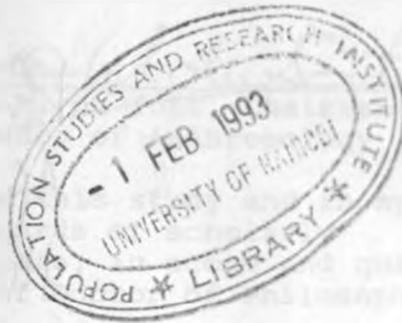


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// OLD AGE IN MERU, KENYA:  
ADAPTIVE RECIPROCITY IN A  
CHANGING RURAL COMMUNITY //



BY

SAMUEL P. THOMAS

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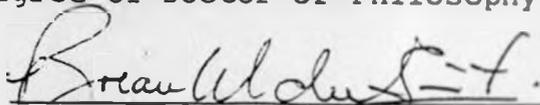
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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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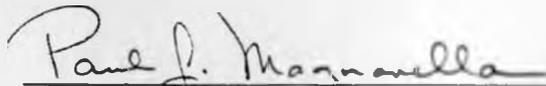
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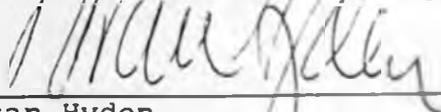
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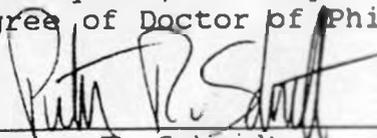
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May 1992

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Dean, Graduate School

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

OLD AGE IN MERU, KENYA:  
ADAPTIVE RECIPROCITY IN A  
CHANGING RURAL COMMUNITY

by

Samuel P. Thomas

May 1992

Chairman: Brian M. du Toit  
Major Department: Anthropology

Old people make important contributions to their societies. Despite cultural change, the skills and knowledge of elderly remain important human resources. The potential usefulness of old people holds special significance in developing countries with limited human and material assets. Facilitating the exploration of elders' latent capabilities requires a heuristic approach which highlights the importance of their contributions.

This study first presents an ecological systems model which emphasizes the adaptive importance of old people and then applies that model to the analysis of aging patterns in Meru, Kenya. The dissertation, therefore, provides a case study of old age in a rural African community as well as a

test of the ability of an ecological systems model to guide the collection and analysis of data about aging.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in three small farming communities in the southern part of Meru, Kenya, in 1990 and 1991. In addition to extensive participant observation, the following data were collected: a household census, life histories, in-depth interviews with a sample of elderly, in-depth interviews with a sample of informants between the ages of 25 and 54 regarding attitudes toward old age, and a time allocation study of the activities of old people.

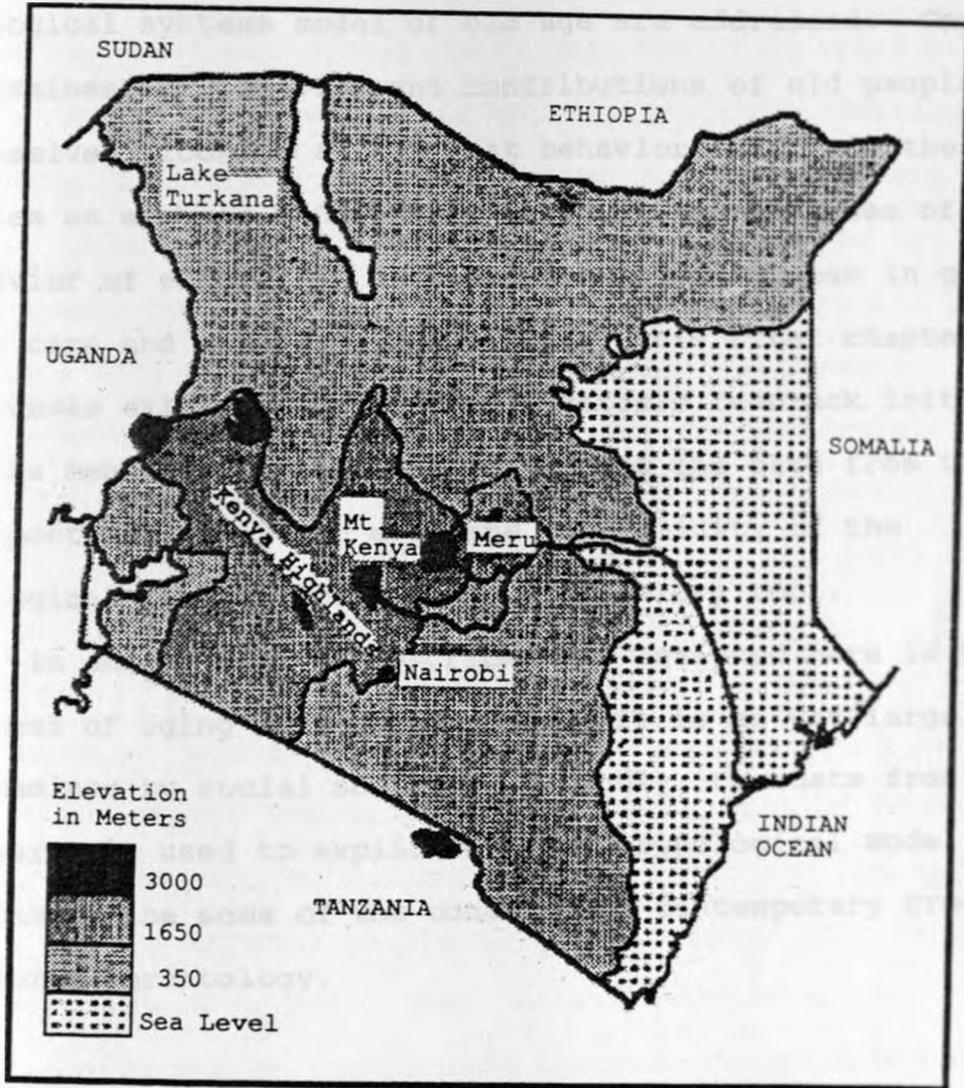
In terms of goals and objectives, the study traces the influence of both systemic and individual factors on well-being in old age. It further investigates the contributions made by elders in southern Meru and explores relationships between those contributions and care-giving behavior. Finally, evidences of positive and negative feedback loops within the system are evaluated.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Old age is common to all peoples, yet subject to enormous cultural variation. It is a time of reverence and prestige in some societies, the focus of dread and ageism in others. How do we make sense of it all?

Generally, western social science has treated old age as a social problem to be solved. Only recently have researchers begun to view old people as a potential developmental resource to be tapped. The study of old age in developing countries in particular can benefit from this new direction in research. Most Third World nations do not possess the surplus resources required to expand care-giving to growing numbers of inactive elderly. Furthermore, using the human resources provided by old people boosts economic productivity and the potential for development, especially in rural agricultural regions where significant out-migration of younger adults occurs.

This dissertation contributes to the developmental perspective in aging research in two ways. On one hand, this study presents a descriptive ethnographic case study of old age in a rural African community. Few cross-cultural gerontologists have systematically examined aging in African communities. The need for knowledge about African old age



Source: Adapted from Bernard (1972)

Figure 1.1: Meru District in Kenya

interaction in Meru and gives meaning to the experience of old age.

Finally, several issues directly arising from the ecological systems model of old age are addressed. Chapter 7 examines the behavior and contributions of old people themselves, looking at how that behavior fits into the system as a whole. Chapter 8 explores the outcomes of the behavior of elderly in terms of its effectiveness in gaining them care and meaning. Furthermore, this final chapter discusses evidence for internal systemic feedback initiated by the behavior of elderly. Examining the data from these perspectives serves to evaluate the validity of the ecological systems model as an explanatory tool.

In short, what is described and analyzed here is the process of aging in a culture where it is as yet largely unexamined by social science. Secondly, the data from that research is used to explicate an anthropological model which speaks to the some of the concerns of contemporary cross-cultural gerontology.

## CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Three distinct disciplinary traditions contribute to this study of old age. As an anthropological investigation of aging, this study encompasses both anthropology and social gerontology. Although these points of view share many common concerns and a common ancestry in western social science, they stand as separate spheres of knowledge. Furthermore, pragmatic humanitarian and developmental issues motivated this research far more strongly than theory-derived hypotheses. Therefore, in order to set forth a personally authentic point of view, appropriate consideration will be given to all three influences: anthropology, social gerontology, and applied aging issues.

This chapter weaves these diverse strands of thought into a single unified anthropological model for the study of aging. The practical questions that prompted this inquiry will first be outlined. Then, social gerontological theory, highlighting the cross-cultural research concerns which grew out of that perspective, will be reviewed. Third, ecological anthropology, the branch of anthropology most germane to this investigation, will be discussed. Finally, an ecologically based model for the study of old age and

aging will be presented and its cross-cultural viability demonstrated.

#### Applied Gerontological Concern in Africa

Policymakers and social scientists only recently began to look critically at the needs and contributions of African elderly. That oversight occurred for two reasons: one, political economic and the other, ideological. Pressing challenges to their economic and political survival preoccupy African nations. Leaders struggle to build unified national identities, develop human and material resources, and meet the growing demands of expanding, youthful populations, all from a disadvantaged position in the international economy. Quietly declining old people sit unnoticed amid these unrelenting and urgent issues. Furthermore, unchallenged assumptions about the African extended family foster a sense of complacency regarding the elderly. Few have questioned the will and ability of African extended families to provide an almost impervious social security network for their members (Cohen 1984). Since a comparatively small number of people reached dependent old age in former years and these few customarily received high status and respect, the possibility that they might not find meaning and care within the context of their families and communities never arose.

During the last decade, however, scholars began to dispute the foundations of these assumptions. These

challenges fall into three divisions: demographic changes, humanitarian concerns, and developmental issues.

### Demographic Change

First, the type of population growth now occurring in Africa makes it very misleading to speak of the "few" African elderly. Although the overall percentage of elderly in African populations remains quite low, Africa will experience larger growth in absolute numbers of elderly than any other region of the world over the next few decades (Apt 1988; Kinsella 1988; Okojie 1988). For example, in East Africa, the number of people over 60 will increase by 82% between 1980 and 2000 and by an additional 137% from 2000 to 2025 (United Nations 1985). The number of East Africans 75 years old and older will escalate by an astounding 434% between 1980 and 2025 (Apt 1988). Most of this growth will occur in rural communities.

### Humanitarian Concerns

Just as demographers began to forecast dramatic increases in the numbers of old people, weaknesses were recognized in the kin-based support networks which provide care to most rural African elderly. Iliffe's (1987) historical study of the African poor points out some intrinsic flaws in these networks. Despite a strong "faith and pride" in the ability of the extended family to care for the unfortunate (including the elderly), actual practice fell far short of that ideal (Iliffe 1987:245). Throughout

history--pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence-- those who did not have close family ties and could not work comprised the "very poor" in African societies. Childless old people who are too frail to work fall into this category.

Recent demographic analyses of current kin-based support in Africa confirm Iliffe's historical conclusions. Very close relatives, primarily children, furnish most of the assistance given to the aged in rural African communities. Only insignificant support comes from neighbors and more distant kin (Oucho and Mukras 1983; Adeokun 1984; Khasiani 1987). Older women without children are especially at risk. Folta and Deck (1987) speak of a cycle of "feminized poverty" among elderly widows in rural Zimbabwe.

Given this pattern, the sufficiency of the assistance elderly receive from their adult children becomes a serious concern. Unfortunately, current economic and social conditions make it difficult for adult children to care well for their aging parents. The migration of young adults out of rural areas and the entry of women into the labor force separate potential primary care-givers from their elderly mothers and fathers (World Health Organization 1987). This separation does not mean that children forget their parents. Social norms for assisting parents remain very strong, even for those who live in urban centers. However, when young

adults move to the city, economic support replaces personal services (Dow and Werner 1983; Oucho and Mukras 1983; Peil 1988; Peil, Bamisaiye, and Ekpenyong 1989). Monetary gifts rarely compensate parents for the loss of the day-to-day presence and care of their children (Togonu-Bickerseth 1989). Moreover, pressure to educate their own children, acquire new material items, and build a good house at their original rural home or at their present residence consumes most of the non-subsistence income of urban dwellers (Togonu-Bickerseth 1989).

