

---

## **The Wameru of Tanzania: Historical Origin and Their Role in the Process of National Integration**

---

**Marina L. Butovskaya**

*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow; Moscow State University*

**Valentina N. Burkova**

*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow*

**Dmitriy V. Karelin**

*Moscow State University; Centre for Ecology and Forest Productivity, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Meru live in one of the most fertile and densely populated areas of Tanzania, and their current population number is about 198,000 people. Today they are organized in 26 clans. Most Wameru claim their origin from the Machame and Siha/Ng'uni groups associated with Chagga community, whose ancestors arrived and settled on the slopes of Mt. Meru about 400 years ago. Three clans traced back to the Maasai ancestors. The Meru actively opposed Christianity, and the missionaries were treated extremely hostile. The first Meru who adopted Christianity in 1905 was ostracized by the whole community. In the course of time the situation changed and currently most Meru are Christians. The Meru actively participated in liberation movement and were among the closest comrades of Julius Niere. The economic liberalization evoked changes influencing the Meru people economy. Along with agriculture, many families are now engaged in various off-farm activities.*

Social Evolution & History, Vol. 15 No. 2, September 2016 141–163  
© 2016 'Uchitel' Publishing House

## INTRODUCTION

Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world in economic and demographic terms and refers to 10 per cent of the poorest economies in the world in per capita terms. According to the United Nations and the Central Information Agency for 2011 year 68 per cent of Tanzanians live below the poverty line of US\$1.25 per day (UNDP 2015; CIA 2015). The Tanzanian economy is heavily based on agriculture, which accounts for more than 25 per cent of gross domestic product, provides 85 per cent of exports and accounts for 80 per cent of the employed workforce. At the same time, due to climatic conditions the crops are grown only in 4 per cent of the country's territory (CIA 2015).

Since Tanzania is an agricultural country, it is natural that the predominant amount of population lives in rural regions, and before 1974 there were mostly small villages. As a result of political reforms in the period from 1974 to 1977 such villages were mostly integrated, and created about 7.5 thousand consolidated villages. Tanzania is one of the least urbanized countries in Africa (Shlyonskaya 2010: 18).

According to the July 2015 data, the total population of Tanzania was 51,045,882 people, representing more than 130 different ethnic groups (CIA 2015) including Meru (Wameru, rwa, rwo). The Meru have been involved in intensive agriculture and now live in the south-eastern and eastern slopes of Mount Meru (JP 2015). The Meru sometimes call themselves 'Varwa', which translated from the Kimeru language means 'those who climb' (from an interview with an informant № 1). Ninety-four per cent of the Meru are Christians (75 per cent are the Protestants and 25 per cent – Catholics), 3 per cent are adherents of Islam (JP 2015).

The Kimeru language, spoken by the Meru, belongs to the Bantu languages, and by its origin has been closely related to one of the dialects of the Chagga language of West Kilimanjaro. The Meru are close to the Chagga not only in language but also in cultural terms. This closeness, according to most experts, is not coincidental: the historically significant number of Wameru clans considered themselves the descendants of Machame and Siha/Ng'uni groups associated with Chagga ethnic community (Spear 1997: 18). Presumably, about 400 years ago the natives from the Machame area left the slopes of Kilimanjaro and moved to the area of Mount Meru (now it is District Aru Muro) (Mlola 2010). One should re-

member that the Wameru do not have any kinship relationships with the Ameru people living in Kenya, except for their common belonging to the Bantu language group. Today the population number of the Wameru is about 198,000 people (JP 2015). In the 1830s when the Arusha people appeared on the slopes of Mount Meru, the Wameru had already been there (Spear 1997). In 1896 punitive expeditions against both the Arusha and Meru were launched the German punitive expedition in the course of which large number of Arusha and Meru were killed, their cattle confiscated, banana groves burnt down to spare the land for the European farmers. Soon, this land was occupied by the Afrikaners that emigrated from South Africa. With the beginning of the British colonial rule in 1916, the Wameru began to actively expand their settlements and farms around, thus extending their agricultural crops planting area. By the 1920s coffee had become the most profitable agricultural product among the Meru farmers (Spear 1997). In addition, they also grew bananas, maize, and beans (Baroin 2003).

Generally, the Meru do not differ much in appearance from the majority of the population of modern Tanzania since they are dressed in the same way as most of the neighboring agricultural groups. This is either a western cut clothing, or (for women) – traditional clothes of African colorful cotton material. In anthropological terms the Meru are metis population, formed by the mixing of the Eastern Bantu and Maasai tribes (Photo 1, 2).



