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ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION
AND
PRACTICE OF HOUSING IN KENYA

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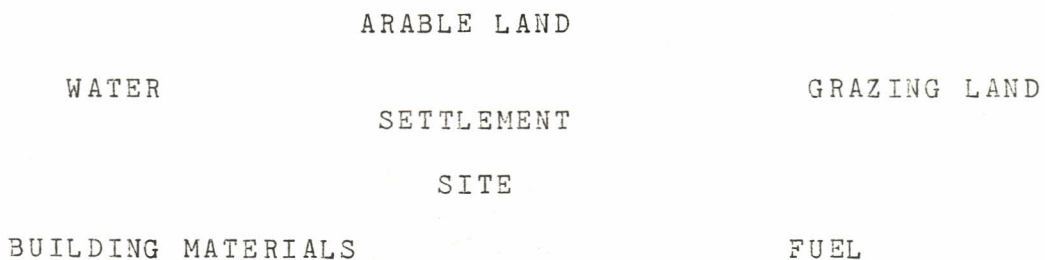
Tribal/Traditional Settlements

A settlement, as defined by McMaster, is "a created, discernible unit of space: a place which man has modified - and thereby distinguished from its environment - as somewhere to live, and usually to work". Settlements have both a "site" in the sense of the physical space that they occupy, and a "situation" in terms of the relationship of the settlement to resources and to other places, settled or used. A settlement can comprise one or more homesteads, and individual units may be dispersed (scattered) or nucleated (compact, grouped). The simplest settlement thus constitutes a single dwelling or group of dwellings.

The present day distribution and composition of traditional/tribal settlements in Kenya is primarily a result of the immigration that has taken place from about 1000 AD. The routes followed by the various ethnic groups have been largely determined by the way of life of the respective people, and those along with the following factors have influenced not only the choice of settlement sites but also the structure of the settlements:

- (i) climatic conditions and geographical features of the land;
- (ii) proximity to a source of water for domestic and livestock consumption and other agricultural activities;
- (iii) availability of land suitable for cultivation and/or pastoralisation;
- (iv) availability of fuel for domestic consumption e.g. proximity to woodlands providing fuel/wood to meet energy needs;
- (v) availability of building materials e.g. proximity to forests supplying readily available materials for use in the construction of structures or proximity to rivers or lakes with reeds suitable for thatching roofs;

The relationship between the above resource factors which influence the selection of settlement location, particularly in an agricultural, subsistence economy, can be illustrated thus:



(after chisholm)

Also of importance are the incidence of disease, e.g. the occurrence of the tsetse fly (which spreads trypanosomiasis among cattle and sleeping sickness among man) is most effective in inhibiting human settlement, and the nearness of neighbouring people, particularly in areas with real hostilities between ethnic groups or different clans. However, in the great majority of instances, needs for water, which is undoubtedly the most variable influence and arable land will weigh most strongly as influences upon site option.

The plurality of traditional settlements have a common barrier for protection against human aggression and wild animals constructed of materials which vary according to location, climatic conditions and available resources, e.g. thornbush which is found all over the dry savannah areas is used by a number of peoples, principally pastoralists, in these regions to form an effective defensive barrier.

VILLAGES

Settlement in villages is widespread in Kenya. The majority of African societies, including those in Kenya, live in communities based on the extended family system. Clan members live proximate to one another to facilitate common sharing and mutual assistance, and also to protect themselves against hostile clans and ethnic groups.

Settlements with an informal agglomeration of houses not based on clan alliances have however become increasingly more common in the recent past owing to population growth and individual ownership of land. Commercial enterprises, schools and other communal facilities often become an integral part of these settlements which in many instances are concentrated on either side of a road and invariably manifest the consequent inconveniences of deficient planning.

In some cases, such settlements may develop into urban centres with serious and social services distributed haphazardly on either side of a thoroughfare which may necessitate the construction of a by-pass route e.g. in the case of Garissa.

MARKETS

Prior to the advent of the British administration towards the end of the nineteenth century, no towns existed in Kenya other than those founded by Arab, Persian and Indian traders which were concentrated along the coastal strip. There were however nodal points, which were functional and met the needs of the local people, in other (rural) parts of the country which had a spatial system related to them which was often well developed although few towns were ultimately built around them. These comprised mainly periodic markets which together with daily markets and trading posts, which were established later, constitute three stages in the urbanization process in Kenya. (The use of the word market in this context describes an institution in which an authorized public concourse of buyer and sellers of commodities assembles at a site more or less strictly limited or defined at an appointed time).

Many of the market centres in Kenya today, which are settlements with a resident population of evolved from periodic and/or daily markets. The market centres for the most part have a typical layout, with buildings which are similar in design and form disposed around three sides of an open square where market activities take place, and frequently border a main road. there is usually an access road between the open square and buildings surrounding it, with commercial activities such as general shops, retail stores and small restaurants on the sides of the buildings which front the access road, and rooms providing residential accommodation to the rear of the buildings.

In many market centres throughout Kenya commercial undertakings such as the aforementioned have however had to close down. Among the causative factors of such closures are overprovision of similar services e.g. general shops and lack of purchasing power of the population in the locality. In a few cases, all the commercial activities save may be one or two small shops supplying basic commodities like sugar, tea, leaves and soap have been abandoned.

A further problem in several market centres has been the lack of comprehensive physical development plans. Growth has thus taken place arbitrarily with buildings being sited haphazardly thereby creating a constraint to future planned development.