Clearly, ample cause for humanitarian concern exists. The informal support network overlooks dependent elderly without children. Even old people with children usually receive gifts of money and material goods instead of personal care. The stress placed on their adult children by the demands of modern urban life reduces this material support to minimal levels. Furthermore, historically unprecedented increases in numbers of elderly threaten to swamp the resources of beleaguered kin-based support networks.

These developments call for positive action on the part of governments and non-government organizations to strengthen deteriorating informal support systems and to ensure care and meaning for the growing numbers of elderly. Encouragingly, a modest policy movement to assist elderly in Africa is underway. In 1984, the United Nations sponsored

an African Conference on Gerontology. Affiliates of non-government organizations (NGOs) such as Helpage International have launched programs in some African countries. A few old-age homes cater to extremely destitute old people (see, e.g., Cox and Mberia 1977). Some countries, including Kenya and Zambia, have limited formal social security programs (Hampson 1985; Lukhando 1985; Menya 1985).

Though these humanitarian efforts constitute a minuscule beginning, they have stimulated discussion of public aging policies in Africa. At this point that debate focuses largely on the viability of various formal options for preserving and supplementing family-centered assistance, such as national social security programs, institutionalized homes for old people, community-based social programs, and tax breaks for primary care-givers. It remains to be seen whether these formal organizations have the will and the resources to bridge the gaps which exist in informal support networks.

#### Developmental Concerns

A balanced applied gerontological perspective, however, must go beyond humanitarian concerns and explore the positive contributions old people can make to their families and communities. The 1982 UN World Assembly on Aging and subsequent conferences, such as the meeting to discuss "Strategies for the Participation of the Elderly in

Development" in Malta in 1988, have generated some momentum to view old people as a human resource and not just as a social problem (Nusberg 1988).

From the standpoint of development, the vigor, skill, and knowledge of old people remain useful even in the rapidly changing modern world. For example, rural African communities need the positive input of their elderly members in order to increase, and possibly just to sustain, their current level of productivity. As more and more young adults migrate to the city and as the specter of AIDS looms larger over that same group of young adults, the contributions of older people in all aspects of social and economic life will become increasingly important to African families, communities, and nations.

Unnecessary impediments such as illiteracy, inappropriate health care, and negative stereotypes of aging inhibit old people from participating fully in social and economic life. Programs which remove these deterrents will elicit greater contributions from elderly. Positive incentives such as appropriate technology and small business loans further expedite the participation of old people (World Health Organization 1987; Nusberg 1988).

#### The Need for Applied Research

Meaningful policy planning to address both humanitarian and developmental concerns requires comprehensive data on the characteristics, needs, and potentials of old people.

Serious deficiencies riddle current data about the aged in Africa (African Conference on Gerontology 1984; Apt 1988; Okojie 1988).

The need to expand this essential data base significantly motivated this research. The decision to collect data on demography and out-migration, attitudes towards aging and old people, activities and roles performed by different categories of old people, needs experienced by elderly, and informal and formal support systems in rural Kenya evolved from this very real and practical demand for data.

However, good applied research is firmly grounded in and informed by theory. Therefore, applied concerns are embedded in broader theoretical issues.

### Social Gerontological Theories

The body of theory most directly concerned with old age is social gerontology. Social gerontological theory is a salad bowl of derived viewpoints and hypotheses arising from the diverse disciplines which compose it. Little coherence or unity emanates from this interdisciplinary mixture. The result resembles a meal of diverse tastes and preferences where each researcher chooses his or her choice theory. Before attempting to articulate an approach which does offer some unity, a brief tour of the gerontological table is in order.

### Activity Theory

The first round of theorizing about old age arose from sociological role theory. Much early debate centered on the roles old people play in society and on the psychological satisfaction they derive from fulfilling those roles (Havighurst and Albrecht 1953; Phillips 1957; Reichard et. al 1962; Maddox 1963; Havighurst et al. 1969; Lemon et. al 1972). These theorists suggested that successful aging requires an old person to remain as active and involved in society as possible. This approach, however, proved to be limiting and unidimensional (Gubrium 1973).

### Disengagement Theory

"Disengagement theory" spurred the next generation of gerontological investigation (Cumming and Henry 1961; Cumming 1963). This functional approach directly challenged the assumptions of earlier "activity theory" claiming that successful aging demanded a gradual withdrawal from productive social roles. A storm of controversy erupted, with gerontologists lining up on either side of the debate. Looking back from the present perspective, both approaches seem simplistic, neither giving adequate consideration to important variations in the contexts of aging (Hochschild 1976).

Even so, disengagement theory and the debate it engendered significantly influenced subsequent theoretical advances in social gerontology. Disengagement theory

offered the first truly systematic approach to the sociological study of aging. The ensuing debate spawned several cross-cultural studies of old age using the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) as well as numerous ethnographic case studies, adding significantly to the knowledge of worldwide aging.

Disengagement theory likewise stimulated a great variety of theoretical responses to the question of what constitutes successful aging. Myerhoff (1978) said the nature of successful aging depends on the individual life course; Marshall (1980), on the way meaning is assigned to on-going personal interactions in different social settings; Dowd (1975; 1980), on access by elderly to adequate personal resources; Riley (1971), on the nature of age-based stratification in a society and the way different cohorts interface with their historical events; Gubrium (1973), on the social environmental context. All of these explanations offer useful, though incomplete, perspectives on the nature of aging.

### Modernization Theory

Another stream of social gerontological theory grew out of applied humanitarian concerns about the "ripple effects" of modernization and westernization. This problem led to the "modernization theory," which asserts that the status and treatment of old people declines during the transition

from "traditional" to "modern" social systems (Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Cowgill 1979, 1986).

The modernization theory oversimplifies both the nature of change (A. Foner 1982; Foner and Kertzer 1978) and the components of status (N. Foner 1984). Further, it romanticizes old age in earlier historical periods (Laslett 1976; Achenbaum and Stein 1978; Fischer 1978) and in non-western societies (Quadagno 1982), overlooking both historical and cross-cultural diversity.

But, despite its weaknesses, the modernization theory stimulated well-placed humanitarian concern about the needs of old people in changing, developing societies. Many of the issues mentioned in the above discussion of applied African gerontology clearly have roots in the same soil.

### Contextual Theories

Both the modernization theory and disengagement theory failed primarily because they overlooked the rich texture and depth of the historical and cultural settings in which people grow old. More recent theories either call attention to life contexts that have been neglected or attempt to integrate the fundamental influences on old age into a congruent systemic approach.

In the 1980s, for instance, several gerontologists applied the constructs of political economy to the study of the elderly, calling attention to yet another ignored contextual factor. Inequalities and exploitation between

and within nations do affect people during old age. Neysmith and Edwardh (1984) point out that the aging experience differs in "core" and "periphery" nations. Others (Tolbert et al. 1980; Hendricks and McAllister 1983) show how "dual economies" within the same society influence old people. Hampson (1982) demonstrated that inequalities of this nature can also affect old people in Africa countries.

Hultsch and Plemons's "life events" model (1979) and Dowd's application of social exchange theory to the study of old age (1975, 1980) are examples of systemic explanations of old age. These approaches represent an advance because they incorporate idiosyncratic personal influences on old age with structural factors such as history and culture within a unitary analytic framework.

#### Relationship between Anthropology and Social Gerontology

While gerontologists have seldom used anthropological theory as the framework for their research, many have employed anthropological data, methodology, and concepts. Looking at the linkage between anthropology and studies of aging, Keith (1980) refers to two major stages in that relationship, "old age in anthropology" and "anthropology of old age." Early culture-oriented studies of old age utilized HRAF materials (Simmons 1945; Maxwell and Silverman 1970; Glascock and Feinman 1981) or reexamined anthropological field notes after the fact (Cowgill and

Holmes 1972; Colson and Scudder 1981) to address certain hypotheses about old age. Later on, other researchers set out to investigate aging from a holistic anthropological standpoint, producing several well-rounded case studies of what it means to grow old in non-western societies (Sheldon 1967; Arth 1968; Guttman 1976; Moore 1978; Simic 1978; Ikels 1980; Kerns 1980; Vatuk 1980).

This interface between anthropology and gerontology has produced some interesting research questions. These include: What is old age, in cross-cultural perspective? Is it primarily a chronological, physiological, or sociological phenomenon? How and why does old age vary from one culture to another? How do elderly fit into human social systems? How does old age fit into the overall life course? What roles are played by elderly? What causes these roles to vary?<sup>1</sup>

However, the full potential of anthropological theory to unite and guide gerontological research remains untapped. The following section demonstrates the explanatory power of one anthropological perspective, ecological anthropology.

#### Ecological Anthropology

The strength of ecological anthropology lies in the holism of its systems approach and the simplicity of its central explanatory concept, adaptation. Since several good overviews of ecological anthropology exist (e.g., Kormondy

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<sup>1</sup> See Keith (1980) for additional suggestions.

1976; Hardesty 1977; Moran 1982; Campbell 1983), no necessity remains to discuss general ecological theory in depth. What does need to be specified is how ecological anthropology relates to this research. Moreover, some relevant critiques of ecological theory should be addressed.

#### Usefulness of Ecological Anthropology

Ecological anthropology posits three types of adaptation: genetic, physiological, and behavioral (Hardesty 1977). This research concentrates almost totally on the last, on the way humans use culture to adjust to stress and change. Most specifically, this study examines the behavioral adaptations of old people in southern Meru.

Secondly, ecological anthropologists use adaptation to explain several things: evolutionary culture change, the functional characteristics of different societies, and the processes of human coping behavior (Diener, Nonini, and Robkin 1980; Moran 1982). Although the evolution and function of cultural adaptations will be discussed when appropriate, the main purpose here is not to explicate evolutionary change nor to dissect abstracted ecosystems. Rather, an explanation is sought for the behavior patterns of elderly individuals in southern Meru, for how they use opportunities and deal with constraints in their social and ecological context. Exploring how specific individuals respond to tangible problems enhances our understanding of both evolutionary and functional systemic processes.

Ecological anthropology and human adaptability studies,<sup>2</sup> however, are not free of criticism. A review of some of these evaluations helps us avoid the most obvious pitfalls and locates this study more precisely within the broad spectrum of the ecological approach.

#### Weaknesses in Ecological Anthropology

Within the critique of ecological anthropology several key concerns arise. First, the specter of environmental determinism--the tendency to overemphasize the causative effects of the physical environment--nibbles constantly at the heels of cultural ecologists. According to Flannery (1968:400), ecologists think "civilized people only ate, excreted, and reproduced." Ecologists tend to neglect social and historical factors and often display "historical naivete" (Diener, Nonini, Robkin 1980:2).

Secondly, ecological models often conceptualize ecosystems as all-inclusive, closed, self-regulating systems that utilize adaptive mechanisms to maintain systemic relations and processes in a state of equilibrium (see for instance Rappaport 1968). Using such a model to explain evolutionary change produces tautological "just so stories" instead of true causal explanations. Closed models ignore change-producing feedback from outside the system. They

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<sup>2</sup> "Adaptability" differs from "adaptation." Adaptation is the process by which an organism establishes a beneficial relationship within its ecosystem. Adaptability, in contrast, refers to an organism's capacity to adapt to a variety of different conditions (Hardesty 1977).

overlook dialectical internal conflicts arising from the uneven distribution of decision-making power and the diverse goals of individual decision-makers. Furthermore, in attributing a teleological character to the ecosystem itself, they denigrate the importance of the choices of individual members of society whose concrete behavior often brings systemic change (see Bargatzky 1984).

Despite the legitimate problems bared by this critique, ecological approaches can avoid these pitfalls. A systemic model can give appropriate weight to the environment, to historical dialectics, and to the social field, including its complex interface with external influences (Fried 1967). Just as important, ecological frameworks need not devalue the role of individual human decision-making and behavior in the process of adaptation.

To avoid these problems, human cultural adaptation is defined as a process in which individuals act purposively to fulfill their physiological and psychological needs. This process involves choosing from existing alternatives within the social and natural environment as well as creatively synthesizing new alternatives. Material conditions and cultural institutions constrain the purposeful actions of individuals, but do not determine them (Rutz 1977; Bargatzky 1984; Earle 1984).