**Photo 1. Marina Butovskaya with Margaret, the director of Makumira School (Photo by Dmitriy V. Karelin)**



**Photo 2. Interview with Meru elders (Photo by Dmitriy V. Karelin)**

### **SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

Traditionally the Meru represent a typical example of a patriarchal society. For them the patriarchy, an institutionalized male dominance over women and children in the family and in the society was a norm (Lerner 1986: 239). Their organization is based on the traditional clan system: the Meru are divided into 26 clans. Most of researchers believe that the majority of the Meru clans descended from the Chagga (Mlola 2010: 98), and only few clans have the Maasai origin (clans of Pallangyo, Nko, and Sikawa [Spear 1997: 22]). The latter was confirmed by one of the Meru elders (interview with an informant № 1). Although, some specialists in the Meru history indicated that the most senior four Meru clans all claim the Shambaa origin (these clans are Mbise, Kaaya, Akyoo, and Sumari), while the rest of the Bantu origin clans are of the Chagga descent (Ndosi, Nanyaro, Urrio, and Nasari, *etc.*) (Spear 1997: 21–22). Some researchers suppose that the high-status clans deliberately insist on the non-Chagga origin. In this way, they try to distance themselves in their origins from the dominating in political terms and numerous Chagga neighbors. In this context, the Mbise, Kaaya, and Sumari consider the Machame not as ancestral but as sister groups (Moore and Puritt 1977: 91–93). However, one should note that actually there are hardly any obvious traces in lan-

guage and culture of the modern Meru that suggest their Shambaa origin.

Each Meru clan is thought to be descended from a common ancestor often an earlier settler on the slopes of Mount Meru. Thus, each area within Meruland has been associated with the name of a prominent and respected ancestor, and named after him (Spear 1997: 21). These settlements today are Poli, Urisho, Sura, Sing'isi, Mulala, Nkoaranga, Nsupo, Ndati, Kimundo, Ndoombo, Akeri, Ikona, and Nkoanrua, *etc.* Each area is associated with a particular clan. For example, Poli is the place of the Sumari clan, Kimundo – of the Kaaya. Although most of the clans live in a particular area within Meruland, some of the clans do not have their own territory and may be dispersed throughout Meruland. The examples are two clans, Urio and Kitomari (Spear 1997: 22).

Each Meru clan has also been associated with certain abilities and assigned for particular public mission. For example, the members of the clan Mbise were claimed to have magical power of diviners and rainmakers (this clan in the Meru's social hierarchy occupied the highest rank). The men of the Kaaya clan inherited political power (were hereditary rulers) and possessed magical power, and the members of the Sarajija clan had life-giving power and their blessing provided protection for houses and gardens. The clan Sikawa of the Maasai origin was attributed as blacksmiths and occupied one of the lowest levels of the social ladder (Spear 1997: 22). Note that the clan of blacksmiths in the pastoralists Datoga society occupies a similar low social position (Butovskaya *et al.* 2015).

Today the Meru clan system has been gradually destroyed. This is a consequence of state policy of the government of Julius Nyerere in the 1960s, primarily directed at the creation of a single Tanzanian nation with a common language (Swahili) and common cultural traditions (interview with an informant № 2).

Still, in their memory the Meru preserved the name of one of their leaders Rari II (also known as Ndemi), who ruled until 1887. This wise leader made significant contribution to economy, in particular, to agriculture, enriching it with new crops including millet, maize, and bananas. He introduced pottery and iron crafts (Spear 1997: 27–28). The Wameru also established the Arusha settlement in the 1830s.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the interaction between the Meru clans of the Bantu origin and groups of the Arusha (Maasai) origin intensified. According to historical data, the Arusha arrived to Mount Arusha slopes, while the Meru people had already settled around Mount Meru. The Arusha settled in the valley south of Mount Kilimanjaro, raised cattle and grew corn. Living rather close to the Meru, the Arusha actively attacked neighbors, hijacking their cattle and taking people away into slavery. The Meru tried to resist the military raids via forming their own military structures. The ethnic identity of the Meru and Arusha was formed by the end of the nineteenth century (Spear 1997: 239).

### **HOMESTEAD**

Today the Meruland is characterized by high population density and agricultural specialization due to the high fertility of the local soil in the first place. The contemporary Meru grow bananas, mangoes, avocados, coffee, tomatoes, legumes and cereals, including maize, rice, millet and sorghum. Along with this, today the Meru hold a limited amount of livestock due to the almost complete lack of grazing land. However, in the late nineteenth century the Wameru kept large herds of cattle on the open pasture. The changed priorities in the use of land can be explained by the transition to growing of a number of crops for sale (primarily coffee) that occurred in the early twentieth century.

A homestead of an individual family – a farm ('kihamba') – functions via the labor of its members. The soil of the household is used not only for crops; a part of the territory can be occupied by trees that serve as a source of wood for construction and as fuel for the fire. Historically, the Meru have built round houses covering them with banana leaves, but today one can hardly meet such houses in Meruland. Most of the Meru live in brick houses, roofed with galvanized iron sheet.

The land in homestead is strictly inherited through the male line from father to son. At the same time, the youngest son inherits the family household, including the parents' house and most of the land plot while the elder sons take their land plots and must make almost a brand new effort to build a house and organize the economy (Spear 1997: 26). The Meru explain such a distribution of the real estate in the following way: the elder sons become mature

when the parents are still young and strong and therefore do not need help of children. When father gets older the eldest son has to take on parental responsibilities and look after the younger children. The junior son does not leave the father's house and must take care of the parents until their deaths (interview with an informant № 1).

