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A Reappraisal**



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MIGRATIONS OF THE BANTU-SPEAKING  
PEOPLES OF THE EASTERN KENYA  
HIGHLANDS: A REAPPRAISAL

BY J. FORBES MUNRO

IT is a common assertion that the various groups of peoples comprising the north-eastern Bantu arrived in the general area of their present homelands in eastern Kenya and northern Tanganyika after a dispersal from the famed Shungwaya, in the area of modern Port Durnford. In the volume which has deservedly become the standard work of reference on the pre-colonial history of East Africa, G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville has written that 'their own oral traditions claim Shungwaya as the dispersal point for the Kikuyu, Meru, Kamba, Teita, Asu, Chaga, Shambaa and Digo, if not the Segeju'<sup>1</sup>. There can be little doubt about the place of Shungwaya in the oral traditions of many of the coastal peoples of the north-eastern Bantu, such as the Giriama, Digo, Pokomo, Teita and Segeju.<sup>2</sup> But what of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Kenya Highlands, among whom are the first three groups on Freeman-Grenville's list—the Kikuyu, Meru, and Kamba? The most authoritative work on the traditions of migration of these peoples has been H. E. Lambert's *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: Part I, History of the Tribal Occupation of the Land*.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, Lambert reaches the conclusion that 'It is probable that the main migrations of the Bantu tribes of the Unit into their present territory formed part of a general movement from the north of the Tana River near the coast, in the region of Shungwaya.'<sup>4</sup> In other words, he suggests that the predecessors of the Kikuyu, Embu, Mbere, Tharaka, Chuka and Meru peoples migrated to the general area of their present settlements from the Shungwaya region. Elsewhere, he includes the Kamba in the same 'general movement'.<sup>5</sup> Lambert's views have been extremely influential, having been accepted, among others, by G. W. B. Huntingford,<sup>6</sup> G. Mathew,<sup>7</sup> and J. Middleton,<sup>8</sup> as well as by Freeman-Grenville. His work is not without its place of importance in East African historiography. He usefully brings together all the known traditions of migration of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Highlands and makes a brave attempt to make some sense out of this disjointed and fragmentary body of tradition.

<sup>1</sup> R. Oliver and G. Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1 (Oxford, 1963), 130.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the compendium of oral traditions in A. H. J. Prins, *The Coastal Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (London, 1952), 8-10, 43-51, 102-3.

<sup>3</sup> Cape Town, 1950.

<sup>4</sup> *Kikuyu Land Unit*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>6</sup> *History of East Africa*, 1, 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 114 n.

<sup>8</sup> *The Kikuyu and Kamba of Kenya* (London, 1953), 14.

However, the question remains—is Lambert justified in reaching the conclusion that these peoples probably migrated from Shungwaya to the Highlands, even on the evidence which he presents himself?

The coastal peoples whose oral traditions are sufficiently strong to suggest a Shungwaya origin often refer to each other in these traditions, but apparently make no reference to the presence of the Highland peoples at Shungwaya. Confirmation can only come from the traditions of the Highland peoples themselves. Only two groups have anything resembling a tradition of origin in the Shungwaya area. The most important of these are the Meru, whose traditions state that they once lived near “the great water”, but fled from there to avoid persecution by light-skinned people known as Nguntune. When they left they crossed “the sheet of water” and then crossed the Tana (this episode perhaps representing a double crossing of the Tana). They stayed for a while at a place called Kigairo or Ugairo or Urimba before trekking to their present country in the Highlands.<sup>9</sup> The much smaller Tharaka group have a very similar tradition,<sup>10</sup> and it is possible that they are an off-shoot of the Meru. On the other hand, it may represent nothing more than the borrowing of a tradition. Although Shungwaya is not mentioned, the Meru traditions could very well indicate an original home in that area. But of the other Highland peoples, the Kikuyu-Embu-Mbere have no traditions of living anywhere else. Their origins are explained by myths which make the Kikuyu, Kamba, Masai, and sometimes Dorobo, sons of the same father who took up different occupations.<sup>11</sup> This type of myth is also shared by the Kamba, but in addition the Kamba have a body of tradition which suggests that they came to their present homeland not from the north-east, but from the south, possibly somewhere around Mount Kilimanjaro.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the Kamba came to their present homeland by way of the south-eastern edge of the Machakos hills.