With the passage of time, similarities in the behavioral choices of individuals lead to shifts in group

behavior patterns and to systemic change. Goldschmidt called this evolution of group behavior a "generalized statement of the process of individual adaptive acts" (1971:303). Friedman referred to it as the "result of interlocking cycles of lower-order goal-oriented processes that have little to do with the question of the survival of the larger unit" (1979:266; see also Bennett 1976 and Moran 1982). In agreement with these writers, I propose that the evolutionary adaptation of cultural systems results partly from the goal-oriented actions of individuals.

Defining cultural adaptation in this manner circumvents both the problem of environmental determinism and tautological explanations of change. Ecological anthropology, when shorn of these problems, offers a great deal of flexibility and explanatory power. The ecological model of old age below demonstrates this potential.

#### An Ecological Model for Gerontological Study

The tap root for this framework rests squarely in the ecological foundations outlined above. The model also draws heavily upon Hultsch and Plemons's (1979) Life Events Model of Human Development. Concepts from other gerontological points of view such as age stratification, social exchange, and political economy are occasionally incorporated. (See Figure 2.1.)

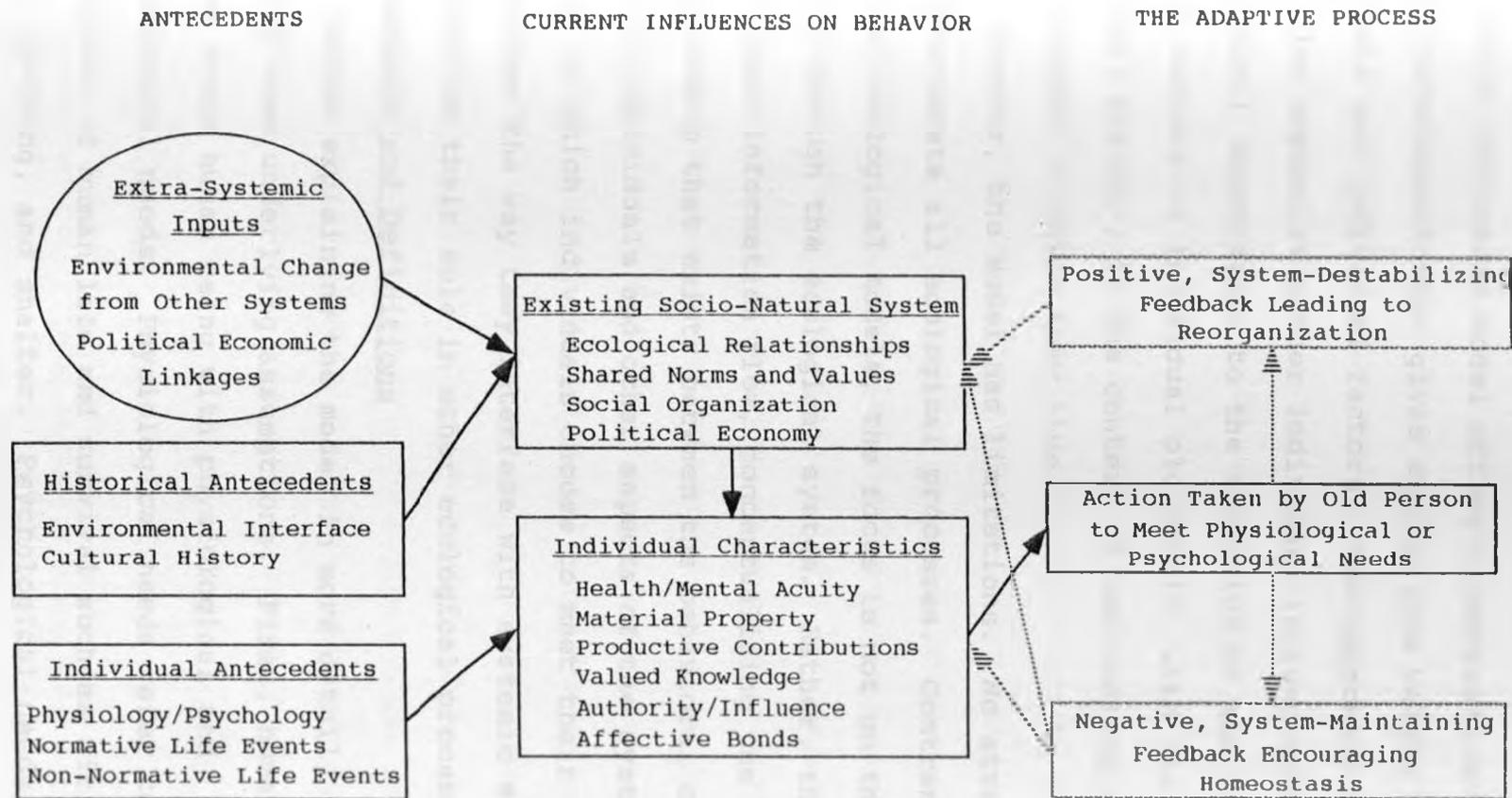


Figure 2.1: A Systems Model of Behavior in Old Age

### Purposes and Limitations

This ecological model offers a perspective on aging and human development that gives appropriate weight to both systemic and individual factors. Most gerontological theories emphasize either individual influences or structural constraints to the exclusion of the other. This model centers on individual old people, with all their personal history, in the context of the society and environment in which they live.

However, the model has limitations. No attempt is made to incorporate all ecological processes. Contrary to general ecological models, the focus is not on the flow of energy through the ecological system. Rather, this model highlights information flow, conceptualizing the dynamic relationship that exists between the behavioral choices of elderly individuals and other aspects of the system. The manner in which individuals choose to meet their needs determines the way they interface with systemic energy flow and defines their role in other ecological processes.

### Assumptions and Definitions

Before explaining the model in more detail, let me clarify some underlying assumptions. First, human biology endows every human being with physiological and psychological needs. Physiological needs refer to the essentials of human life and survival such as air, water, food, clothing, and shelter. Psychological needs include

such social and emotional requirements as companionship, status, respect, and other perceived wants. These more complex needs develop largely out of the fundamental pair bonding that occurs in the mother/child relationship and from other interactions within human social units. Both sets of needs spring from the human psycho-biological makeup.

Second, self-interested efforts to meet these needs motivate most human activity.<sup>3</sup> Subconscious or indirect self-interest prompts even seemingly altruistic behavior. In this quest for survival and personal enhancement, no single strategy for need satisfaction takes priority. For example, minimizing risk (Johnson 1971) or maximizing non-economic benefits such as prestige (Schneider 1974) may be just as important as maximizing anticipated economic gain.

Finally, this goal-directed human activity occurs within a socially and environmentally circumscribed context. Following Bargatzky (1984:404), I label this context the "socio-natural system." The term "socio-natural system" offers certain advantages over "ecosystem," the more commonly used expression in ecological anthropology. Using "socio-natural system" accentuates socio-cultural aspects

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of individual self-interest and individual teleology within social systems has been widely recognized (Firth 1951; Barnett 1953; Erasmus 1961; Boissevain 1974; Magnarella 1979).

without losing sight of the fact that human society and culture are inseparably linked to other non-human elements.

### Overview of the Model

The model focuses on the individual behavior at the heart of cultural adaptation, placing special emphasis on the actions of elderly. A variety of factors directly influences the behavior of old people, including physical health, affective ties, population dynamics, and shared cultural norms. Antecedent events, as well as on-going contact with other systems, mold the factors that influence individual behavior. These influences, both personal and systemic, then shape individual perception of needs and discernment of the resources available to meet those needs.

The model also traces the results of behavioral choices. Successful initial efforts to meet needs reinforce habitual interaction patterns and encourage systemic equilibrium. However, if customary strategies fail, innovative behavior may, if fruitful, generate destabilizing feedback<sup>4</sup> which leads to reorganization of the system. Either change or the status quo may or may not be adaptive in the longer run.

In summary, the model consists of three general components: (1) antecedents, which encompass dialectic

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<sup>4</sup> Ecological anthropology uses the term "positive feedback" to denote influences which push the system toward change and "negative feedback" to refer to influences which inhibit or negate movement toward change and reorganization.

historical antecedents, individual antecedents, and extra-systemic inputs; (2) current influences on behavior, including the existing socio-natural system and individual characteristics; and (3) the adaptive process, which begins with the needs-satisfying behavior of an old person and conceptualizes the outcomes of that behavior, both for the individual and the socio-natural system.

### Historical Antecedents

Historical antecedents shape the existing socio-natural system. Diachronically, a socio-natural system evolves out of the cumulative behavioral choices of earlier adapting generations. To streamline the model, this dynamic historical process is simply differentiated into environmental interface and cultural history.

Geography, climate, and other elements of the physical environment set constraints upon behavioral choices and thus upon the development of the socio-natural system. For example, the division of Meru settlers into ridgetop communities and the Meru pattern of interethnic warfare (further described in chapter 4) appeared because of the rugged topography of the Mount Kenya slopes. Likewise, the diversified Meru pattern of subsistence results from a logical exploitation of the many biomes and ecotones of their rapidly rising mountain environment.

At the same time, each society's unique cultural roots, including past contacts with other societies, show

remarkable continuity and contribute significantly to evolving behavioral adaptations. Again, the Meru furnish an ideal example. The proto-Meru used patrilineal, virilocal descent groups long before their arrival on Mt. Kenya (Fadiman 1973). Since this type of social organization harmonized well with ridgetop agricultural practices, their use of clans continued.

The overtones of these historical events reverberate throughout the existing socio-natural system, molding the perceptions, resources, and behavior of elderly.

#### Extra-systemic Inputs

Earlier, socio-natural systems were defined as open systems. Open systems must take account not only of internal feedback, but also of feedback arising from external sources, from their on-going interfaces with other socio-natural systems.

Incorporating inter-systemic interactions into the model brings conceptual complications. Lineage, ethnicity, geography, politics, economics--all define the boundaries and bonds that exist between different socio-natural systems. Some linkages are stronger and more harmonious than others. The size and duration of the connection, the degree of inequality between the systems, the extent of cultural compatibility, and the nature of the interaction combine to temper the import of culture contact (Herskovits 1958; Arensberg and Niehoff 1971).

Regardless, the change-producing potential of inter-systemic contact is significant. For example, long-term political economic ties to larger structures, as in a relationship of dependency between an industrialized nation and a developing nation or between a national urban center and a rural periphery, may unleash dramatic transformations on localized socio-natural systems. Even the diffusion of something simple such as a metal hoe to replace a digging stick or a steel axe to replace a stone one (Sharp 1934) can significantly alter holistic relationships.

Furthermore, the leavening effects of other socio-natural systems do not necessarily require direct contact. Some ecological events in particular may generate far-reaching consequences. A volcanic eruption can lower global temperatures. Pollution from adjacent societies may produce acid rain and spoil water resources. The actions of several societies may combine to produce worldwide events such as global warming or destruction of the ozone layer. Doubtless, such environmental disturbances create stresses for people of all ages, including the elderly.

Having established the importance of inter-systemic contacts, this discussion now turns to a concept that facilitates their analysis. It is helpful to visualize socio-natural systems as hierarchically interrelated to other systems of different size and complexity. By way of illustration, Magnarella (1974) identifies several ordered

spheres of identity and involvement in a Turkish town: the family, the defended neighborhood, the residential quarter, the town itself, and the region or nation. Gubrium (1988), from a slightly different perspective, refers to overlapping organizing contexts or "fields of reality" which help define the meanings people assign to events.

While some of the spheres referred to by Magnarella and Gubrium are too small to be considered as separate ecological units, their work identifies a valuable concept. The meanings individuals attach to behavior, as well as their relationship to systemic resources and energy flow, vary with the hierarchical context in which the behavior occurs. For example, an old man in a rural African community may command significant control of village land and labor resources, but have negligible influence on regional, national, and international events which determine the value of the commodities produced by that land and labor.

#### The Existing Socio-Natural System

As indicated above, both historical events and concurrent linkages with other socio-natural systems shape the existing localized socio-natural system. The size and boundaries of the socio-natural system may vary from one locality to another. For the purposes of this study, the socio-natural system at its lowest hierarchical level can be defined as a single rural farming community.