Daughters also get a dowry from the parents in the form of small and big cattle, which in the future after the marriage the woman, her husband and children can use. However, in polygamous families, the ownership and use of cattle is fixed only for the woman and her offspring. Similar practices of securing cattle for a woman are also observed among the Datoga (Butovskaya *et al.* 2012).

## **FAMILY**

The Meru have traditionally practiced polygamy (Mbise 1973; Spear 1997). The polygamous males had more children, and therefore, more workers to handle more land. Women in polygamous families also have a better position, because all wives share workload and take care of children together. As a consequence, the polygamous families are richer and better off. In accordance with the Meru traditions a male can have as many wives as he is able to support. His first wife later helps husband to choose other wives. Her dominant status is recognized by all the wives. At the same time, all the children in a polygamous family are provided with equal share of the inheritance (except for the youngest son who inherits the house and his father's land). In polygamous families throughout Africa there exists a certain hierarchy among wives, based on the principle of priority of marriage with husband: the first wife is higher in status than the second and so on, because she fulfills certain organizational and economic function. The first wife distributes the work between wives, cares about the food for her husband and is responsible for the welfare of the whole family (Holleman 1979; Ksenofontova 2010: 52–52; Seed 1932: 73). The persistence and stability of polygamy in Africa are now explained in the first place by economic reasons since the low-effective technological systems prevailing among the majority of Africans make the family livelihood become dependent primarily on the labor of women and children (Rybalkina 2010: 127).

The Meru polygamous household includes a separate house for father (in fact, this is an analogue of the male house) where father and each wife's grown-up sons live and individual houses for every wife where women live with their children. At the age of ten the boys move to live in their father's house, while girls stay in the mother's house until they marry.

Traditionally the mother's status in the Meru society was quite high. However, the Meru only honored the woman who gave birth to three or more children (interview with informants № 1 and № 2). This transition was symbolically indicated by clothes: after the birth of her third child a woman changes a short fringed leather skirt to a long skirt crafted of long leather stripes. Similar phenomena can be observed all over Africa, where over the years a woman with numerous children becomes one of the central figures in the family (Holleman 1979; Ksenofontova 2010: 51).

Traditionally, the birth takes place in the woman's house and the delivery is assisted by a specially trained midwife. According to the respondents' stories (interviews with respondents № 1 and № 5) if the birth pangs start on her way somewhere, a woman should hide in the bushes and put a symbolic branch on the path. If she is lucky and a man conducting male circumcision happens to be nearby, then she will get assistance. This man would rub her belly with special grass and put a bunch of grass in her vagina to stop the bout. Then he would escort the woman to her house and leave to call the midwife. The woman gives birth while lying on the bed. The cord is cut by disposable razors (special knife in the past). The afterbirth is buried in the ground near the bed. The interval between births is on average two-three years.

The birth ceremony is compulsory. First, mother-in-law visits the woman. She brings milk, butter and other gifts. Then neighbor-women come to visit her. Approaching the house they make loud hooting sounds symbolizing the universal joy. Thus, the whole district learns about a new member of the society. In two-three days after the birth, a child is treated with a small portion of mashed fried banana. A breast-fed lasts from one year to one and a half years. All this time a child sleeps in the same bed with his mother. According to the Meru tradition, a child has to inherit the name of one of the recently passed away family members, but the real name will be kept in secret from outsiders (Millett 2001).

The family violence may happen among the Meru. A husband can beat his wife, but it is not encouraged by society. In this case a woman has the right to apply the elders for help. The gathered assembly of community elders will call husband and wife to come and explain the reasons for misbehavior. Most often, the husband will pay his wife a penalty (interviews with informants № 1 and № 2). Similar practice is typical for their polygamous neighboring pastoralists Datoga. The woman's relatives (father or brothers) will demand a penalty for her husband. Sometimes if her own relatives live rather far away, a woman seeks for help from neighboring elders or husband's relatives (Butovskaya 2012). The last Constitution of the Meru people, based on customary law, contains an article that extends female rights. Particularly, it is stated, that if her husband drives her from the house the woman has the right to claim for husband's land, or that her husband's clan has to provide her with a piece of land. Besides, in case of serious physical abuse her husband is obliged to pay a penalty in the form of cattle (Baroin 2003: 158). According to interviews (informants № 1 and № 2), however, it happens from time to time, that husbands are beaten by wives. Such facts rarely come into public, since such men would inevitably lose the respect of others and become the object of ridicule. As a rule, in such cases husbands preferred to divorce without raising unnecessary noise.

The education of children is carried out by both parents in line with the gender principal. Mother teaches girls, father – boys. Parents have the right to punish children for various faults using a stick (rod) or simply slapping with a hand. Yet, certain restrictions should be followed: if the father is around, the punishment could be carried exclusively by him. In his absence the mother can punish her children for misbehavior. However, fathers cannot punish grown-up girls since this is strictly tabooed because the father is not allowed to touch her. So in this case, mother carries the penalty (interview with informant № 2).

