

## **A Thematic and Historical Synthesis of Embu Oral Traditions**

By

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### ***Abstract:***

*Oral traditions, after years of intense debate about their usefulness and admissibility as sources of history, have now come to be accepted as sources of historical inquiry. While they remain largely underutilized, in the absence of any other sources, oral traditions can be very useful for historical reconstruction. This paper offers a thematic analysis, as well as a historical synthesis of oral traditions collected among the Embu of Kenya by H. S. K. Mwaniki in 1971. It shows that despite the inherent limitations in oral traditions, Embu oral traditions have greater historical value and significance. For easy analysis, Embu oral traditions have been packaged into traditions (themes) pertaining to genesis/origin, the economy and famine, time and space, and war. The importance of this study is to provide a thematic and historical synthesis of Embu oral traditions in the absence of any known analysis since they were collected in 1971. The study therefore offers a mere thematic and historical synthesis of this corpus of oral traditions.*

### **Introduction**

This paper has been occasioned by the fact that nowhere did the author find this rich corpus of Embu oral traditions discussed or analysed in the manner I propose to do either by Mwaniki himself, or by any other scholars since they were collected. It also has to be stated that the choice to focus on Embu oral traditions was simply because the corpus was easily accessible to the author. The collection remains housed in the Department of History at the University of Zimbabwe. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a thematic and historical synthesis of Embu oral traditions, as well as to show how any corpus of oral traditions can be analysed or assessed.

Geographically, the Embu are found in east-central Kenya, on the south-eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya and between the altitudes of roughly 6900 feet (2104, 5 metres) and 4000 feet (1220 metres). To their west are the Kikuyu and Ndia, to the north are the Meru and Chuka, to the South are the

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Kamba and to the east are the Tharaka. Culturally and linguistically, the Embu are related to their neighbours, especially the Bantu speaking groups of the Kikuyu, the Meru, the Chuka and the Mbeere, with the latter virtually indistinguishable from the Embu (Saberwal, 1976: 31; Ambler, 1989: 14).

By definition, oral traditions are verbal messages from the past beyond the present generation that are transmitted from one generation to another. Henige (1982: 2) defines oral tradition as something 'widely practised and understood in a society and [which] must have been handed down for at least a few generations' while Vansina (1965 & 1985) defines oral tradition as 'a testimony transmitted orally from one generation to another [about] a single sequence of events'. These definitions must therefore not be confused with oral history which is simply living memory about the recent past based on personal experiences, life histories or personal recollections and reminiscences. These definitions must be kept in mind as we set out to examine oral traditions collected by H.S.K. Mwaniki among the Embu of Kenya and published in 1971 under the title *Embu Historical Texts*.

### **Oral Traditions and the Debates of the 1950s – 1980s**

The Western historical profession was slow to accept oral traditions as historical sources until the late 1950s and early 1960s when Jan Vansina was able to professionalize their use. This he did by arguing for both the conscious expansion of methods drawn on by historians and the rigorous application of the conventions of historical analysis of the day to oral sources as well as written sources. The strength of Vansina's argument was that he argued for both approaches. His first book translated from French into English in 1965 and the *Journal of African History* (from 1960) therefore provided the much needed techniques. But Vansina was immediately criticized and attacked by both Europeanists and Africanists for "...seeking to apply western analytic techniques to new types of sources and to validate African histories on terms applicable to historical analysis in the west..." (Newbury, 1998: 6). Consequently, there were two schools of thought opposed to Vansina's model; the fundamentalist school of the 1960s and the structuralist school of the 1970s. The fundamentalists argued that oral traditions were literally true and therefore rejected Vansina's emphasis on the careful analysis of oral sources using western derived techniques. On the other hand the structuralists argued that virtually all oral traditions of the past were structured by the essential cosmological principles of the society in question and therefore that

they were simply the medium through which fundamental values of the society were expressed.