In southern Meru, geographic terrain provides the most visible set of boundaries between different farming communities. Since Meru District lies on the eastern slope of Mt. Kenya, the region is divided into a series of ridges and steep mountain valleys. Furthermore, each ridge contains several different ecological zones due to changes in elevation.<sup>5</sup> These geographic and ecological characteristics interact with social and economic factors to establish the boundaries between different communities.

In pre-colonial times, each ridge with all its ecological zones constituted a separate community or a socio-natural system. One Meru clan or small group of interrelated clans settled in the temperate middle elevations of each ridge and clan elders oversaw land use within all ecological zones on their ridge. Therefore, each ridge was a distinct social and economic unit and could be considered as a separate socio-natural system at the lowest hierarchical level.

However, population pressure has fragmented the original ridge-based communities. Many people have moved from the middle elevations into lower and upper zones. Thus, at present, each ridge usually contains three or more relatively distinct farming communities. Community divisions generally correspond to variations in elevation

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter 4 provides a more extensive description of the geography and ecology of the region.

and ecological zone. In almost every community, a small cluster of retail stores serves as a locus of communal identity. Often, a primary school (and sometimes a secondary school), a medical dispensary, and one or two churches provide additional platforms for community interaction.

Although each farming community enjoys a great deal of social and economic autonomy, fairly extensive articulation does occur between these communities and larger hierarchical entities: the region, the district, the nation, and even the international economy. These linkages, as discussed above, do influence the life of individuals in their localized socio-natural systems.

Nevertheless, the existing socio-natural system at its most intimate and localized level furnishes the most important context for behavior in old age. For instance, ecological relationships, such as the customary subsistence strategy used to obtain energy from the system, help to define the resources available to a person in old age. The experience of old age in an industrial society will differ dramatically from that of an elderly Maasai pastoralist, for example. Fluctuations in the rate of population growth and the age composition of the population weigh critically upon the way people perceive and treat the elderly. Individuals who grow old in a socio-natural system with an aging population structure and lots of elderly (e.g., the United

States) may experience more age-related discrimination than they would if their society had very few elderly.

Moreover, shared cultural norms and values regulate individual interaction with the socio-natural system. With particular relation to the elderly, cultural norms define the meaning of old age, sanction proper attitudes towards the aged, designate appropriate resources for elderly to use, and suggest suitable strategies for need satisfaction in old age.

A brief reference to social organization illustrates the importance of cultural factors. Since groups of individuals cooperating together meet their needs more effectively, old people are embedded in highly organized social networks. For example, many non-industrial societies use kinship as one basis for social organization. Thus, the form of conjugal union, the rules of post-marital residence, and the principles of descent all temper the manner in which elderly individuals draw upon systemic energy flow. A case in point, agricultural societies with field/fallow land use models generally have strong descent-based kin groups which oversee communal land tenure. An understanding of local ecology and the oral history of land use plays a pivotal role in societies with this land tenure model. The need for this kind of cultural knowledge provides elderly (especially old men) with an essential social role and significant control over productive resources.

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the same normative life events. These might include initiation, marriage, birth of the first child, and graduation from active elderhood or retirement. In contrast, non-normative life events follow no culturally defined pattern. Severe illnesses or injuries, migration to the city, occupational choices, or educational success substantially alter a person's relationship with others and with their environment. The non-normative events individuals experience, the life stage at which they encounter them, and their response to those events--all bear upon the experience of old age.

#### Individual Characteristics and Resources

This segment of the model synthesizes the entire complex of systemic and individual influences, both past and present, into a single cluster of factors which directly bear upon individual behavior. These factors distill the effects of the past history, extra-systemic input, existing socio-natural processes, and personal background into a concrete set of influences that color behavioral choices and set the boundaries for adaptation.

Several factors directly shape behavior in old age. Physical vigor and mental health critically affect behavioral alternatives, whether for young or old. The personal resources available likewise channel a person's attempts to extract energy from the system and meet their needs. Cultural norms ascribe some personal resources to

old people by virtue of their age grade. Other resources are achieved over the course of life.

One critical resource is power over the means of production (i.e., the control of land, labor, and money.) Valued skills and knowledge, political authority and influence, ritual roles or power, the ability to work and perform tasks for the group, and strong affective bonds built up over a lifetime of interaction further facilitate a person's access to systemic energy flow.

Viewed within the broader ecological context, the personal resources accessible to old people largely determine their usefulness to the socio-natural system. Thus, the cluster of resources available to old people regulates whether they will be perceived as a human resource or as a social problem.

#### The Adaptive Process

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When elderly individuals experience physiological or psychological needs, they act to meet those needs. In most cases, their initial behavior conforms to culturally prescribed patterns. Should that action fail, individuals select and implement other strategies. Simple trial and error decision-making usually resolves straightforward problems which involve little uncertainty. Individuals merely "grope" around for a solution among commonly used strategies. In conditions of high risk and anxiety, decision-making becomes more complex in process and content,

calling forth the use of simulations, estimates of probability and/or the consensus of knowledgeable leaders (Moran 1982). In terms of content, unstable circumstances stimulate the borrowing and invention of innovative strategies. Individuals may use new strategies within old existing contexts or they may synthesize old strategies with new contexts (Barnett 1953).

#### The Outcomes of Behavior: Adaptation?

Individual behavior produces both positive (system-destabilizing) feedback and negative (system-maintaining) feedback. When initial stress reduction strategies succeed, characteristic behavior patterns are reinforced. Little change occurs in either the individual or the system. Should the first attempt fail but another common strategy succeed, the individual's coping repertoire may increase, but overall behavior patterns remain the same. However, if circumstances elicit innovative strategies, positive feedback enters the system. When a sufficient number of individuals begin to make comparable choices to relieve the same stressors in corresponding circumstances, then holistic reorganization of the socio-natural system may occur.

It is significant that I have not yet spoken of the consequences of behavioral choices as adaptive. Successful short-term coping is not synonymous with long range adaptation. Just because people happen to survive and meet their needs by using certain behaviors at a particular point

in time does not mean those behaviors necessarily contribute to the overall adaptability of the socio-natural system. From the standpoint of the system, behavior which satisfies individual needs in the short run can lead to either adaptation or maladaptation. Negative feedback can maintain maladaptive status quo behavior or positive feedback may bring maladaptive changes.

#### Application of the Model

As noted above, social gerontology does not have a unitary concept to explicate the process of aging. An adaptive model can provide that coherence. The ecological perspective reframes many of the important questions about old age and incorporates much of what has been learned about aging into one united framework.

#### Old Age and Adaptability

First of all, the concept of adaptation answers a very critical question. Why do humans have the potential for a prolonged period of "old age" in the first place? The extended length of the human "post-reproductive" life stage<sup>6</sup> stands unique among mammals and other primates. Assuming that persistent biological features contribute positive benefits to species survival, a long post-reproductive life span must somehow increase the adaptability of human populations (Teski 1983).

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<sup>6</sup> Ecology divides the life span into three segments: pre-reproductive, reproductive, and post-reproductive (Kormondy 1976).

What positive benefit, then, do old people convey upon their societies? Extensive human reliance upon behavioral adaptation provides the key. Culture stands as a buffer between humans and their ecological settings. Human populations survive in diverse habitats by using complex cultural adaptations, including living together in cooperating groups with intricate social rules and behavior patterns.

Cultural rules and behaviors must be learned.<sup>7</sup> Where better for children, the new members of society, to learn the intricacies of culture and ecology than from old people, those with the greatest cultural and ecological experience (Teski 1983). Furthermore, in societies without written records, myth, oral history, social contracts, and even debts must be stored in human memory. Elderly have a lifetime to memorize these traditions, as well as to accumulate additional experiential wisdom. By acting as reservoirs and transmitters of cultural knowledge, older people contribute significantly to the on-going productive and reproductive vitality of their societies.

Studies of old age in a variety of cultural and ecological contexts document the role played by elderly in the preservation and communication of culture. Consulting, interpersonal counseling, conflict resolution, teaching of

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<sup>7</sup> The necessity of learning complicated cultural facts also accounts for the extended period of childhood among humans.

the youth, and childcare consistently arise as common activities for the elderly in cross-cultural comparison studies (Simmons 1945; Maxwell and Silverman 1970; Press and McKool 1972; Silverman and Maxwell 1983; du Toit 1990). Case studies of aging confirm the valued role of elderly as repositories of cultural knowledge and as educators. !Kung hunter/gatherers esteem old people for their knowledge of the environment, healing, ritual, and story-telling. !Kung elderly also nurture and educate the children (Biesele and Howell 1981). Grandparents in Philippine Kalinga society teach their grandchildren about ethnic history, their relationship with neighboring ethnic groups, the boundaries of the family's fields, and debts owed to or by the household (Lawless 1977). The major portion of family social life in pre-colonial Samia society in western Kenya revolved around to grandfathers' and grandmothers' fires, where boys and girls respectively sat in the evenings listening to stories and receiving advice (Cattell 1989). Others have documented similar functions among Australian aborigines (Tonkinson 1974), the Highland Druze (Guttman 1976), the Igbo (Arth 1972), the Bakongo (Missinne 1980) and other societies.

In conclusion, little dispute arises over the importance of elderly as guardians and transmitters of cultural knowledge in pre-industrial societies. The ecological perspective, however, builds on this consensus

and points out how the need to preserve this knowledge led to a post-reproductive period of life in humans.

As will be demonstrated below, an ecological viewpoint also adds dimension to one of the dominant humanitarian concerns involving the elderly, their status and treatment.

#### Status/Treatment and Cultural Knowledge

Gerontological studies have consistently found a positive correlation between the control of knowledge by the old and the status and treatment accorded them by members of their societies (Simmons 1945; Maxwell and Silverman 1970; Silverman and Maxwell 1983; Cattell 1989). An adaptive explanation of that finding offers intriguing possibilities.

As noted above, old age and its primary function of cultural transmission have deep roots in human behavioral adaptation. The positive correlation between knowledge control and good treatment of dependent elderly derives from that fundamental relationship. Biological evolution merely prepared primates, including humans, to survive from birth to the end of what we call the middle years. The conditions which permit a long post-reproductive period in humans are behavioral, coming long after the evolution of biological characteristics (Dolhinow 1984). Only extensive support from younger members of the group enabled the aged to weather the physiological declines of late life. As behavioral adaptations became increasingly essential to human survival, the knowledge and skills of old people grew more and more

valuable. Younger adults went out of their way to prolong the lives of the elderly.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, these behavior patterns became an integral part of human culture and were validated by norms and values.

Thus, the relationship between the treatment of the elderly and the importance placed on cultural knowledge arises from evolutionary cultural adaptations. The recognition of this connection offers fresh insight into the evolving interactions between old people and their support networks.

#### Status/Treatment and Resource Control

In addition to their role as knowledge brokers, another common characteristic associated with high status and treatment of the elderly cross-culturally is the control of essential material, social, and ritual resources by elderly men (Ikels 1980; Glascock 1986). The origins of this phenomenon also lie in ecological relationships. First, just as it is logical to have those who best know the culture to teach it to the youth, it is also wise for those with the greatest amount of experience to make decisions about vital resource use. However, the control of resources by old men developed not only from an ecological need for efficient resource use, but also from the cumulative effects of the self-interested actions of former generations. Once a

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<sup>8</sup> This pattern of prolonging the lives of older dependents does not hold true in extremely harsh environments, such as the Arctic.

long post-reproductive life span became a persistent adaptive pattern, self-interested humans began to look for ways to solidify their security in old age. The most effective way to guarantee that security was to control the vital means and relations of production and reproduction, something done with great regularity in many non-industrial cultures (see Rey 1979).

A move to consolidate power resources appears especially logical since elderly, despite their adaptive value, were often neglected once they reached the point of decrepitude. Glascock and Feinman (1981) found that non-supportive behavior towards decrepit elderly occurred in 84% of the societies they sampled. Earlier, Simmons (1945:177) stated: "Even in societies where the aged have possessed firmly entrenched rights, the very decrepit have faced the threat of indifference, neglect, and actual abuse." Given their observation of these realities, self-interested, individuals would take steps to solidify their positions in society and avoid abuse and neglect whenever possible (see Caldwell 1982; Dorjahn 1989).