### **INITIATION RITES: CIRCUMCISION**

Traditionally, the Meru practice both, male and female circumcision. The custom of female circumcision was introduced by the immigrants from the Kilimanjaro regions (interview with informant № 1). The traditional female circumcision took the form of cli-

toridectomy and was a part of the female initiation. The circumcision was performed by specially trained woman using a special ritual knife. Currently the female circumcision is performed using a single blade razor. The tradition of female circumcision was officially banned during the British colonial rule. According to specially issued law, the arrangement of daughter's circumcision inflicted a penalty for the parents responsible for it. However, the attempts to ban this and similar operations failed and circumcisions were simply carried out in secret (Kulkova 2010: 124). With Julius Nyerere coming to power the female circumcision was severely prosecuted. Yet, today this tradition continues to persist in a transformed form. The girls are now being circumcised in infancy, while in the past this ceremony used to be conducted at the age of puberty. Thus, the ceremony of circumcision ceased to perform the function of female initiation, symbolizing the transition from adolescence to the age of a mature woman capable for childbearing. It is important to note that the tradition of female circumcision – whatever it used to be and is preserved in the present – does not imply the association of women in the age classes and does not aim at contributing to the arrangement of cohesive female groups.

The causes of the stable practice of the female circumcision are the matter of considerable debate. Some scholars point to the persistence of social ideas about the women's dependence on men; others find the reason in social attitudes towards preserving cultural traditions. The evolutionary psychologist Martin Daly defines the female circumcision as a global 'sado-ritual syndrome' practiced to reinforce patriarchal authority in traditional societies (Daly 1978). However, according to some anthropologists this ceremony probably expresses the fundamental idea of the subordination of younger women to the eldest as well as the idea of obedience of daughters to mothers, rather than the principle of gender discrimination (Thomas 2000). As we know, in the Kenyan Meru the transition from circumcision by means of a special triangular knife to the use of a razor blade, caused an active condemnation from the side of the elder women, and the different attitudes between the younger and the older generations on the issue persisted in the 2000s as well. One should note that the women themselves were the main defenders of the ritual (the interview with the respondent № 1). Thus, it would be wrong to consider the excision among the

Meru as a manifestation of female discrimination by the males or as an attempt to deprive women of sexuality and sexual drive. Some researchers believe that this operation equalizes the status of women with men who also undergo circumcision, allowing them to perceive their importance and value for the society (Kulkova 2010: 124).

The Meru also practiced male circumcision whose origin goes back to similar practice among the Chagga people. According to the respondent (interview respondent № 1), the members of the Mbise clan initially practiced male circumcision. But they lacked the Institute of *morans* (warriors). The initiation accompanied by the circumcision of boys provided membership in a particular age group within a particular clan. However, despite the fact that within this unit men become brothers as a result of the initiation, it does not function as an independent military or political association (Grant *et al.* 2003; Puritt 1970: 46–48). According to this tradition, each group of initiating boys chooses a leader among themselves. These leaders had to submit to the head of their clan. And those, in turn, to submit to the supreme ruler (Mangi). In the case of general meetings all leaders represent their clans before the Mangi.

Meru young men after initiation became members of a particular age-set which under the influence of contacts with the Arusha developed into a warrior group (Spear 1997: 29). From 1881 until 1929 Meru did initiation into Talala (settlement of a Maasai loibon), and obtained the morans status together with Maasai boys (Spear 1997: 30). The parents of a young Meru would pay for initiation to loibon with tobacco and goats. During this period the Meru joined the succeeding two Maasai age-sets: Tuati (1896–1917) and Tareto (1911–1929). The Meru continued to participate in the initiation with Maasai and shared age-sets with them till 1959. After that time they broke with the Arusha and continued to initiate their own warrior units and give their own names for each generation set, different from the Maasai names for their generation sets (Spear 1997: 30). However, the general organization principles of such units are similar with the Maasai: every such unit selects its own leader (*laigvanani* in Maa, means commander) whose primacy is strictly recognized by all members of the age-set; the leader serves simultaneously as a mediator in all internal conflicts, he is delegated to the right speaker to navigate conflicts with other age-sets. As a result, such peculiar structure of the age-sets allows their

leaders to usurp some of the duties and rights of the clan chiefs (Spear 1997: 31). Thus, in Meru society the whole male population is divided into a number of '*rika*' (age-sets). Young men enter the youngest *rika* after circumcision. The interval uniting young men into one *rika* is about 15 years. Each *rika* has its own leader and positions itself as a separate warrior unit (Baroin 2003: 155).

### RELIGION

Initially, there was an open opposition to the ideas of Christianity in Meru society, and the missionaries were treated extremely hostile. The first Meru who adopted Christianity in 1905 were considered as lost identity, and subjected to complete ostracism. Among the first Meru who adopted Christianity in 1905 were Luke Kaaya, Nderingo Palangyo, and Yohana Ndosí. After proper training in the missionary center in Marangu, they subsequently returned to Meru-land and became directors of newly opened schools for the local people (Spear 1997: 161).

At the beginning of the Christianization process mothers actively resisted attempts by missionaries to take their children to school. If that occurred they would defiantly shave their heads and mourn their children as dead (Mbise 1973). Such a hostile attitude towards the Christianization had certain obvious reasons: the missionaries persuaded the Meru to eliminate polygamy, claimed that the traditional beliefs were not pleasing to God, and criticized the practice of female circumcision. That is they condemned cultural and moral values of the Meru, and certainly, the Meru could have hardly accepted this.