Early critics of his seminal work *De la tradition orale* (1961) pointed out to three problems of this work. First they questioned the elaborate method and its value for historical analysis; second they objected and questioned the wisdom for the intense search for the original version of the oral tradition and third they rejected the concept of the chain of transmission as opposed to the process of transmission. The greatest challenge to Vansina's oral methodology was by his own students, David Henige, Joseph C. Miller and Paul Irwin. Henige (1974) likened the search for chronology in oral tradition to a quest for a fantasy, questioning the validity of absolute chronologies derived from them. Miller (1980), incorporating elements of structural anthropology came to question the validity of the documentary analogy. Irwin (1981) questioned the whole premise of history through oral sources, arguing that if the techniques of the day had failed to account for the fluidity of the medium period, how was it possible that oral sources could be reliable and credible on the deep and remote past. Irwin therefore questioned the consistence and durability of oral traditions over time. These criticisms by his own students and other scholars made Vansina to shift "...significantly from his<sup>1</sup> conclusions presented in *De la tradition orale*" (Newbury, 1998: 27), as most of his later works were revisionists accounts which tried to incorporate some of the criticisms, for example *Children of Woot* (1975), *Paths in the Rainforest* (1991), *Living With Africa* (1994).

It is in the contexts of these debates and the subsequent revisions to oral historical analysis that this paper tries to offer a thematic and historical synthesis of Embu oral traditions collected by Mwaniki in 1971. For easy analysis, the paper has divided Mwaniki's collections into traditions (themes) pertaining to genesis/origin, the economy and famine, space and time, and war. This categorization and ordering is arbitrary and is used for purely convenience rather than anything else. Where possible, Embu oral traditions are evaluated against other Kenyan oral traditions as well as other secondary sources. This approach affords us to validate corroborate, supplement, amplify, or deny what Embu traditions say, thereby making it possible to judge their virtues and limitations.

## Oral Traditions Pertaining to Genesis/Origin

Flamboyant stories of origin are mythical charters and timeless, with the middle period moving in cyclical time and representing the ideal present society, and the recent period portraying events in linear time (Vansina, 1986: 105-106). In this paper, the term 'genesis' here is used in its broadest sense (Vansina, 1974: 317-322) to mean origin, creation and migration.

One of the versions recorded by Mwaniki among many has it that the very first people called Embu were a man and a wife called Kembu and Werimba respectively who bore sons and daughters who married each other until Embuland was filled, while another version runs, '... This was so long time ago that nobody remembers properly. After all nobody was there but the writings say that God created Adam and Eve and these were the mothers of the Embu. They traveled from the creation place to Embuland' (Mwaniki, 1971: 19 & 87). But according to Saberwal (1970: 3; 1976: 30) who also collected Embu traditions, the issue of origin excited no great interest among his informants although some of them told him that, '... Ngai (God) created the Embu people (or a man their common ancestor Muembu) when he created the rest of mankind, or that man Muembu and his close kinsmen migrated into Embu country from the Meru area'. Clearly, reference to Adam and Eve as the ancestors of the Embu is a clear case of what some scholars call feedback, that is a deliberate borrowing from other sources in order to enhance a claim. In this case, the borrowing is from Biblical sources.

True, the traditions of nearly all the peoples of eastern and central Kenya start with the origins of mankind, just like most traditions of oral societies in many parts of Africa. Another case in point is the Kikuyu legend of Gikuyu and Mumbi which runs thus, '... God created the first man and woman and gave them sheep, goats and land. The two had nine daughters, among whom land was divided. These were the ancestors of the present kikuyu clans and they still farm the land that was initially allocated to them by God' (Spear, 1981: 46).