Women, in contrast to men, did not develop power/control-oriented adaptations. Due to sexual dimorphism and the social dependencies necessitated by childbirth and childcare, women had little opportunity to gain control of vital resources. Therefore, old women

relied less on power and more on their functional roles as teachers, child-rearers and food preparers.

#### Status/Treatment and Culture Change

In relatively stable socio-natural systems, people recognize the value of the knowledge and wisdom possessed by their elderly. Consequently, old people have high status and receive good treatment. However, when the gap between socio-environmental realities and an evolved cultural adaptation becomes great, cultural knowledge loses much of its adaptive usefulness (Moran 1982). Much orally transmitted cultural knowledge does not readily apply in a socio-natural system undergoing rapid change.

Any type of social or environmental change can produce this transition. For example, major alterations in ecological context brought by migration or other factors decrease the usefulness of experiential knowledge. When the Gwembe of Zambia were moved from their ancestral lands to a new geographic setting to make way for the Kariba Dam, their culturally accumulated knowledge lost much of its value. As a result, many old people suffered from neglect (Colson and Scudder 1981).

Culture contact often brings swift transformations as well. Of particular concern, very rapid changes in social and ecological relationships usually occur when slowly evolved socio-natural systems encounter the international market-based political economy. In the process of shifting

from circumscribed, self-sufficient domestic economies (see Meillassoux 1981) to a modern cash economy, the value of cultural knowledge drops. Young and middle-aged professionals trained to impart the new knowledge needed in the contemporary political economy take over educational functions from old people. At the same time, the market economy supplies young men and women with new avenues to wealth beyond the reach of their elders, and old men's control of productive and reproductive resources slips from their grasp.

Thus, the emergence of a large gap between culture and current behavior destabilizes the evolved relationship between status/treatment of old people and their control of cultural knowledge and other resources. Such circumstances invite the evolution of new adaptive syntheses which are more appropriate to a socio-natural system with a rapidly changing knowledge base and diffuse economic resources. However, these periods dramatically increase the danger of maladaptive adjustments as well.

Old people themselves play an active role in this process. New adaptive (or maladaptive) syntheses develop out of attempts by elderly to meet their needs within the new socio-natural context. Two examples suffice. Glascock (1986) observed elderly Somali males who actively manipulate available material resources to guarantee their care in dependent old age. Tiriki (Kenya) elderly exploit new

economic opportunities, filling vacancies in the local political economy produced by youth going to the cities (Sangree 1986).

The transitional context offers several behavioral alternatives to elderly (Barnett 1953). (1) They may withdraw into a state of denial, attempting to hold on to their old roles and their old contexts of interaction. (2) More likely, they will select a few of their comfortable old roles and try to adapt them to the new social context. For instance, in some transitional societies, old people appear to be retaining fragments of their role as knowledge brokers. Colombian villagers still prize their elderly as experts in local ecology. Colombian elderly also settle disputes and provide relationship counseling (Kagan 1980). Societies experiencing revitalization movements or other types of cultural revivals depend heavily on elders' memory of lost traditions. Such was the case for the ethnic Corsican community in Paris (Cool 1980) and the Coast Salish Indians of the Pacific Coast (Amoss 1981). (3) Some elderly, especially those with physical vigor, may carve out new roles, taking active advantage of emerging economic and social opportunities to consolidate their influence in the new economic order. Under British colonial rule, the Igbo and Nyakyusa elders actually expanded their economic control and political influence (Ottenberg 1971; Wilson 1977).

If the elderly fail to find new meaning and purpose in the transforming socio-natural system, they risk becoming a devalued population, visualized as a social problem, the object of ageism and neglect. Myerhoff (1984) suggests that our own society with its emphasis on productivity has assigned its elderly a cheapened "roleless role." On the other hand, if new syntheses are successful, elderly may enjoy new-found adaptive importance. Whatever specific result emerges, the best way to ensure that elderly are not the object of neglect is to facilitate their continued input into our adaptability as a species.

#### Individual Differences and Adaptability

When considering the contribution of elderly to adaptability, it is important to note that usefulness varies with the individual. All elderly do not have equal value. Lifelong individual differences greatly impact circumstances in old age. Elderly who have proven their value by demonstrating their wisdom, showing their mastery of ritual and healing skills, acting as capable leaders, telling stories well, and efficiently resolving disputes receive the highest respect and status in old age. Even egalitarian hunter/gatherers accord greater honor to elders who demonstrate bravery, dexterity, organizational ability, and concern for others over the course of their lifetime (Van Arsdale 1981).

Moreover, societies reward individuals who follow the prescribed life course and fulfill normative expectations during their productive years. In our society, we value economic productivity. Thus, we reward those who work hard at steady jobs by giving them social security and pension benefits. Even societies without formalized reinforcement systems accord greater respect in late life to individuals who live by social rules. For example, Colombian elderly who had families and provided well for them received greater honor in old age (Kagan 1980). The Chagga of Tanzania built a life-long store of social reciprocity upon which they drew in old age (Moore 1978). The status and treatment conferred upon elderly widows in rural Zimbabwe varied with their productive and reproductive success in earlier life (Folta and Deck 1987). To receive the respect and esteem ordinarily given to elders, individuals in Tiriki, Kenya, and Trigwe, Nigeria, had fulfill the social role of parent. Childless elderly were never viewed as full adults or full elders (Sangree 1987).

#### Ecologically Based Categories of Old Age

Another well documented fact about aging cross-culturally also springs from ecological processes. Almost universally, societies divide their elderly into two groups, the "independent well old" and the "dependent frail old" (Amoss and Harrel 1981) or the "young-old" and the "old-old" (Neugarten 1982). Generally these culturally shaped

categorizations are based on socially defined reproductive status and physical vigor, which is often estimated from physical appearance (Biesele and Howell 1981; Glascock and Feinman 1981; du Toit 1984). These primary characteristics define a person's relationship with key ecological factors, production and reproduction.

#### Applied Value of Ecological Perspective

The road between applied and theoretical science is well-traveled. Theory arises from and is tested by applied research. Coherent models guide applied research to more useful findings and interpretations.

A case in point is the belated recognition in gerontological circles of the need to emphasize the contributions of the old people instead of just viewing them as a humanitarian problem. Greater attention has been given to the analysis of the usefulness of elders in some recent studies (Guillette 1990; Logue 1990). Previously, however, applied cross-cultural gerontology concentrated largely on the decline in the status and treatment of the elderly that surfaces when modern social and economic structures begin to erode the cultural anchors of evolved socio-natural systems. This approach placed the emphasis squarely on dependent elders as a social problem created by changing norms and values and transforming social support networks.

An adaptive perspective coincides more closely with recent attempts to look at the developmental potential of

old people (Nusberg 1988). The ecological viewpoint identifies the root cause of declining status and treatment as the loss of adaptive roles. The most effective solutions, therefore, do not lie in trying to control social transformations, but in finding useful roles for elderly within new socio-natural contexts.

Further, just as preserving Amazonian habitats bears upon the future survival of our species and many others, the preservation of the cultural knowledge of diverse human societies increases overall human adaptability. The homogenization of human cultural adaptation brings the danger of over-specialization. The skills, knowledge, and organizational patterns of varied cultures may prove essential to future survival. As Moran says: "One of the crucial questions for our time is how to protect the pool of past knowledge and at the same time bridge the gap between cultural and environmental change" (1982:322).

These concerns are very pragmatic and "applied."

#### Research Agenda Generated

The usefulness of the research agenda generated partly determines the value of any model. Below, the research questions which arise from an ecological model for old age are briefly outlined.

- A. Most important, does the adaptive usefulness of elderly correlate positively with behavioral outcomes (i.e., the meeting of individual needs)?

1. Is there a positive correlation between need for cultural knowledge such as advice, arbitration, and oral history and the assistance given to dependent elderly?
  2. Is there also a positive correlation between the control of material, socio-political, and ritual resources and assistance given?
- B. Which individual characteristics and resources have the greatest impact on desired behavioral outcomes in old age?
- C. Which factors in the socio-natural system and its antecedents have the greatest impact on desired behavioral outcomes?
- D. Do these systemic and individual factors vary with ecological determinants, such as physical environment, subsistence strategy, technological development, economic organization, and population dynamics?
- E. What evidence is there for the creative participation of elderly in the process of behavioral adaptation?
1. What new innovative/synthetic strategies are emerging in the behaviors of the elderly in transitional contexts?
  2. Are these strategies effectively meeting needs of elderly who practice them?
- F. How well does this model predict change and stability in the socio-natural system?
1. Can positive feedback loops be specifically identified and analyzed? (In other words, can change-producing elements, particularly intrasystemic influences, be demonstrated?)
  2. What evidences exist for the occurrence of negative feedback between behavior of elderly and the rest of the system?
  3. Can it be shown that positive and negative feedback lead to different ends?
- G. How does this model specifically relate to applied concerns?
1. What can be done at the systemic level to facilitate the informal assistance given to the

elderly by members of their socio-natural system? (I.e., assuming that a society values their elderly and wants to help them, how can that assistance be encouraged?)

2. Can adaptive roles be found for the elderly in the context of their societies which increase their perceived value to their societies?

It would not be possible to address all these issues in this particular study. Some questions require cross-cultural comparison. Others are simply beyond the scope of my data and/or analysis. This dissertation, in addition to giving a relatively comprehensive description of the socio-natural context for aging in southern Meru, will primarily deal with the degree to which the perceived contributions of old people, both over the life course and at the present time, affect their success in achieving desired outcomes in old age. Secondly, the evidence for positive and negative feedback loops between the behavior of elders and other elements in the socio-natural system will be addressed.

#### Summary

Most studies of old age address issues articulated in gerontological theory and applied gerontology. Although this study owes a significant debt to those same traditions, I embed these gerontological concerns in a recognized anthropological perspective, ecological anthropology. The concept of adaptation and the socio-natural system offer a fertile conceptual foundation from which to approach the study of old age.

This dissertation attempts to explain how old people in one specific geographic and cultural context, southern Meru, Kenya, act to meet their physiological and psychological needs. An ecological approach takes full account of the interaction between the behavior of old people and existing environmental, historical, cultural, and personal factors.

CHAPTER 3  
THE FIELD EXPERIENCE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

This chapter discusses the research conducted in Meru, Kenya, over a period of 17 months, beginning in December of 1989 and ending in May, 1991. It highlights some of the major logistical and methodological decisions made regarding that field work. Furthermore, it identifies the location of the research communities, describes the characteristics of the research population, reports the sampling procedures used, clarifies the kinds of data collected, and outlines the processes employed in data-analysis.

Practical Considerations

Several essential preparations had to be made prior to data collection. These arrangements included finalizing research location, obtaining personal accommodations, deciding on the primary language of communication, finding research assistants, training those assistants, and translating the research instruments.

Choice of Research Location

The primary research was conducted in three farming communities of approximately 1500 persons each in the southern part of Meru District, Kenya. Southern Meru furnished an ideal site for this research for several reasons. The region has experienced significant culture

change while maintaining a relatively cohesive social fabric. This locality was suitable, therefore, for learning how elderly adapt to a changing resource base and support network. Furthermore, southern Meru has an intact, though somewhat beleaguered, economic base. Most families are able to care for their elderly members, although doing so can be a significant burden. These circumstances provided a good context for studying evolving care-giving strategies.

Given the ecological, developmental, and sub-ethnic variety in southern Meru, obtaining a representative picture of regional aging patterns required gathering data in more than one community. The three chosen locations, Lower Karimba, Upper Karimba, and Mwonge, reflect these intra-regional variations. (See Figure 3.1.)

Bordered by the Nithi and Tungu Rivers, Lower Karimba lies at approximately 1150 meters elevation on Karimba Ridge about five kilometers north of Chuka Town. The last three decades have transformed Lower Karimba from the grain-producing breadbasket and common pasture for inhabitants of upslope communities into a community of resident small farmers growing food crops, grain, and tobacco. Only those Lower Karimba homesteads occupying the flat one-kilometer wide plateau immediately surrounding Ndumbeni Primary School were included in the research population.