By 1912 the situation began to change and some Meru girls started to attend a day school (Spear 1997: 101–102). After 1916 the Christianization of Meru became intensive. Yet, one should say that in that period the missionaries also began to show greater loyalty and tolerance for the Meru cultural traditions. Today, the vast majority of Meru are Christians. But they insist that this in no way conflict with their traditional and ethnic identity. Many people professing Christianity talk proudly about ethnic roots and are well aware of the cultural traditions. They follow traditional customs, visit traditional sacred shrines and pray to traditional deities (Photo 3).



**Photo 3. Sacred Meru place on Mount Meru slopes  
(Photo by Marina L. Butovskaya)**

### **TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES AND NATIONAL MOVEMENTS**

The traditional authority of *Mangi* was grateful. The *Mangi* from Kaaya clan that had moved to the Arusha region inherited the traditions of the previous *Mangi* (according to the Meru elders, all their *Mangi* have traced their origin from the Shambaa). It was assumed that *Mangi* took care of all the people and the land inhabited by the people of Meru. Besides, he was the chief judge and by his decision the sentenced individuals were flogged with sticks and then sent to prison. In addition, such criminals were obliged to pay penalties to *Mangi* for their faults (Puritt 1970).

While initially the title of *Mangi* was hereditary, later under the pressure of the colonial administration (first German and later British) the hereditary power of the *Mangi* was over. The chiefs were elected in accordance with their abilities and popularity among people and loyalty to the colonial authorities. The German colonial rulers constructed an impressive brick residence in Poli. From here *Mangi* ruled his people, regularly arranged meetings, and carried the important decisions, and settled clan conflicts and disputes. This residence is still present in Poli as a historical artefact (Photo 4). Today local authorities try to restore it and convert into the Museum of Meru History. Close to the building in the open field the huge sa-

cred tree is growing. All community meetings both in the past and at present have been conducted in its shadow.



**Photo 4. Residence of last Mangi in Poli  
(Photo by Marina L. Butovskaya)**

The formation of moran's groups among the Meru youngsters caused some social tension in the society. The morans ceased to obey not only the leaders of the clan, but also the *Mangi*. The moran groups started raiding, robbing neighbors and taking cattle from them. They remained almost deaf to bans of the supreme leader. One of the documents of those times contains the following information. The first Europeans who visited the Meruland in 1887 were immediately robbed by a group of young warriors from both Meru and Arusha youngsters. The victims went to complain to *Mangi* named Matunda. However, he failed to provide real help to these people. The *Mangi* confessed that morans followed instruction of their elected leaders, but not himself (Puritt 1970; Spear 1997: 31). Thus, the gradual transformation of the social organization of Meru in the direction of paramilitary organizations of Maa-sai type led to substantial decentralization of Meru society in the late nineteenth century.

Between the 1930s and 1940s, a substantial population growth was observed among the Meru, which resulted in both local and colonial concern about the increasing pressure on land (Baroin 2003: 151). The situation was aggravated by the fact that many White settlers had set up large and profitable coffee plantations, forming a circle around Mt. Meru, which prevented the Meru from

expanding down the mountain and from taking their herds to the low pastures and watering points (Baroin 2003: 152; Iliffe 1979: 145; Luanda 1986: 273). Although Lake Tanganyika was the Mandated Territory of the British Empire after the defeat of Germany at the end of World War II it had been administered by the United Kingdom under the loose supervision of the League of Nations promoting 'the material and moral well-being and the social progress of the inhabitants' (Iliffe 1979: 246–247; Baroin 2003: 152). The British tried to carry out a new policy, under which the former tribal authorities were transformed into more modern and democratic Local Governments. It was thus decided that in accordance with the colonial administration the local chiefs were to be elected and should rule in keeping with a written tribal constitution, which would combine local practices with modern principles, such as the separation of executive and legislative functions (Baroin 2003: 152; Iliffe 1979: 246–247). The creation of tribal Constitution dated back to 1948. In this period the Meru refused to collaborate with colonial administration, and boycotted *Mangi* because they felt that local ruler was assisting the colonial administration to gain their tribal lands, and thus demanded his resignation. The British tried to suppress the rebellion by deporting most of its leaders, but unintentionally made matters worse: many Meru joined the Kilimanjaro Citizens' Union (KCU) that had been set up by the Chagga and was aimed at eroding the power of local traditional authorities. Although this Constitution has never been used, the Meru acknowledged the superiority of its basic principles (Baroin 2003: 153; Iliffe 1979: 491–494; Tanganyika Territory 1948: 63).

The national movement spread over in the 1940s, and affected Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). The Tanganyika African Association (TAA) was among the first parties that united people of different ethnic origin under the slogan of national liberation. Although the progressive Meru representatives were involved in this party, the unprecedented actions of the colonial government stimulated massive activity of the Meru, who, as a result, concentrated on the defense of their ethnic group's historic rights in tribal land.

