mainly considered Kiimenti, which was the language of instruction in the lower primary school in the old Meru District. It is arguable that the language became prominent because both the colonial, independence and the post independence administration of the region was centered at a town in Imenti called Mutindwa which the colonialist referred as Meru Town. It is from this scenario that the Imenti language dominated over the rest of Meru Dialects. Someone is left

wondering if the colonialist set up his district headquarters' at Chogoria Town in Mwimbi, could the town have been/not named Meru Town? What of Marimanti Town in Tharaka?

Aatharaka like other Meru sub-tribes have been practising circumcision rites. However, their rites of passage for boys slightly differed and continue to differ. Kumerua is a teenage rite of passage among Tharaka boys and is never practiced by other Aameru. During teenage, the boys are initiated into a self awareness rite called *kumerua* – meaning to be swallowed. The mythical creature said to swallow boys is known as *Kirimo*. Not much is known about Kirimo because it is against the Aatharaka culture to divulge to females and *nkara* (the non-swallowed) what it really is. It has remained in the domain of *rugu* (the swallowed) to have authority to know what it is. However, even the “unswallowed” can easily know someone swallowed by their behavior and language. Those swallowed are more conservative in the traditions than the non-swallowed and also have a language code of *rugu*.

In the pre-colonial and colonial eras of Kenya, Aatharaka had *Iriika* or *Nthuke* systems of identification of the circumcision seasons. Some of the Iriikas are, Kianjuri and Kaburia and were referred to as Nthuke ya Kianjuri and Nthuke ya Kaburia respectively. Such seasons were significant in tracing years back by counting nthukes from the then current to a former one. For example in 1979 when the government of Kenya allowed women to acquire national identification cards, the issuing officers traced years a woman was born by letting her quote during which nthuke she was born. Illiteracy levels were too high at the time.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, circumcision still continued to be practiced among both boys and girls. The boy peers who got circumcised in the same season considered themselves “*muntu wa nthuke yeetu*” meaning a fellow initiate of a same season. Identifying circumcision season by its name had then become redundant. The god-fathers (Bamo) were and still remain the sponsors of the initiates. Babo is considered a father and has the right to name his circumcised son a new name, “*Riitwa ria uthaka*” meaning a name of the circumcised. Such names are denoted by *M'* which is pronounced ‘nta’: M'Mwenda, M'Thuranira, M'Kamwara, M'Muriithi and others.

Girl initiate sponsors (Maami wa Muthenya) denoting the daylight mother (circumcision was done during the daylight); gave new names to the circumcised girls: Ciagakenia, Ciakathekia, Ciandigara. Bacigira was the name of fellow girl initiate in the same season. This naming mode was in the 1980s and the preceding years. Later the naming mode changed into their Christian baptismal names: Maggie for Margret, Nancy, Louise, Lucy, Mary and others. However, this situation changed from 2002 when the national government declared it a criminal offence to subject girls into FGM. The then first lady of Kenya, Mrs Lucy Kibaki campaigned and advocated so much against the practice. FGM in the area has recently been converted into “alternative rites of passage” whereby girls get educated on the roles of adulthood without having to undergo the physical rite. It has however been found that a few girls still undergo FGM secretly especially at night, but still call their circumcision sponsors maami wa muthenya.

August was the prime circumcision season in Tharaka in the 1990s and previous years. This is because no farm cultivation was ongoing during this month. Livestock were also allowed free range even into neighbours' lands and farms. Further, it was a post harvest season so there was plenty of food to feed the celebrants and the initiates. August has been and is still an official school holiday in Kenya. Thus, the amalgam of all these scenarios offered conducive season for circumcision. However, an education policy declaration by the executive government, stipulated that all circumcisions be done in December; since it is the longest school holiday, terminal examination candidates graduating from class eight would be ready for circumcision without having to interrupt their educational schedules. Aatharaka have since adopted December as the circumcision season. This is because boys are graduating from class 8, and are ready to join secondary schools while they are “more adults”. Aatharaka have viewed this as benefit, because it saves the boys from getting bullied as “*Mwiyi*”, the non-circumcised in form one. Song and dances adorned these ceremonies.

Folk songs and dances of the pre-colonial and colonial eras such as ncungo, mburi, njai and Kibuco are no longer performed but Folk songs such as Kirarire, Authi, Mbeere and Gacanda (a more recent dance) are sang and danced with pomp for circumcisions. Initially, pre-circumcision celebrations took 5 days but due to socio-economic changes they now take a day or two. Gruel

and solid food is served to the celebrants at this time. The initiate is very early in the morning of the day of circumcision, taken to a river to take a cold bath at around five o'clock in the morning. He then is taken to the venue of circumcision called "*Kigiri*". On getting the cut, the spectators who are men only shout a loud ululation that get received by the women in some far edges and the ululation spreads across; depending on whether the initiate has bravely born the knife or not. If he had shown no signs of 'braving the knife' there would be no ululations. The celebrants sprint to the boy's homestead to relay to others that their son is a real gentleman, because, he has braved the knife! Some traditional liquor called *Marwaa* (made from grains) and *Uuki* (made from sugar and honey) are served to the elders and young men who drink after the circumcisions. The mode of circumcision corresponds to the traditional Meru.

The circumciser was usually a traditional tribesman until the advent of HIV/Aids which has prompted Aatharaka to get a doctor who wills to cut their boys in the traditional way. He becomes a tribesman by the virtue of this practice. His title bestows upon him a lot of honour. Circumcision prepared both boys and girls for adult life of marriage.