A rugged rocky escarpment divides Upper and Lower Karimba. The community of Upper Karimba falls well within

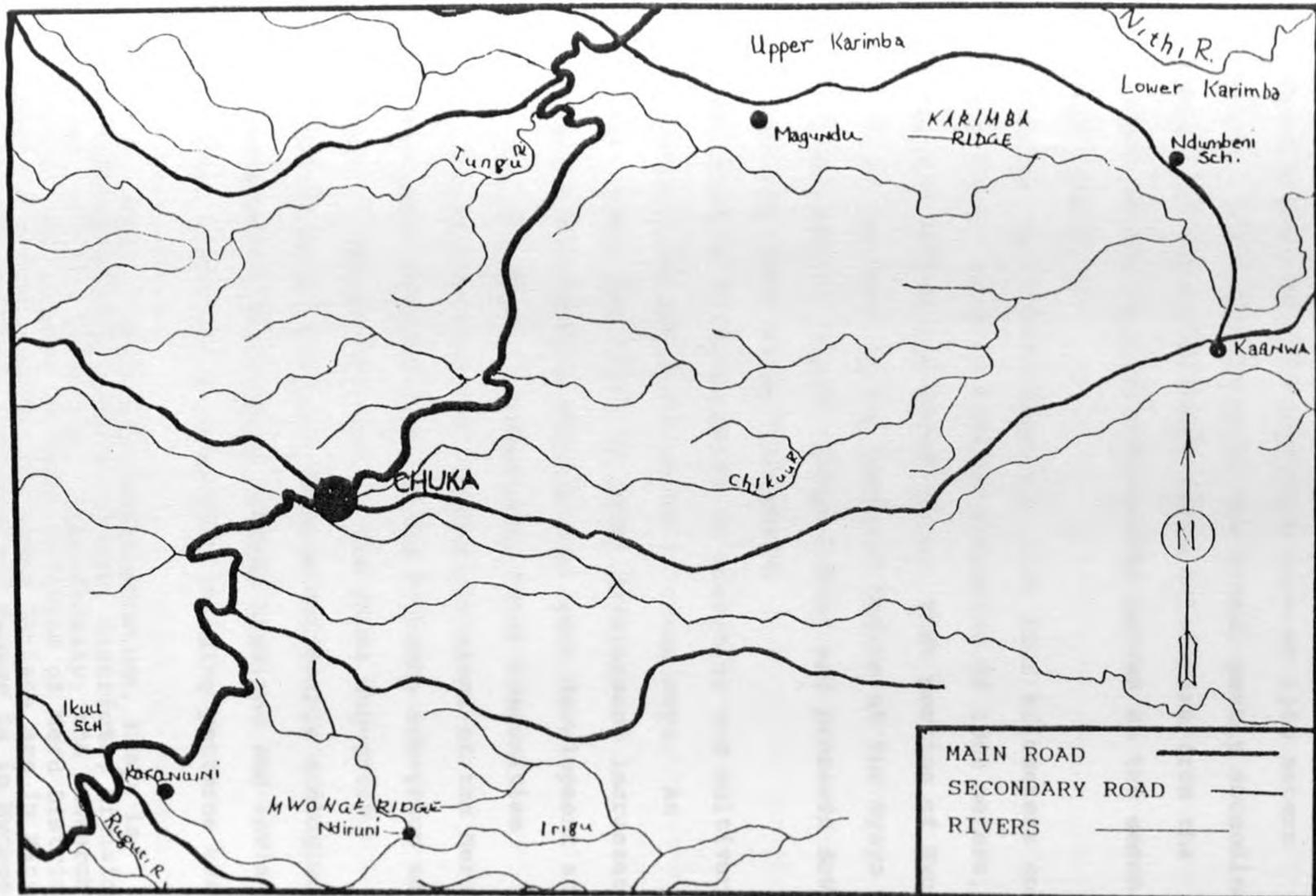


Figure 3.1: Map of Chuka Region

the heavily settled coffee-growing zone at 1300 meters elevation. The inhabitants of the broad, gently ascending ridgetop that stretches about three kilometers from the escarpment to the main Embu-Meru Road served as the second research community.

Mwonge, the third community, lies four kilometers south of Chuka Town. With an average elevation of 1500 meters, both tea and coffee are common here. That portion of Mwonge Ridge to be included in the research begins at the Nyayo Tea Zone at the edge of the Mt. Kenya Forest and proceeds down the slope for about three kilometers.

In addition to differences in elevation and cultivars, these communities are distinctive in other ways. As elevation rises, the level of rural development increases as well, with Lower Karimba showing the least development and Mwonge, the greatest. Furthermore, these communities include two of the local sub-ethnic divisions of the Meru. Upper and Lower Karimba fall in the Muthambe sub-group and the people of Mwonge are part of the Chuka sub-group.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, however, despite noticeable ecological and developmental differences between highland and lowland communities, significant variations in aging patterns were

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of political administration, Kenya is divided hierarchically into provinces, districts, divisions, locations, and sub-locations. Specifically, the research communities are located in Nithi Division of Meru District in Eastern Province. Upper and Lower Karimba are in Karimba Sub-Location of Muthambe Location and Mwonge is in Mwonge Sub-Location of Mwonge Location.

not noted. Therefore, in the analysis and discussion of data, I seldom distinguish among the different communities. Had it been possible to include a community from the true lowlands in Tharaka, possibly more differences would have arisen.

### Personal Accommodations

Finding a place to live in Upper Karimba, the first community to be researched, proved very difficult. Eventually, I accepted the invitation of the deputy headmaster of a local secondary school to stay in his home in Chuka Town. Later, a gracious family in Upper Karimba offered me accommodations in a house they had built for their son who was away in university. I lived with them for a period of three months from June to August of 1990, during the most intensive fieldwork there.

Overall, then, arrangements for personal accommodation worked out very well. Using Chuka Town as a base of operations gave easy access to both Karimba and Mwonge. Moreover, lodging in Chuka offered welcome amenities such as a warm shower in the evening and electricity for lights and a computer. Though my stay in the village was somewhat abbreviated, it provided the cultural immersion and intimate view of family and community life so essential to deeper anthropological understanding.

### The Language of Research

The common languages in southern Meru are English, Kiswahili, and Kimuthambe/Kichuka (two related dialects of Kimeru). Most youth, many middle-aged, and a few elderly speak Kiswahili or English, but the "mother tongue" Kimeru remains at the core of daily life. Although my knowledge of Kiswahili served well in many circumstances, talking with old men and women deep in the villages demanded Kimeru.

Unfortunately, the level of fluency required for deep, meaningful interaction entails months of intensive language acquisition. Regrettably, neither the time nor finances existed for me to intensively study Kimeru. Though I learned enough during the course of fieldwork to follow the general drift of informant responses, my overall ability in Kimeru remained elementary. Extensive reliance on local translators and assistants was, therefore, essential.

Dependence on translators and interpreters certainly filtered out some of the the rich nuances in communication, resulting in a loss of descriptive metaphor and expression. On the other hand, as their understanding of research goals increased, my more able assistants acted as invaluable informants themselves.

### Finding Assistants

Discovering local people with the proper combination of community respectability, linguistic competence, and conceptual understanding presented a very difficult task.

Middle-aged and elderly individuals with the necessary linguistic background were deeply involved in their own affairs. Several secondary school graduates with relatively good language skills offered their services, but they often lacked the ability to deal conceptually with more challenging research tasks. Fortunately, a few recent university graduates lived in the area waiting to be posted to new jobs. Once finally located, these university graduates provided ideal translators and informants.

The initial household census was collected mainly by secondary school graduates from each census community. Later, two recent University of Nairobi graduates, one from Chuka Town and the other from Mwonge Location, assisted with interviewing and other data collection. These individuals worked throughout the most intensive phase of fieldwork and proved extremely able and responsible.

All these assistants were male. Despite persistent efforts and repeated inquiries, finding female assistants proved nearly impossible. Three female assistants did help, however, for short periods of time. One middle-aged female primary school teacher assisted with the collection of two life histories during her school holiday. Two female secondary school graduates, both unemployed primary school teachers, helped temporarily with interviewing. Otherwise, women in the area with the necessary qualifications were unavailable.

Initially, I was afraid that my use of younger assistants would limit the types of information we would be able to collect. However, as I later discovered, my assistants were the "grandchildren" of most of the old people we interviewed. In Meru society, alternating generations are very free and open with each other. Given this pattern of behavior, perhaps younger people make better assistants than middle-aged who are the "children" of the elderly.

### Training Assistants

The training given each assistant depended on the nature of the task assigned to them. Nonetheless, in every case, several days of extensive apprenticeship followed an initial orientation session. Several trainees who demonstrated mastery of the necessary skills eventually were permitted to gather census data or conduct interviews alone. Spreading the work load among several assistants increased sample size significantly.

Teaching assistants how to do the household census was quite straightforward. Each assistant studied a census-takers' guide, discussed the census form and purposes of the research, and then accompanied me until they reached an adequate level of competence.

Assistants who helped with in-depth interviews received more lengthy training. After extensively reviewing the overall purposes and goals of the research, each assistant

translated the interview instrument into Kimeru and then back-translated into English another assistant's Kimeru translation of the same instrument. A very extensive period of apprenticeship followed. Furthermore, daily review sessions were held during the course of data-collection. Everyday we reviewed what we had learned the day before, what new questions had arisen, what new ideas we wanted to explore, or what we were missing in a particular segment of the interview. Furthermore, I alternated my personal assistant, going with one person one day, with another the next, trying to keep everyone fresh and motivated and aware of evolving concerns.

#### Translation/Back-Translation of Instruments

Another preparatory task involved translating research instruments into Kimeru. Before we began each set of in-depth interviews, one assistant translated the interview guideline into Kimeru. Afterwards, another assistant back-translated that Kimeru version into English. Then, all together we reviewed the results, pinpointing those concepts that were unclear and discussing ways to better communicate ideas for which there were no linguistic and cultural equivalents. We followed this process for every instrument except the household census which was very simple and straightforward.

The group back-translation exercise had limitations. All the assistants felt very uncomfortable working with

written Kimeru. Their entire education except for the first few grades in primary school had been conducted in English. They much preferred writing in English. Thus, when we went out to conduct interviews, they very quickly left their Kimeru translations of the interview questions at home, using the written English version as their only prompt. Still, the back-translation exercise acquainted every assistant with difficult concepts to translate. It generated an oral Kimeru translation which was the product of group discussion. And, since every new assistant went through the same process, it brought a partial measure of standardization to interviewing procedures.

#### Methodological Decisions

The research posed several methodological questions which proved difficult to address. These included defining a household, operationalizing the concept of economic well-being, and calculating chronological age. Deciding upon the parameters for the research population and choosing the sampling procedure created less difficulty.

#### Defining Households

In terms of social organization, this research focuses more on the character of the household,<sup>2</sup> or the residential

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<sup>2</sup> Distinguishing between a homestead and a household may be helpful. A "homestead" refers to a small farm and a group of houses occupied by those working on that farm. A "household" alludes to a cooperating group of people who live together, usually on a homestead, sharing their resources and labor and making common decisions.

grouping, and less on the nature of extended kinship relationships. The domestic family group comprises the main hub of life for elderly in rural Meru. Moreover, researchers working in other African communities have noted a connection between residence patterns and care-giving to elderly (Robertson 1984; Dorjahn 1989; Togunu-Bickerseth 1989). Likewise, old people living in dissimilar household contexts have differential access to material and affective resources and may have different behavioral patterns. Thus, an accurate method of household classification is essential.

Fortes (1958) suggests that domestic groups proceed developmentally through three phases: an expansion phase in which a couple marry and have children, a consolidation phase where their children marry and establish their own nuclear families, and a decline phase in which all children are married.

Following du Toit's (1974:290-299) previous adaptation of Fortes' residential types, a household classification scheme was developed for the Meru. This typology evolved over a period of time as various anomalies were incorporated. The current categories subsume the range of household types in southern Meru, particularly as they relate to the integration and provision of care to older people. Particular attention has been given to "incomplete" households, those in which one spouse is not present. Elderly in incomplete households face a higher risk of

neglect, especially as incomplete households often contain widows and divorcees.