On January 1, 1951 the Meru set up their separate political party, the Meru Citizens' Union (MCU), splitting from the KCU. On 24 February, the Meru elected their first Paramount Chief *Nshili Nnini* (which means 'a big leader'), using the same word '*nshili*'

which used to refer to a clan leader in parallel with the pro-British *Mangi* (Baroin 2003: 153). The new national party was headed by Kirilo Japhet, who was also the Secretary of the local branch of the ATA in Arusha at that time.

In the historical annals the precedent was denoted as ‘The Meru Land Case’ 1951 (Jafet and Seaton 1967; Wright 1966). The conflict between the colonial authorities and Meru was the result of illegal eviction of 3,000 farmers from their ancestral lands in the area Engare Nanyuki and transfer of these fertile lands to ownership of the European farmers. Although the protest at the tribal level yielded no results, Meru did not resign to the actions of the colonial officials. They sent Kirilo Japhet to represent their rights in the UN, where the case of infringement of the rights of the indigenous people was considered. The UN recognized that the British colonial authorities acted illegally and issued the resolution in favor of Meru. The UN resolution said: ‘the land should be returned to Meru as originally belonging to them by law’. However, the British authorities simply ignored the UN resolution. The Meru Community would never give up. Japhet consulted with other leaders of the TAA, Julius Nyerere and S. Kandoro concerning the further possible actions. They advised him to go through Tanganyika telling the whole country about the infringement of the rights of his people, and about the UN resolution in favor of the Meru ignored by the British. Over time, ‘The Meru Land Case’ turned into a nationwide business, and the leaders of the TAA, including Julius Nyerere used it to form the political claims of their party platform in 1954 (Japhet and Seaton 1967). The Meru considered K. Japhet their national hero, ‘Merishai’ (in KiMeru) (Mesaki 2013: 22).

The final blow to Meru tribal organization and traditional tribal hierarchy was inflicted in the times of Julius Nyerere. Before that time *Mangi* used to officially perform administrative functions associated with the colonial authorities while *Nshili Nnini* was responsible for internal affairs. In 1963 the power of *Mangi* was finally abolished and *Nshili Nnini* remained the only representative of the tribal power (Baroin 2003: 154, 157). His main function was to enforce the customary law in accordance with tribal constitution and wishes. He did not make decisions independently: a consensus was always cared for, and all matters of general concern were discussed within the tribal council or in public meetings (Baroin 2003:

154). The *Nshili Nnini* had no special clothes, but when on duty, they carried a special sacred stick '*ndata*' carved from senefu tree. Such sticks as symbols of status are known throughout Tanzania (both the Maasai and the Swahili used them). 'No one else should touch the stick, and although the chief can curse a person by pointing it at him, or by turning it upside down in front of this person, he should never use it to kill another human being. The supernatural power of *ndata* is such that it also stops fighting: the chief only needs to raise it above the belligerents and they will stop immediately' (Baroin 2003: 154). The *Nshili Nnini* headed the council of elders called the '*kamati*' composed of about 15 to 20 members representing clans and elders. They meet two-three times a month under a huge tree in the center of the village to solve common tribal issues, sometimes acting as the High Court in cases when local meetings failed to solve the problems (Baroin 2003: 155).

Despite the fact that *Mangi* had lost his importance as the leader of Meru, the clan leaders still have power nowadays and control the life of Meru local communities. For example, a serious crime is a police matter, but the lawsuits and disputes over land or violent behavior of young people are currently still under the charge of the local elders (interview with informant № 2). When the head of the family fails to settle the family conflict, it is discussed within the lineage; if the lineage cannot solve the problem as well, the members of the clan will try to find a proper solution. Only if this does not work either, the case goes to *kamati* (Baroin 2003: 155). The decisions of *kamati* are indisputable, and hardly anyone dares to apply to the state court (Baroin 2003: 156). The creation of official court has been strongly affected by the European ideas about a society as an amalgamation of numerous individuals disregard of their tribal origin and traditional family structure (Moore 1986: 169). Meanwhile, even now for the Meru (as well as the Chagga and other peoples in Tanzania) the clan and family interests prevail over individual ones (Baroin 2003: 156).

However, the Meru sought to adhere to their own traditional social organization with strong gerontocracy, patrilineal clans, age-sets and centralized leaders. The clan meetings decide family matters and inheritance of land, which is the most important issue at the moment, since the land is in shortage due to population pressure. Each clan and each age group appoint their local leaders and

other authorities. These leaders compose *kamati*. They control the law and order, and monitor compliance with the norms of the RWA Constitution, the written document adopted on 27 May 1953 and based on the customary law (Baroin 2003). Although after 1963 it ceased to exist in its original form, the political system of Nshili Nnini reflects on it. The French anthropologist Catherine Baroin fixed four versions of changed Constitution from 1985 to 1995 in Swahili and English, dealing with regulations concerning marriage, injury or murder, stealing of cattle or food, rites concerning death and inheritance, and general regulations, taking into account the undergoing changes in the society (Baroin 2003: 157). One of the important articles of the last Constitution is the obligation for parents to send their children to primary, secondary and technical schools (Baroin 2003: 159). In the context of a sharply growing population density and reduction of land, the education can be a major key to the well-being of future generations of Meru. Today in Meru society the neo-traditional tribal institutions compete with two additional sources of power: the Church and the governmental administration (Baroin 2003: 162).