Naturally traditions of origin tend to unite a whole people into a single genealogy. Many Embu traditions collected by Mwaniki point to Meru as the place of origin. For example, informants Simeon Guitangaruri and Noftaly Kabogo told Mwaniki (1971: 42-3) that

*... people came from Meruwards and crossed by Igambang'ombe ford. They settled at Guikuuri near Maranga hills. They had come*

*from Igembme and came to Tharaka where they also settled. They left Tharaka to come to Embu. The first people were very few but found the present Embuland completely empty and so occupied it. These were the founders of the two clans, Kina and Igamuturi.*

Another informant, Herbert Ndwiga Gataara says that the fore-fathers of the present Embu came from a place called 'Tuku' which might be Ethiopia or in Ethiopia (Mwaniki, 1971: 43).

Informants Ngiyane Makururu and Mrs. Maitha Kithae talk of their origin as a place beyond Meru, and this version is echoed by informants Petero Njuranio, Mbogo Kamwea, Kabogo Gacigua, Joseph Kibariki (Mwaniki, 1971: 63; 104; 106; 152). One interesting testimony is given by informant Joseph Kibariki who openly told Mwaniki that,

.... when the Europeans tried to ask the question of origin, we knew they wanted to take our land. So we told them ...that we are not new comers or slaves, we belong to here since the land was created and we expelled nobody from here ..... But in reality, nearly all nations came from Meru directions ... (Mwaniki, 1971: 152).

Such are the oral traditions about Embu origins, which are echoed by their close neighbours, the Mbeere and the Chuka. For example, informants Julius Mutembe (Mbeere) says that, 'the Embu came from Igembe ...' while Murigire and Njeru Ngairi's testimonies talk of Embu origins as being in the Meru direction (Mwaniki, 1971: 181; 211). Chuka traditions also claim that they (Chuka) came from Meru, together with the Mbeere, Embu, Gikuu, Tharaka and the Maasai (Mwaniki, 1971: 224). In short, therefore there is a lot of corroborative evidence in both Mbeere and Chuka traditions about the origins of the Embu. But the question still remains, to what extent can these claims be accepted as historical truth?

European anthropologists J. Orde-Browne, G.W.B. Huntingford, and H.E. Lambert showed considerable interest in the folklore and customs of the different peoples of Kenya as they went about recording their various stories. However, J. Orde-Brown, G. W. B. Huntingford and H. E. Lambert made little attempt to produce integrated histories of the different peoples they studied and many of these European writers based their works on the oral traditions of a few informants (Ogot, 1976: x). Anthropology therefore seems to offer little about the origins of the Embu. After all, one major weakness with anthropology is that it is concerned with structure and function than with the historical evolution of society and its institutions.

Just like anthropology, linguistic evidence about Embu origins seems to be lacking too, despite the fact that there are impressive linguistic affinities between the Kikuyu, Embu, Kamba and Meru. These linguistic affinities, according to Lambert, are unreliable evidence of tribal origins (Saberwal, 1976: 32). Even the pioneering archaeological work of Dr. Louis Leaky and his wife Dr. Mary Leaky offer very little on the early history of the present inhabitants of Kenya as they put more emphasis on the origin of man and the Stone Age Cultures. Ambrose (1982: 104) has aptly stated that the complexities of human geography in East Africa presents an intriguing challenge to oral historians, historical linguistics, and archaeologists alike, all of whom have attempted to document the places of origin and the times and directions of movements and contacts. However, written sources provide some clues to Embu origins or places of genesis. Assertions have been made by Lambert that the predecessors of the Kikuyu, Embu, Mbeere, Tharaka, Chuka and Meru peoples migrated to the general area of their present settlements from the famed Shungwaya region. Huntingford, Freeman-Grenville and Mathew, have also recently asserted the Shungwaya origin. However, Saberwal, says that such claims are baseless as none of his informants made reference to Shungwaya, warning readers not to accept them uncritically. Just like Saberwal, Munro (1967: 26) has also rejected Lambert's claims of a Shungwaya origin, arguing that the coastal peoples whose traditions are sufficiently strong enough to suggest a Shungwaya origin often refer to each other in these traditions and make no reference to the presence of Highland peoples at Shungwaya and also that the Highland peoples' traditions do not confirm this at all, save for two groups – the Meru and Tharaka. Munro further argues that the Kikuyu, Embu and Mbeere have no traditions of living anywhere else and that their origins are explained by myths. In Munro's eyes, Lambert appears to have taken the Meru evidence of a Shungwaya origin and applied it as a blanket covering to a general movement of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern highlands. While he concedes that Lambert's hypothesis could be correct, there is need for supporting evidence. Asserting his thesis he writes,