A. Nuclear Family Households

1. Expanding/Consolidating Monogamous: husband, wife and children
2. Declining Monogamous: husband, wife, and grandchildren
3. Declining Monogamous: husband and wife alone
4. Polygynous: husband, co-wives and their children

B. Extended Family Households

1. Laterally Extended: The household head and his or her children with siblings and their children<sup>3</sup>
2. Generationally Extended: The household head and children with one or more member from the parents' generation, or the household head and their children along with one or more adult sons and their families.
3. Generationally and Laterally Extended: Any combination of the above, such as a male household head, his wife and children, and his brother, his brother's wife and children, and an aged parent.

C. Incomplete Households<sup>4</sup>

1. Husband/Wife and Children; spouse works away

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<sup>3</sup> Usually laterally and generationally extended households are anchored to a core nuclear unit of a male household head, his wife, and their children. However, these households were defined simply as "the household head and his or her children..." because there are a few instances in which the core nuclear unit is a female household head and her children. Technically, these should be classified as incomplete extended families, but for the sake of simplicity, that complication was not introduced into the typology.

<sup>4</sup> The term "incomplete" describes the fragmentary state of these households (see du Toit 1974; Barth 1961).

2. Husband/Wife and Children; spouse divorced or living with another wife elsewhere
3. Husband/Wife and Children; spouse deceased
4. Husband/Wife and Grandchildren; spouse divorced or living with another wife elsewhere
5. Husband/Wife and Grandchildren; spouse deceased
6. Husband or wife alone; children or grandchildren live adjacent
7. Husband or wife alone; no living children

Devising a workable household typology was simple compared to finding uniform criteria by which to assign nuclear family units to their respective households. Southern Meru is in a state of transition between indigenous and contemporary forms of social and family organization, creating a very fluid situation. Rural Meru homesteads present a bewildering array of contradictions. Invariably, a homestead consists of a small cluster of houses where everyone is related. However, these consanguineal clusters yield a variety of combinations of decision-making interactions and cooperative behavioral patterns. Distilling a pattern from these relationships with internal meaning and/or external consistency proved very difficult.

Several combinations were considered and discarded. First, the official Kenya Census classified every family that cooked in a separate kitchen as a household. Despite its objectivity and simplicity, that solution is problematic in Meru. According to indigenous Meru custom, several food-

producing/consumption units could exist within the same household. For example, each wife in a polygynous household had her own plot of ground and her own kitchen. Secondly, more complicated strategies, such as measuring the degree of income and labor sharing, offer highly quantifiable results. However, these methods seemed too cumbersome and intrusive for a brief initial census survey.

Simply using the internal perception of informants was the most parsimonious solution. However, that approach also proved very slippery. Even members of the same household often disagreed with each other. In one case, a 65 year old wife of the household head thought that her nuclear family and those of her two sons were a single unit. After all, the sons were her children and they shared land. But, her 27 year old son felt that his family was a separate household, since each had their own kitchens and household items. In other families, the situation was reversed, with the elderly parent saying the families were separate households and their sons or sons' wives disagreeing.

Despite the difference of opinion among Meruians on this issue, most people used land ownership as their primary criterion for determining household composition. The majority feel that extended family units are a single household when their land is owned in common.

This emphasis on land ownership reflects relatively recent social change. Indigenous land use customs required

a father to give each son a portion of his farmland to cultivate when that son married and had children. The son could even plant perennial cash crops such as coffee trees or tea on that land. For all intents and purposes, the son's family became a separate economic unit at that point.

This customary land use practice continues. However, since land adjudication has occurred throughout most of this region, farmers usually have, or will soon receive, titles to their land. Therefore, the Meru themselves make a qualitative distinction between land use rights and official land ownership.

Informants adamantly insisted that when separate land titles are granted, nearly all joint decision-making and economic interdependence ceases. Family members may share a water tap or cistern; they may assist a niece or nephew with school fees; the old father may be sought out for advice and arbitration if there is a disagreement between people of different nuclear families or if a domestic dispute arises between a son and his wife. But, once someone obtains a title to their own land, they basically depend on themselves, except in times of crisis.

It is important to add that a very strong minority opinion exists. Many Meruians believe that as long as nuclear units cooperate socially and share some decision-making and arbitration, they remain one household. For instance, one 58 year old man and his wife share the same

compound with the family of their 38 year old son. That son and his wife are both teachers. The father and son have separate houses, kitchens, and land titles, and appear to share very little decision-making beyond occasional group concerns such as marriage and school fees. Yet all adults on the homestead--the father, his wife, the son, and the son's wife--all resolutely insist they should be considered one unit. The old man says as long as he helps to solve family problems, advises, and teaches children how to marry and plan their family then they are a single household.

Nevertheless, barring a handful of unusual exceptions, for the purposes of this research, nuclear family units which own their own land are classified as separate households.<sup>5</sup>

#### Operationalizing Economic Well-Being

Economic well-being directly impinges upon the personal resources and behavioral alternatives available to people in old age. To avoid distrust generated by extensive probing into economic matters during our initial household census, this essential data was obtained by using relatively simple, non-confrontive measures of household economic well-being.

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<sup>5</sup> Those exceptional cases include the following example. In one household, the father and son own small amounts of separate land, but share the same house and kitchen, obviously cooperating on practically everything. Those conditions supersede the primary criterion of land ownership.

First of all, several observable household characteristics reflect economic well-being. The type, size, and condition of the dwellings at each homestead constitute one such indicator. A rating scale for household dwellings was developed using data from an extensive survey of rural housing conditions in Meru District (Sterkenburg et al. 1986:81). These categories are:

1. Houses with pole walls and thatch roof
2. Houses with mud/wattle walls and thatch roof
3. Houses with mud/wattle walls and tin roof
4. Houses with timber walls and tin roof
5. Houses with stone walls and tin (or tile) roof.

Many homesteads, of course, contain more than one type of dwelling. It was not uncommon to find households with two or three mud/wattle homes alongside a large stone structure, for example. In such cases, we recorded all types of dwellings present in a household and the number of each type. During analysis, a six-point rating scale was developed based upon the raw collected data.

The measurement of economic well-being also included collecting some straightforward information about income generation and expenditure. We recorded the total acreage owned by the members of the household, acreage planted in different cash crops, and how many persons in the household have off-farm jobs. In this last calculation, we included those members who do not actually live with the rest of the household, but who visit often and contribute regularly to its well-being. We also recorded the value of livestock

owned and the value of an inventory of selected household items.

This household inventory is an adaptation of the 15-point wealth index which Haugerud (1984) used in Embu, the district just south of Meru. Haugerud's index was drawn from a much larger household inventory and consisted of items that Haugerud found especially important to local economic perceptions. The scale was up-dated by finding the current local retail value of the items on Haugerud's index. The resulting index consists of the following items and their current value in Kenya shillings: automobile (60,000), motorcycle (30,000), gas cooker (6,500), ox cart (6,000), sewing machine (5,000), plough (3,000), sofa set (2,500), bicycle (2,500), radio (1,500), pressure lamp (750), paraffin stove (250), hurricane lamp (150), charcoal stove (100), and wood chairs (100).

Extenuating research circumstances and personal oversights contributed to several weaknesses in economic data. For example, the data on dwellings would perhaps be more powerful had we recorded the size of the dwellings as well as the type. However, measuring the square footage of all the dwellings in each compound would have been awkward and intrusive. Simply counting the total number of rooms would only have created an illusion of discrimination where none existed. In some cases, rooms are constructed of permanent stone or timber walls in well-built modern homes.

In other cases, they are merely cardboard partitions in a mud and thatch hut. Some families choose to divide up tiny ten by ten foot huts into "rooms" while others decide to leave a larger dwelling as one single room. Considering all the inconsistencies, we merely counted the number of dwellings of each house type. Even though that measure partakes of the same vagueness as that of "rooms," at least the number of dwellings could be quickly ascertained by observation and did not require additional probing.

Secondly, in determining the value of livestock, we assigned every cow the same value of 5,000 Kenya shillings, the approximate cost of a "grade cow," a cow from European breed stock that has higher beef and dairy potential. Although grade cattle are ubiquitous in most of highland Meru, the less valuable, hump-backed Zebu cattle are common in lower elevations, including Lower Karimba, one of the three research communities. Thus, the valuation of livestock is somewhat inflated for many households in Lower Karimba.

Ascertaining the amount of land owned created some problems as well. During the initial census, we attempted to record the amount of land actually possessed and/or used by the household, including land owned by someone else in the household, say an absent brother or father. In cases where families rented land, we listed the rented land only

if the household had absolutely no land of their own and were living on rented property.

Despite all attempts to maintain consistency, the census-taker in Lower Karimba interpreted land ownership in the literal western sense. He recorded only the land for which the family held a title deed. This departure from established practice was discovered too late to correct the error. Fortunately, only a small number of households were affected. Of more concern was the tendency of some census respondents report acreage inaccurately. Some cautious individuals no doubt intentionally under-reported their holdings slightly; others just didn't know the exact figure. Fortunately, we returned to several homes a second time for interviews. That second visit gave us an opportunity to check the accuracy of many census forms.

A final consistency problem resulted from the evolutionary nature of early census-taking. Several refinements were made in the census data collected in the process of surveying the first community, Upper Karimba. As a result, more refined measures of economic well-being were not collected for some Upper Karimba households. Whenever we returned to a household for an interview, we always took a new census form and obtained the remaining information. However, to have revisited every single household would have been counter-productive.

### Setting Population Parameters

Who should be considered an old person for the purposes of this study? Cattell (1989) began with internal cultural criteria when defining her elderly population. She asked local leaders to identify the "old people" in their community and later determined the characteristics, including the chronological age, of those thus identified. This type of holistic definition has a strong internal validity and a distinct anthropological appeal.

However, using a chronological age boundary to determine population parameters also offers some useful methodological and analytic advantages. This approach enables, first of all, random sampling and stratified sampling by age. Moreover, using chronological age facilitates comparison with other cross-cultural studies. Therefore, I chose to reverse Cattell's procedure, first defining the old age population with a definite chronological age boundary and then exploring the cultural characteristics of that population.

Khasiani (1987) and Menya (1985) chose 50 years of age as the lower limit for their studies of elderly in Kenya. The comparative international "standard" in cross-cultural studies is usually age 60. Observations made in southern Meru during the household census suggested that an age limit of 50 would include a very large number of highly active people who were still culturally considered to be "middle-

aged." On the other hand, the comparative international "standard" of 60 years seemed to omit individuals who could be considered "old."

Since the official retirement age in Kenya is 55, that age was chosen as the lower age boundary for elderly in this research. Using age 55 incorporates practically everyone who would be considered a truly "old" person by cultural standards without including an unnecessary number of "middle-aged."

#### Calculation of Chronological Age

Chronological age holds little meaning to many Meruians, particularly among older age groups. Most Meru elderly do not know their actual age. Official identity cards estimate birth dates, but these estimates are highly inaccurate. Since the Meru used to have formalized age-sets, age-set names provide a very rough guide to a person's age. However, age at circumcision varied widely. Earliest childhood memories of area historical events, however, give a somewhat more reliable measure of chronological age. Certainly, some people recall childhood events from an earlier age than others. Also, some were born near a catastrophic event and others were not. Nevertheless, by compiling a list of dated historical events and then questioning elderly informants very closely about their recall of historical events from childhood and puberty, we

arrived at a reasonably accurate chronological age for our elderly informants.

A list of area historical events was compiled by first investigating published works by Fadiman (1982), an early history of Chuka by Mwaniki (1982), the 1989 Kenya National Census Enumerator's Guide, and material at the Kenya National Archives and the Meru Museum. After assembling a list of general events, several particularly knowledgeable elders from Muthambe and from Mwonge were visited in order to ensure that each list of events was specific to the area in which it was used. Thus, we ended up with two slightly different calendars, one for Mwonge and one for Karimba. (See Appendix A for the Mwonge Events Calendar.)