Marriage is an important institution among this people. In the pre-colonial and the colonial periods, tradition required a bride to be a virgin who would stay in the mother-in law's hut for at least four months before moving in with the groom. This was to ascertain that she was not immoral to have conceived before marriage. It was a taboo to break virginity before marriage. If a girl got a child out of wedlock, their father put a rope around their neck or waist and 'hawked' them to any willing 'buyer' who would mostly likely be an elderly man. She would be "bought" as a second or umpteenth wife because of the disgrace she was considered to have caused the family.

This practice changed in the independence and the post independent era. The bride eloped(s) with the groom at night and stays in his hut or house for four days. The bride would not venture out of the groom's abode in the four days. She is fed by the groom's relatives in the house. After the four days, the girl reports back to her parents that she had gotten married. After reporting to her parents, the groom's relatives go to report to her parents that they are the father and/or mother of the "thief". The thief because eloping is secretive therefore is similar with stealing. He stole their daughter. The bride price is 27 goats and 8 cows. Currently, because of cultural and economic transitions, parents are accepting money as bride price. Other goodies accepted are sugar, honey, alcohol, blankets and more depending on socio-economic status of the groom. Bearing children in marriage cannot be ignored.

Parenting is considered a superior role in a family setting among the Aatharaka. A real family is considered to be the one with father, mother and children. However, cultural transitions have brought about single parent families. Children still continue to be considered a primary element of a family. If a couple cannot get children, they separate and look for new companions. Polygamy is also probable for instance, if the first wife cannot beget children. A boy child is considered the pillar of the family because he is the one to retain his family's name along generations. A girl child cannot because she would get married into another family. If the first wife cannot get a boy or boys, polygamy may occur too in the search of a boy child. However, due to cultural transitions and "struggling" Christianity, families with only girls may persist. Children born of single mothers have been seen relocating to their "fathers" to avoid stigmatization of being a "child of the mother". A boy also is regarded as the one to take care of their parents when the parents become old.

At middle age and old life, elderly parents are taken care of by their last born sons. This is the son who is 'supposed' to remain in his father's homestead while others establish themselves at somewhere else in an inherited land or a bought land. In case the parents (most likely the mother) do not have sons, some may concede to be taken care of by their married daughters. Others defy, and suffer a lot in poverty. Though rare, others may be taken care of by extended families.

Aatharaka have extended family clan system called *Mwiriga* or *Miriga* in plural. The clans are further subdivided into sub-clans - *Riiko*. To exemplify, Kitherini, Kamugao, Kanyaki, Mbura and Gankina are the major clans in Ntugi area in Tharaka. Kitherini Clan has got Nthiga, Njiru and Njeru as their Riiko. The naming system of children may be associated with *mwiriga* too. If a

male child is named after a person whose Riiko is Nthiga, his name would be Nthiga. Other names associated with riiko are Njeru, Nyaga, Njiru and many more.

Character and personal attributes also matter in the naming of both boy and girl children. Gaceri is a girl's name whose namesake (the woman she is named after) is very hard-working. Names connoting negative attributes also were given to children if the person named after had negative and vicious characteristics. There are norms and taboos that govern intra and inter-clan marriages.

People belonging to one clan cannot marry because they consider each other a brother or a sister in blood. That is the reason a girl and boy of a same Tharaka clan residing even in far away country cannot marry. Further, some "isolated" clans do not inter-marry because there had been a 'curse' placed against their intermarriage by the ancestors. For example, Kanyaki and Kamugao clans never marry.

The naming of a child started with the eldest person in the extended family. This means that a first born child would be named after the eldest person in the extended family. For instance, if brothers, M'Kamwara and M'Mwongera have sons, M'Thuranira and M'Mwarania respectively; and M'Kamwara is the elder brother to M'Mwongera, and M'Mwarania who is the son of M'Mwongera begets a boy child as the first born, the son would not be named after M'Mwongera but after M'Kamwara since he is the elder brother to the latter. However, with the coming of modernity and family planning, many are zeroing in to naming their children after their parents. Some people can name their children after a preferred person in the village or even their best friends.

Aatharaka mores like many African communities are governed by norms and taboos. Unique taboos among this community are such as *kugura giciaro*, *muntu wa mwiriga na muntu wa mwiriga waku*. It means that is a taboo to marry a spouse from Muthambi Sub-tribe (Giciaro), it is not allowed to marry a person from an 'isolated' clan or marrying someone from own clan. If someone breaks the taboos, a curse is supposed to befall them such as not begetting children or if they beget the offspring may die through mysterious circumstances, their skin may "peel off" which they call *kumuka ruuo* and many more calamities. It is not ascertained whether these calamities are just myths or facts, but Aatharaka have for long kept this tradition. They also have legends.

A legend is narrated among the Aatharaka of a person called Kibuuka. He was the Aatharaka's spiritual leader and medicine man, a diviner and rain maker. He administered Tharaka warriors with charms in wars to protect them from enemies on combat. His elder son led Tharaka battalion in every war. In several incidences, the son got killed in wars but resurrected by the power of charms embossed in his abdomen by his father. It came a time when the enemy spies and a Tharaka traitor revealed to the enemy about the charm in the son's abdomen. They killed him and gauged out the charm from the abdomen thus he died completely. The charm was a magic horn, "*rugoci*".

The murder of his son infuriated Kibuka so much that he cursed the Aatharaka and emigrated from his residence, a shrine which is said to be near Kibuka Primary School in Tunyai Location of Tharaka South District. The route he followed is alleged to have turned into a seasonal river (the current Kathambangiri River in Tunyai). He passed by Kijege Hill at a place called Kaunguni, "At the Pot". It is said he left one of his cooking pots at Kaunguni thus the place name is Kaunguni. His footprints are also said to be visible on a rock in Kijege to this day. It is from there he disappeared into River Tana, at the confluence with River Kathita. The places he lived and paused at are all shrines, called in Kitharaka '*Iri*'.

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