...In the meantime, in the case of Lambert's inclusion of the Kikuyu, Embu and Kamba in a general movement from Shungwaya, the Scottish verdict of 'not proven' must be retained. As evidence is lacking in their own traditions, proof of the migration of the Kikuyu-Embu-Kamba from Shungwaya can only come from archaeology (Munro, 1967:28).

But as we have already seen, archaeology is yet to produce something. Dismissing Lambert's assertions of a Shungwaya origin, Godfrey Muriuki says that

...the Kikuyu proper and the Cuka have no traditions of ever having emigrated from the coast, let alone Shungwaya. The Embu and Kamba, according to the researches recently carried out among them, do not have traditions that recall their emigration from the coast either. It is the Meru ..... alone that claim to have come from the place to the east .... Alone that claim to have come from the place to the east .... According to the Embu, the Mbeere and the Kikuyu, their ancestors originated either from the east or north-east of the present Mbeere country. In the event and on the evidence available, it is quite clear that the ancestors of the Tharaka, Cuka, Mbeere, Embu, Ndia, Gicugu and the Kikuyu migrated from the Tigania and Igembe in Meru. This migration was well underway by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century' (Muriuki, 1974: 49).

This claim is equally supported by Ochieng (1990: 8) who says that southward penetration by the first Bantu-speaking peoples began around AD1450, followed by the ancestors of the Tharaka, Embu and Mbeere and that after crossing River Thuci, both the Embu and Mbeere traveled southward to their present settlements.

Notwithstanding the various claims and counter-claims regarding the genesis of the Embu, the fact remains that the Embu migrated from an area outside their present location. It can also be safely concluded that the Embu came from the Meru direction and not the famed Shungwaya region. Other interesting observations include claims of an Ethiopian origin, possibly explaining why the Embu claim to have been created by God, as Ethiopia was a well known Christian country at the time. Furthermore, Embu claims that Ngai (God), created the Embu people, or that God created a man, their common ancestor Muembu when he created the rest of mankind has an analogy of the Biblical story of the creation of Adam, the first man supposedly created by God. Such a tradition could be a clear case of feedback, that is deliberate borrowing from the Bible. A case in point is Wilson Njiru's testimony which says that, '...what makes me believe that we came from the Jews is the fact that my grandfather's name Baricirai is in the Old Testament. Also the Jewish traditions are very much like ours ...' (Mwaniki, 1971: 278). Furthermore the whole idea of creation could have been borrowed from the Arabs or other western Christian groups during periods of contact as Saberwal points out that for several decades prior to the

establishment of the administration in Embuland, parties of Zanzibari traders had been visiting the Embu and that two or three European led expeditions had also visited the Embu (Saberwal, 1970: 14). It is true that Arabs and the Portuguese preceded the advent of Europeans in East Africa, and this information from historical sources finds confirmation in the memories of living Embu informants.

But one thing which readers should not miss in Embu oral traditions of origin is the invention of tradition in the wake of imperialism in order to safe-guard their interests as Joseph Kibariki's testimony has shown. This example is a classic case of deliberate distortion of tradition in order to validate the claims to land rights. Thus during the 1960s, the Embu, fearing land appropriation by the Europeans, emphasized traditions that showed an ancient attachment of the Embu-Mbeere to their land. Besides the treat of Europeans, border conflicts between the Embu-Mbeere and their neighbours have also led the different groups concerned to concentrate on traditions which try to prove land occupation from the earliest times. A case in point are the Mbeere who have been advancing claims that their ancestors lived in Mwea from time immemorial and a number of witnesses have supported such claims. Yet on the other hand, witnesses from the Ndia area have totally rejected these claims, saying that '... the Mbeere are lying .... Mwea has belonged to the Ndia since the time of our great-great-great-great-grandfathers' (Ambler, 1989: 155). It is therefore clear that anyone seeking to understand Embu oral traditions of genesis must of necessity be aware of the above intricate issues.