If then, the Kikuyu—Embu—Kamba have no traditions of origin at Shungwaya, or even near the coast or the Lower Tana, can one conclude, as Lambert does, that they migrated to their present homes from Shungwaya? What Lambert appears to have done has been to take the Meru evidence and apply it as a blanket-covering to a ‘general movement’ of the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Highlands. But his own evidence, in fact, suggests that the Meru case need not necessarily be typical and that the Meru may not in fact have been part of a ‘general movement’. There is firstly the question of timing. By his own computations, Lambert shows that the Meru were late-comers to the Highlands, arriving *ca.* 1750 A.D., while the main Kikuyu body reached Metume (Fort Hall) *ca.* 1545 A.D.

<sup>9</sup> *Kikuyu Land Unit*, 7–14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 19–20. See also R. Meinterzhagen, *Kenya Diary* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Kikuyu Land Unit*, 28; G. Lindblom, *The Akamba* (Uppsala, 1920), 13–14. Similar oral traditions were collected by myself in the course of field-work in Kenya during 1964–65, on a grant from the University of Wisconsin.

and the Embu arrived even earlier.<sup>13</sup> Accepting Lambert's own dates, there is a gap of 200 odd years between the arrival of the Kikuyu and the arrival of the Meru. This gap is sufficiently wide to cause one to query whether the Meru were part of the same 'general movement' as the Kikuyu-Embu groups. Perhaps even more important is the linguistic evidence. Lambert himself points out that 'the languages (or dialects) within the Unit divide themselves into two main groups. One includes Kikuyu, Ndia, Gichuga, Embu and Mbere, and is closely related to Kamba. . . The other group includes Meru, Muthambi and Mwimbi, and shows closer affinity with the coast languages (Pokomo, Nyika) than does the first.'<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Meru (and the two small offshoots, Muthambi and Mwimbi) are unique among the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Highlands in that their language shows closer affinities to that of the coastal peoples than does the language of their neighbours. This again throws doubt on the application of Meru experience to the Kikuyu-Embu-Kamba, and suggests that the Meru migrations can be seen as part of the movements of the coastal peoples rather than the movements of the Highland peoples.

What, then, is the position of the Kikuyu, Embu and Kamba, and the smaller related groups? Can they be said to have migrated from Shungwaya? There is no evidence to suggest this in their own traditions, or in the traditions of the coastal peoples; nor can the Meru case be taken as applying to them. In fact, the Kamba traditions of origin have probably more relevance to the migrations of the Kikuyu-Embu-Kamba groups than have the Meru traditions. It is possible to put forward the counter hypothesis that the Kikuyu, Embu and Kamba never lived in the Shungwaya area, but moved north from Tanganyika directly into the Highlands, possibly along the line of the Athi River, prior to or at the same time as the dispersal of the other groups from Shungwaya? Lambert, in fact, notices the anomaly of the Kamba traditions, and attempts to fit them into his general scheme by putting forward the hypothesis that the Kamba came south from the Shungwaya area, then turned west and north again, up the Athi River.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is really begging the question, for it still has to be proved that the Kamba, or indeed the Kikuyu or Embu, were living at Shungwaya. Lambert's general hypothesis about the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Highlands could still be correct, but supporting evidence must be found. It may be that the archaeological investigations at

<sup>13</sup> *Kikuyu Land Unit*, 33-43. Lambert's methods of dating raise some important questions, with which I do not intend to deal at length. His dates of c. 1750 for the Meru and c. 1545 for the Kikuyu (Metume) may well be reasonably accurate, being based in the case of the Meru on two lists of age-grades and in the case of the Kikuyu on a list of generation ages. There is still a good margin for error, however, in that the two Meru lists are far from being in complete agreement and the Kikuyu data are based on one list only. Much more doubtful are his dates for the Ndia (c. 1475), Embu (c. 1425) and Chuka (c. 1300), which are based on an estimate of the rate of occupation per square mile. This system fails to take into account such variables as population growth, or decline and density of settlement.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 27-28.

present being carried out under Dr Brian Fagan, by the British Institute of History and Archaeology in East Africa, will provide this evidence. 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 returned.

#### SUMMARY

Historians have frequently included the Bantu-speaking peoples of the eastern Kenya Highlands—Kikuyu, Embu, Mbere, Kamba, Meru, etc.—in the general migrations of the North Eastern Bantu from Shungwaya. The most authoritative statement in support of this view is set out in H. E. Lambert's *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: Part 1, History of the Tribal Occupation of the Land*. However, only the Meru have oral traditions pointing to a Shungwaya origin, and chronological and linguistic evidence which Lambert presents himself suggests that the Meru experience may not be typical of this group of peoples. As evidence is lacking in their own traditions, proof of the migrations of the Kikuyu—Embu—Kamba from Shungwaya can only come from archaeology.