### THE MERU TODAY

Today Meru live not only on the slopes of Mount Meru, but in the valley at the foot of it. Such settlements are rapidly converted into small towns. For example, Madji ja Chai, Leguruku, Ngare Nanyuki, Tengeru and Usa River. The Tanzanian Meru also live in Arusha, Moshi and Karatu. They are engaged in agriculture and handicrafts (pottery). Among the Meru there are representatives of Tanzanian modern middle class: doctors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, as well as military personnel.

During our visit in Poli we were surprised by a strong man who approached us and addressed to us in good Russian. During the conversation, it turned out that he was an aircraft technician, and got his education in the Soviet Union. He said that he loves Russia and follows the news about Russia in Media. He also told us that today the head of administration of Poli is a young woman aged 35 (interview with informant № 3). Having asked about the traditional dominance of men in the public sphere, our new friend commented:

She was elected at the meeting of our community almost unanimously. The reason is her business qualities, social

activity and the ability to defend the interests of our settlement to higher authorities. Besides, she does not drink alcohol, which currently is a problem for many men. And the fact that she is a mother of several children does not prevent her to cope with administrative duties (interview with informant № 3).

About 14 years ago K. Millett mentioned that a small farm making cheese and butter in one of Meru villages became the headquarters of the Usangi Women's Organization (Usangi Women's Group). Its members were business ladies searching for education and economic self-sufficiency (Millett 2001). Thus, the representation of women in administration in many Meru villages nowadays may partly serve an indication of women's successful fulfillment of such planning.

The areas of compact settlement of modern Meru are also characterized by high levels of education: almost all children go to school today, and 90 per cent of the adult population has the education level of not less than 7 years of primary school (interview with informant № 4). Besides, the level of medicine in Meru region is high by Tanzanian standards (interview with informant № 5). According to the Ministry of Health of Tanzania today 100 per cent of women in this region give birth in a hospital, and children under one year are regularly subjected to medical examination and vaccination. As a result, the small children mortality rates in the areas of compact residence of Meru are one of the lowest in Tanzania (interview with informant № 6).

The Meru live in one of the most fertile and densely populated areas of East Africa, where the population number has increased almost tenfold over the last century. As a consequence, the most serious problem for the farming families is the lack of land. Historically, the Meru have successfully coped with the situation of land shortage until a certain moment – almost universal acceptance of the cultivation of coffee in 1950 greatly contributed to the improvement of life in spite of the very high rates of population growth. In the 1980s, however, the national economic recession led to social crisis – the prices of coffee fell down and jobs were reduced.

More recently, economic liberalization evoked changes that have led to increased earning opportunities outside agriculture.

This tendency was obvious in Meruland due to the proximity of Arusha – the regional capital. Economic liberalization and increase of population pressure on farmland, on the one hand, and rising aspirations and opportunities brought by economic reforms, on the other hand, led to the situation when many Meru families engage in off-farm activities. The non-agricultural employment of some family members provided the means for preservation of small family farms, thus not implying a full-scale withdrawal from agriculture (Larsson 2001). This tendency is obvious nowadays in Meruland everywhere.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities (Project No. 15-01-18077e), and approved by COSTECH (2015). We thank Lara Leach for her assistance and support. We also thank all Meru friends for tolerance, understanding and help during the whole period of data collection.

#### REFERENCES

- Baroin, C. 2003. A Brief History of a Neo-traditional Form of Chieftaincy and its 'Constitution' in Northern Tanzania, 1945–2000. In van Binsbergen, W., and Pelgrim, R. (eds.), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law. Essays on Africa and beyond in Honour of Emile Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal* (pp. 151–166). Leiden: African Studies Centre.
- Butovskaya, M. 2012. Wife-battering and Traditional Methods of its Control in Contemporary Datoga Pastoralists of Tanzania. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* 4 (1): 28–44.
- Butovskaya, M. L., Karelin, D. V., and Burkova, V. N. 2012. Datoga of Tanzania Today: Ecology and Cultural Patterns. *Asia and Africa Today* 11: 51–55. *Original in Russian* (Бутовская М. Л., Карелин Д. В., Буркова В. Н. Датога Танзании сегодня: Экология и культурные установки. *Азия и Африка сегодня* 11: 51–55).
- Butovskaya, M. L., Burkova, V. N., and Mabulla, A. 2015. Manipulations of the Corpus in the Context of Life Cycle Rites among the Datoga Cattle Breeders of Northern Tanzania. *Social Evolution & History* 14 (1): 87–104.
- CIA. 2015. Central Intelligence Agency. The World Factbook. Tanzania. URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tz.html>.