### **Oral Traditions Pertaining to the Economy and Famine**

Embu traditions also talk of the types of crops grown, the animals reared, trading activities and the various famines that hit Embuland. Embu traditions pertaining to the economy say that the Embu grew such crops as njavi, njugu, nthoroko, maize and such millets as sorghum, foxtail and bulrush, as well as bananas, arrowroots and sugarcane. Informant Getanguthi wa Mutundu says that these millets belonged to Embu while maize and beans found their way into Embuland from the outside world. One tradition by Herbert Ndwiga Gataara, the first educationist in Embu attempts to trace the development of agriculture by saying that the Embu people were collector-gatherers, and then Muembu learnt how to grow foodstuffs from the Comba traders. In the Embu oral tradition version, '.... Muembu, we are told, was first a hunter and collector-gatherer at the same time, then became a herder with a bit of



cultivation, lastly took to cultivation with little herding. Yams and sugarcane are indigenous while most grains and beans are exotic' (Mwaniki, 1971: 58). Embu traditions also make mention of conducting trading activities with their Mbeere neighbours, bartering goods like millets, goats and cattle especially in times of famine. Even honey and iron goods were bartered at the usual market places.

Mwaniki's collections of Embu traditions of the economy find confirmation in the traditions collected and analysed by Saberwal. According to Saberwal (1970: 2-3), there was division of labour among the Embu with the women cultivating a variety of crops like maize, peas, beans, sorghum, arrowroots, yams, bananas, cassava and sweet potatoes while livestock management (sheep, goats, cattle) was a male responsibility. Saberwal also tells us that hunting and gathering was an insignificant occupation among the Embu, although they were ardent bee-keepers. Like many other pre-colonial African societies, livestock represented accumulated capital that was used for bride-wealth and other various life-cycle ceremonies as well as for dispute settlement, besides being the last resort to food during times of famine (Saberwal, 1970: 3).

True to historical fact, Embu oral traditions point out that maize was not an indigenous crop, having been introduced by the first European traders to come into contact with them. However, despite the fact that bananas and sugarcane have no origin in Africa, Embu oral traditions claim the Embu have been cultivating them from time immemorial. Ochieng (1990: 24) and Gwyne (1975: 249) show that agriculture was first introduced into Eastern Africa through Ethiopia and the eastern Sudan from South West Asia during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. To the extent that Embu traditions talk of bananas and sugarcane as some of the crops they grew, one can speculate that the Embu must have established commercial ties with the outside world, or with other coastal African groups who might have established contacts with the voyagers. The story of the Comba traders (who might have been Arabs, Swahili or European traders) bringing seeds to Embuland from which the Muembu learnt how to grow foodstuffs tells it all. The characterization of Muembu as first a hunter, then collector-gatherer, then herder and finally cultivator is interesting in that it follows a well known pattern of the development of most societies from hunter-gatherer mode of production to settled agricultural societies. It is therefore possible that the tradition represents a well established pattern of transition from one mode of production to another, or that it might have been borrowed from any of the

hunter-gatherers and pastoralists groups of East Africa. On the basis of this, one can question the authenticity of the tradition given the informant's status. Herbert Gataara was a respected elder, the first educationist in Embu East, and a priest of long standing who might have borrowed this tradition from school books. Was it a coincidence that Gataara's testimony should be a carbon-copy of the historical evolution of agriculture?

Closely related to traditions of the economy are traditions of famine. Many Embu traditions talk of famines in the past, most of which were due to drought and locusts. Informant Muriria told Mwaniki that famines were frequent in the past and that among the memorable ones were *kavovo* and *kithioro*. '.... It came about 1917-18. People got maize flour after earning it through road-making from the British administration. Even so, famine corpses lined highways...' (Mwaniki, 1971: 7). *Kithioro* seems to be the most remembered famine because of its contemporaneity, coming as it did in the time of *muthungu* (whiteman).

Other major famines mentioned are Nvaraganu, Kiverio, Murekethu, Kavovo, Kivatanja, Kanungu, King'ang'a, Kibatau, *Kithioro* and that during such famine people ate such food as *matanda* 'boiled leaves of wild plants, blood yielded by cattle from both sides of their necks' and milk diluted with a lot of water (Mwaniki, 1971: 29). There is general consensus in all the traditions that the famines were a result of drought and locusts, thereby triggering movement of people in search of food and pasture. The traditions also say that many people died because of the famines, although many more died due to the heavy work on the road while others died '.... as they waited for their *kivava*'. The *kivava* was a tin-container used as a measurement for recipients of food rations. During this period, the tin was delayed for reasons that are not clear, leading to the deaths of many more people as others did not even have the strength to cook the flour, 'while others still died of hunger and beatings on the road work', relates Kariungi, with reference to *Kithioro* famine. Traditions of other groups also confirm Embu traditions of famine. For example, Mbeere and Chuka traditions talk of famines caused by locusts and lack of rains (Mwaniki, 1971: 237). To the extent that the Mbeere and Chuka mention *Kithioro* famine coming only 'yesterday,' after the whiteman was already around, and during the time of the First World War, this famine can be placed somewhere between 1915 and 1918. While allowing for possible borrowings from each other, the Embu traditions of famine could hardly be dismissed out of hand. Although these traditions do not provide dates save for *Kithioro* (1917-18), tentative dates for some of these traditions

could be arrived at, using Saberwal's proposition that rainfall variability was an important part of the ecological context, leading to famine every five to ten years and to major population migrations to and from Embu (Saberwal, 1970: 3; 1976: 29). It is common knowledge that man's biggest challenge in both pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial East Africa has been famine due to poor soils and unreliable rains. Saberwal says that he finds it reasonable to accept Embu testimonies that rainfall in Embuland fluctuated widely and that famines were frequent.

From the above, a number of historical interpretations are possible. Firstly, the traditions tell us that the Embu were an agricultural people who depended on the soil and livestock for survival and that climatic variability caused frequent movements in search of both food and pasture. This may explain why the Embu and their neighbours migrated from the Igembe-Tigania region to settle in the area to the south and east of the Mt Kenya area. It is also clear that Embu traditions of famine vividly remember the ugly face of colonialism where a good number of them lost their lives as many of the people were forced to work for the colonial government. As we all know, forced labour was widely practised throughout Africa during the colonial period. Embu traditions of famine can be used to explain both past and present food shortages in the East African region. While this may not necessarily be a new insight into the history of the region, it is important to state that Embu oral traditions do amplify that which we already know.

### **Oral Traditions Pertaining to Space and Time**

The physical environment can affect a peoples' conception of space. The Kikuyu, for example, see Mt Kenya as a marker of their early migration, shifting to Nairobi from ridge to ridge, whereas the Embu see Mt Kenya as too close to be a significant place of origin hence they talk of Meru, some distant place from their present settlement. Vansina (1985) says that the most important spaces were linked to the spot of creation, with temporary as well as spatial value. The directional element is also seen in Embu traditions as they talk of coming from the Meru direction or from Ethiopia, both of which can stand for spots of creation.