- Daly, M. 1978. African Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities. In *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (pp. 153–177). Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Grant, E., Murray, S. A., Grant, A., and Brown, J. 2003. A Good Death in Rural Kenia? Listening to Meru Patients and Their Families Talk about Care Needs at the End of Life. *Journal of Palliative Care* 19 (3): 159–167.
- Holleman, J. F. 1979. The Changing Roles of African Women. In Smith, P. (ed.), *Africa in Transitions*. London: Max Rheinhardt.
- JP. 2015. Joshuaproject. net. URL: [http://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/13687/TZ](http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13687/TZ).
- Illiffe, J. 1979. *A Modern History of Tanganyika*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jafet, K., and Seaton, E. 1967. *The Meru Land Case*. Vol. 2. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
- Ksenofontova, N. A. 2010. Types of Social Links and Forms of Dependences in System of Family Relation. In Krylova, N. L., and Ksenofontova, N. A. (eds.), *Africa. Gender Dimension* (pp. 50–56). Moscow: Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Original in Russian* (Ксенофонтова Н. А. Виды социальных связей и формы зависимости в системе семейно-родовых отношений. *Африка. Гендерное измерение* / ред. Н. Л. Крылова, Н. А. Ксенофонтова, с. 50–56. М.: Институт Африки РАН).
- Kulkova, O. S. 2010. Male and Female Initiations in Africa as Models of Regeneration of Gender Sacredness. In Krylova, N. L., and Ksenofontova, N. A. (eds.), *Africa. Gender Dimension* (pp. 115–126). Moscow: Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Original in Russian* (Куликова, О. С. Мужские и женские инициации в Африке как модели воспроизведения гендерной сакральности. *Африка. Гендерное измерение* / ред. Н. Л. Крылова, Н. А. Ксенофонтова, с. 115–126. М.: Институт Африки РАН).
- Lerner, G. 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsson, R. 2001. Between Crisis and Opportunity. Livelihoods, Diversification and Inequality among the Meru of Tanzania. *Lund Dissertations in Sociology*. Vol. 41. Department of Sociology. Lund: Lund University.
- Luanda, N. N. 1986. *European Commercial Farming and its Impact on the Meru and Arusha Peoples of Tanzania, 1920–1955*. Ph. D. Thesis. University of Cambridge.

- Mbise, A. S. 1973. The Evangelist: Matayo Leveriya Kaaya. In Iliffe, J. (ed.), *Modern Tanzanians* (pp. 27–41). Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
- Mesaki, S. 2013. Recapping the Meru Land Case, Tanzania. *Global Journal of Human Social Sciences (Economics)* 13 (1): 15–23.
- Millett, K. 2001. *The Meru People*. URL: <http://goafrica.about.com/travel/goafrica/library/weekly/uc061001.htm>.
- Mlola, G. T. 2010. *The Ways of the Tribe* (pp. 78–95). Dar-es-Salaam: E & D Vision Publishing.
- Moore, S. F. 1986. Social Facts and Fabrications. 'Customary' Law on *Kilimanjaro, 1880–1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, S. F., and Puritt, P. 1977. *The Chagga and Meru of Tanzania*. London: International African Institute.
- Puritt, P. 1970. *The Meru of Tanzania. A Study of their Social and Political Organization*. Ph D. Illinois.
- Rybalkina, I. G. 2010. Some Demographic and Sociopolitical Aspects of Functioning of African Family. In Krylova, N. L., and Ksenofontova, N. A. (eds.), *Africa. Gender Dimension* (pp. 127–135). Moscow: Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Original in Russian* (Рыбалкина, И. Г. Некоторые демографические и социально-политические аспекты функционирования Африканской семьи. *Африка. Гендерное измерение* / ред. Н. Л. Крылова, Н. А. Ксенофонтова, с. 127–135. М.: Институт Африки РАН).
- Seed, J. H. 1932. *The Kinship System of Bantu Tribe*. NADA, vol. X: 65–73.
- Shlyonskaya, S. M. 2010. *United Republic of Tanzania. Handbook*. Moscow: Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. *Original in Russian* (Шлёнская, С. М. *Объединенная Республика Танзания. Справочник*. М.: Институт Африки РАН).
- Spear, T. 1997. *Mountain Farmers: Moral Economies of Land and Agricultural Development in Arusha & Meru*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tanganyika Territory. 1948. *Annual Reports of the Provincial Commissioners for the Year 1948*.
- Thomas, L. 2000. 'Ngaitana (I will Circumcise Myself)': Lessons from Colonial Companies to Ban Excision in Meru, Kenya. In Shell-Duncan, B., and Herulund, Y. (eds.), *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change* (pp. 129–150). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- UNDP. 2015. United Nations Development Programme. Human Development Indicators. Tanzania. URL: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TZA>
- Wright, I. M. 1966. The Meru Land Case. *Tanzania Notes and Records* 66: 137–146.

**Interviews:**

- Informant № 1. A 77-year-old farmer from Sangananu. Interviewed on June 08, 2015.
- Informant № 2. A 76-year-old Pastor from the Usa River. Interviewed on June 8, 2015.
- Informant № 3. A 54-year-old former aeromechanic from Poli. Interviewed on June 10, 2015.
- Informant № 4. A 60-year-old Director of school from Makumira. Interviewed on June 11, 2015.
- Informant № 5. A 40-year-old doctor of a local hospital from Tengeru. Interviewed on June 24, 2015.
- Informant № 6. A 38-year-old Regional Commissioner for Health from Tengeru. Interviewed on June 24, 2015.