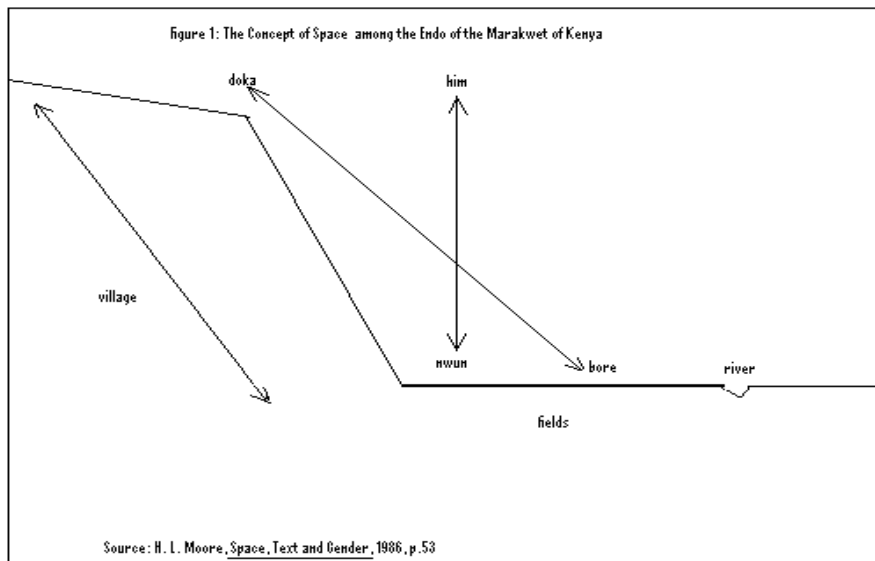
Embu village morphology is another clear expression of their conception and utilization of space. According to traditions, the Embu built all their homesteads in circular forms. Walls were put up of two concentric circles of closely erected poles. The gap between two rows of poles was filled with leaves and pressed so close with wooden mallets. The house was

then divided up inside into rooms with shorter walls of thinner posts (Mwaniki, 1970: 97). What is of interest is how the different huts of different members of the family were arranged relative to each other. To quote one tradition at length,

‘...If one had more than one wife and sons, the second wife and subsequent wives had their huts in the order of seniority. The man had his hut to the extreme right of the senior wife’s, with the elder son’s hut nearest to his, and the rest to the left of the elder son’s, in order of seniority’ (Mwaniki, 1970: 98).

Also of interest were sleeping arrangements. When sleeping in the family bed, the father slept to the right side of the bed with the mother on his left. The eldest child slept next to the wall by the bed’s extreme left, while the youngest child was next to the mother with the rest fitting themselves in order of seniority (Mwaniki, 1970: 14). This arrangement conforms to some popular conceptions of space like ‘upstream’ or ‘downstream’, north or south, right or left. According to Vansina, (1985: 127), concepts like ‘upstream’, ‘north’ or right tended to signifying superiority, while ‘downstream’, ‘south’ or left signified inferiority. Therefore the sleeping arrangements were symbolic of the roles and places accorded to each family member.

However, Mbeere traditions do not seem to corroborate those of the Embu with regards to village morphology. If there are any, then they are silent on this conception of space. The Chuka, who may have borrowed from Embu traditions, also have traditions of space which state that they built circular huts. Moreover, a good number of Kenyan societies just like many other societies in the world have their own varying conceptions of space. For example, villages of the Endo (of the Marakwet of Kenya) are built on the slope of the Cherangani escarpment and daily movements from the village to the fields on the valley floor is a constant process of moving up (*doka*) and down (*bore*). They also distinguish the heavens and earth by the terms *him* (up) and *nwun* (down), while some spaces are associated with men and with other women (More, 1986: 53), as Figure 1 below attempts to illustrate.



However, this idea of a systematic village pattern among the Embu is denied in some sources. Saberwal (1970: 10) quotes Orde-Browne, district Commissioner for several years between 1909 and 1916, describing the homesteads as ‘... haphazard in arrangement, and there seems to be no rule at all for the position of huts.’ Saberwal also says that man’s wives were not formally ranked and that the huts of married women, living virilocally, accounted for most members of a homestead.

Embu traditions are also expressive of time, especially the daily routine of the peoples’ lives modeled around agricultural seasons. Most of the traditions talk of two distinct seasons. Social activities like dancing and singing were timed for particular seasons. Usually there were two counted seasons in the Embu calendar viz: the season of *mwere* (millets) and *njavi* (maize). The traditions rightly point out that the season of maize came more recently as we know that maize was not indigenous to Africa. According to one informant, there were six ‘moons’ in one *mwere* season and another six ‘moons’ in the *njavi* season (Mwaniki, 1970: 36-37). Thus the Embu had a twelve months calendar, just like the modern calendar. Both Mbeere and Chuka traditions echo Embu traditions with regards to the concept of time, and of course this should not be surprising given that the groups were barely distinguishable from each other. Embu oral traditions also point out that

traditional dances and songs were performed during particular times of the year. For example, *Mboi* and *Mukinyo* dances were performed just before millets were ready for harvest, *Kithuco* after harvest, *Kuanyi* during the njavi (maize season), *Kigaru* during marriage and solely for women, *njai* during the season of sorghum, while *Makaari* songs were sung by victorious warriors who would have killed enemies (Mwaniki, 1971 77-78).

From the above, it can be seen that the Embu conception of time was cyclical or repetitive in which the past and the present were constantly renewed with each other- repeating itself. However, the traditions say very little about the remote past. This should not be surprising as many traditions of oral societies speak less of their remote past due to lapses in memory. After all, un-stratified or loosely structured societies in East Africa are notorious for their historical amnesia. As such, Embu traditions, like most African traditions, concentrate on the recent past and time-present, reckoning their time by the use of heavenly bodies and changes in climate.

### **Oral Traditions Pertaining to War**

Mwaniki (1970) says that many Embu traditions mention going to war with their neighbours – the Chuka, Mbeere, Kamba, Maasai, Tigania, Meru, Gikuu, Gumba and Kikuyo (Mwaniki, 1971: 8; 19; 44-47; 52-53; 56-57; 66; 88-92; 139; 141-4; 154-157; 168-178). Such wars are also mentioned in both Mbeere and Chuka traditions which Mwaniki also collected. The Embu have always presented themselves as victorious in these wars. Two testimonies would suffice. Informant Kabogo told Mwaniki that ‘...the Maasai came from Giduu .... taking the Embu by surprise .... The Maasai were driven to Gicogo. The Embu warriors cut them off on their way and killed almost all of them in Weru’ and of the Kamba, Kabogo says, ‘...there was much killing and capture of the Kamba ...’ (Mwaniki, 1971: 44: 47). Another informant, Kithae told Mwaniki about the Kikuyu-Embu wars that ‘...the rest of his warriors had to flee for their lives. They were chased and many were killed ...’ (Mwaniki, 1971: 66). The above claims are corroborated in Chuka traditions which claim that the Embu always prevailed over them in war, a rare confession made by any African group. While this confession may not be questionable, it remains doubtful as to whether the Embu were always victorious over their neighbours and other groups in war. It is very likely that Embu traditions have been ‘coloured’, a practice common among many oral societies of Africa in order to express politically convenient sentiments of superiority and invincibility. However, what remains obvious though is that

there were several wars among the various groups of the Mt Kenya area, reinforcing written claims that pre-colonial African societies were always involved in internecine wars.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has offered a thematic and historical synthesis of Embu oral traditions by showing their content and historical value in the absence of any known analysis since they were collected in 1971. The paper has shown that Embu oral traditions pertaining to genesis, the economy and famine, space and time, and war have greater historical significance. Again, the paper has shown that while many of the traditions may have suffered from contamination and amnesia, and may be shrouded in myths, they have rich political, economic, social and moral verbal messages that cannot be doubted. Furthermore, the paper has provided a general framework through which oral traditions can be analysed and discussed.

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