#### Sampling for Interviews

Following census-taking, two sampling frames were compiled from census results. One sample was taken from all those individuals over the age of 55 for a set of interviews with elderly and another sample from those between 25 and 54 for an interview on attitudes towards aging and old people. A standard table of random numbers was used. Since age and sex are two very important variables, the sample in each community was stratified by sex and age.

Out of a total population of 377 persons over 55 years of age, a sample of 131 were interviewed. This population in each community was divided into four age categories: 55 to 64, 65 to 74, 75 to 84 and over 85. We tried to

interview equal numbers from each age and sex category. However, some irregularities were encountered, primarily because of a low total population in the oldest male categories. For example, there were only seven males between 75 and 84 and only three males over 85 in Upper Karimba. We attempted to interview all of these individuals.

TABLE 3.1: SAMPLE FOR INTERVIEW WITH ELDERS

Age	Mwonge		U. Karimba		L. Karimba		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
55-64	4	4	10	11	4	4	18	19
65-74	4	5	9	11	4	4	17	20
75-84	4	5	5	10	3	4	12	19
85+	4	5	3	10	2	3	9	17
Total	16	18	27	42	13	15	56	75

In Upper Karimba, the original target community, 69 people out of a total population of 145 over age 55 were interviewed. In Mwonge, the sample size was 34 out of a population of 140; and, in Lower Karimba, 28 individuals out of a population of 92 persons.<sup>6</sup>

An identical sampling procedure was followed for the attitude survey. The population of each community between ages 25 and 54 was divided into three age groupings: 25 to

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<sup>6</sup> A larger sample was collected from Upper Karimba because research began in that community. Time did not permit collecting interviews for the same size sample in the other two communities.

34, 35 to 44, and 45 to 54. Equal numbers of males and females from each age category were chosen.

TABLE 3.2: SAMPLE FOR ATTITUDE SURVEY

Age	Mwonge		U. Karimba		L. Karimba		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
25-34	8	7	10	18	4	4	22	29
35-44	4	6	10	10	4	4	18	20
45-54	6	8	10	10	4	4	20	22
Total	18	21	30	38	12	12	60	71

In Upper Karimba, we interviewed a minimum of 20 individuals, ten males and ten females, in each age grouping. The total sample was 68 out of a population of 373 between the ages of 25 and 54. In Mwonge, the second community to be surveyed, we drew a similar sample of 20 persons per age category, but due to time and logistical constraints only interviewed an average of twelve persons per age grouping, six males and six females. In Mwonge, 39 individuals out of a population of 469 were interviewed. In Lower Karimba, time constraints permitted us to interview only eight persons per age category, four males and four females, for a total sample of 24 out of a population of 303. In summary, we interviewed 131 persons between age 25 and 54 out of a total population of 1145 about their attitudes towards aging.

#### Types of Data

Over the course of fieldwork in Meru, several different kinds of data were collected from sub-sets of the target

population. These included a household census, informant interviews, life histories, time allocation studies, and notes from participant observation.

### Household Census

Initially, a household census of each community was conducted in order to obtain basic demographic profiles, get a sampling frame, and establish rapport within the community. Demography is an integral part of ecological analysis. Population dynamics affect access to systemic energy flow and behavior in old age. Moreover, in rural Meru the best way to get an accurate sampling frame is with a household census. Furthermore, conducting a census educates the community about the research purposes and gains confidence before more invasive data collection begins.

Following general United Nations census collection guidelines, basic data on age, gender, education, occupation, and migration were collected. Moreover, each household was classified according to social characteristics and economic well-being. However, due to cultural and temporal limitations, the standard census categories of fertility and mortality were omitted.

A de facto recording procedure was used to determine household membership. In other words, the census recorded all persons who customarily live in the household. In order to measure out-migration, those who are considered a part of the household but who live and work elsewhere were also

listed. However, these individuals were not included in community demographic totals. Neither did we include outsiders who rent rooms in the market towns, such as teachers who reside temporarily in the community.

### Informant Interviews

As noted above, in-depth interviews were conducted with a randomly selected sample of informants over 55 years of age and with a sample of individuals between ages 25 and 54. An extensive set of questions guided the structure of these interviews. (See copies of these interview guidelines in Appendices B and C.) However, in addition to several standard areas of investigation covered consistently throughout the course of the research, broad ranging flexibility was encouraged. We asked numerous follow-up questions and probed for deeper meanings and fuller explanations as our knowledge grew during the course of the research.

### Supplemental Interviews

In addition to the two primary sets of interviews, we talked with a small group of retirees from the formal economic sector. In Kenya, teachers, policemen, army personnel, health workers, agricultural extension agents and other civil servants join employees of industries and business in eligibility for small retirement benefits and pension payments. These formal and public sector employees must retire from their jobs at the age of 55. Since

retirement is a foreign concept and a new phenomenon in Kenya, policymakers want to learn what happens to retirees who return to their rural homes (Odenyo, Okoth-Ogendo, and Oucho 1988). However, we found so few retirees within the research communities, only eight out of a total population of nearly 4500 people, that the results of these interviews are of marginal significance.

A second set of supplemental interviews was conducted with the residents of two homes for destitute old people located in Kirinyaga District in neighboring Kikuyuland. Though very few old-age homes serve the elderly in Kenya, these institutions do represent one possible method of caring for elderly in their dependent years. Moreover, given the nature of African society, many of the individuals who go to old-age homes have failed to cope within the normal social context. Finding out their common characteristics promised to illuminate important theoretical issues.

Each of the two homes visited, both operated by the Catholic Church, had a resident population of approximately 40. In cooperation with the workers and directors in both homes, a cross-section of residents suitable for interviewing were selected. Interviews consisted of recording an abbreviated life history, in which residents related cogent aspects of their background and recounted the specific events that led to their coming to the home. We

conducted twelve interviews at one home and ten interviews at the other.

### Collection of Life Histories

Life histories are not essential for discovering what is happening right now among old people in Meru. But, they do offer intimate insight into the thinking of individual elders and provide an interesting perspective on the life course and other aspects of culture.

Given the extensive amount of time required to collect life histories, we recorded the life histories of only four individuals, two women and two men. Each life history took approximately ten to twelve hours of interview time. In addition, translation into English consumed between two and three hours of work for each hour of taped interview.

### Time Allocation Studies

Near the end of the research, during May of 1991, a short two-week time allocation study was conducted. This study focused on the activities of old people in Mwonge, the community which was most accessible to the two assistants who conducted the study. The purpose of the study was simply to quantitatively confirm or disprove previously observed and reported behavior.

Reported activities and informal observation data had already been recorded for 32 randomly selected elderly informants in Mwonge. These individuals formed the sample for the time allocation study. In order to randomize times,

each day was divided into eighteen 45-minute observational periods, between 8:00 a.m. and 9:30 p.m., for six days each week, omitting Sunday. Each observer recorded the activity of a randomly selected old person sometime during each 45-minute time period. To insure that every individual was observed at different times of the day, days were divided into three separate segments, each with six 45-minute time periods. Individuals were then randomly assigned to time slots in each of the three segments. That is, three separate random selection procedures were performed, one for each of the three time segments. As a result, the time allocation study produced a set of data in which every individual was observed twice during each of the three day-segments, for a minimum of six times over the two week period. Furthermore, to prevent informants from altering their behavior patterns, our visits were unannounced and unanticipated. If the old person saw the observer first, that fact was noted.

#### Participant Observation

Participant observation adds depth, texture and internal validity to the data collected by other methods. Recording these observations began with notes taken in a small notebook in the course of daily activities. These notes then formed the basis for more extensive field-notes which were recorded each evening. In addition, a personal journal of impressions and feelings was kept.

Reflecting back over the field experience suggests that three separate periods of observation were very constructive. The most exciting occurred just after my arrival when everything appeared fresh and new. Observations from this period seem naive in retrospect, but even their naivety reveals certain useful concepts. My most intimate view of Meru life came while living with in Upper Karimba from June to August of 1990. However, in terms of depth and breadth of information collected, the most productive observation period was from December of 1990 through March of 1991. By that time, we had passed beyond the threshold of superficial knowledge about aging in the region and had begun to probe into more complex matters. At that point, interviewing became very comprehensive, sometimes leading to several pages of notebook paper in addition to the standard interview sheet.

#### Analysis of Data

A great deal of content analysis was done during the process of field research. That continuing analysis facilitated an early revision of the basic interview guideline and later expedited the day-to-day revision of emphasis in interview sessions, helping us isolate those aspects of culture and behavior to explore in more depth.

Straightforward statistical analysis was performed on appropriate data. Data from the household census and from some interview questions fall into this category. For

instance, in question 17 on the Elders Interview (Appendix B), informants simply identified the person who most often supplies them with food, clothing, and other survival needs. On question 27 in the same interview, informants rated their overall health compared to others their own age, using a small five-step ladder as a rating scale. Responses to these questions are highly quantifiable.

Although many interview questions were open-ended, some responses could be statistically analyzed after content analysis. For instance, on question 21 in the Elder Interview, informants were asked how they would feel about becoming dependent on others in their family. A content analysis of these responses grouped their answers into three general categories, with several sub-divisions:

- (1) Happy to be dependent: I helped my children, now they should help me;
- (2) Ambivalent:
  - (a) Acceptable only if I am completely unable to care for myself;
  - (b) Acceptable if I receive only a little help;
- (3) Unhappy:
  - (a) I want to take care of myself;
  - (b) Other people are unreliable and inconsistent;
  - (c) I am afraid I will be neglected.

On the other hand, for other ethnographic data, no attempt has been made to quantify responses. This material includes the more intensive probing into the nature of blessings and curses, the workings of respect and reciprocity, the losses associated with old age, the settling of disputes and giving of advice, and numerous rich

examples of behavior cited by informants to illustrate their statements.

Statistical analysis of appropriate responses consisted primarily of two types: descriptive analysis, such as the computation of frequency distributions and means, and bivariate comparative analysis, testing the relationships between several independent and dependent variables. Given that much of the data is ordinal and nominal level data, Kendall's nonparametric tau is used throughout to compute correlations. Agresti and Finlay (1986:226) describe Kendall's tau as a conservative correlation statistic for use with this type of data.

#### Summary

This chapter reviews many of the experiences, methodological problems, and thought processes that transpired over the course of fieldwork in Meru. The parameters of the research population and the sampling procedures have also been described. As well, the chapter clarifies the types of data collected and the analyses subsequently performed on that data.

CHAPTER 4  
HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIO-NATURAL SYSTEM

Aging occurs within complex socio-natural systems. The elements and processes of these systems profoundly affect the character of old age. This chapter traces the development of the existing socio-natural system in southern Meru District, emphasizing the ecological and historical influences which helped to produce the current social world of old people.

Geography and Ecology

The southern portion of Meru District lies on the eastern slopes of volcanically formed Mt. Kenya in Kenya's Eastern Province. (See Figure 1.1.) Mt. Kenya, called Kirinyaga, or the "ostrich feather," by the Kikuyu because of its snow-covered peaks, towers at 5,194 meters in the distance. To the northeast, the Nyambeni Hills at 2500 meters drop rapidly down to the flat, arid "northern grazing area" inhabited largely by non-Meru pastoralists. Downslope to the east stretch the parched stony lowlands of the Tana River, which eventually drains into the Indian Ocean. Between the peaks of Kirinyaga and the barren Tana River hills, are the well-watered volcanic highlands of southern

Meru, ruggedly fertile with their fast-flowing streams, deep gorges, and uncountable red clay and loam ridges.

### Rainfall Patterns

Located directly on the equator, Meru District experiences a bi-modal rainfall pattern tied to the seasonal movement of the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone. Most rain comes from southeasterly trade winds off the Indian Ocean (Ojany and Ogendo 1973). The long rains in Meru usually commence in mid-March and continue into May. Dry weather exhausts June to September. The short rains occur from mid-October to early December, followed by a dry January, February, and early March. Mean annual rainfall on the eastern Mt. Kenya highland slopes ranges from 127 to 228 centimeters. Unfortunately, rainfall can be very erratic. For example, mean annual rainfall for Chuka Town at 1463 meters elevation has fluctuated from a recorded low of 100 centimeters to a high of 276 centimeters (Bernard 1972).

### Ecozones

The geology and climate of the region create a variety of ecozones. Generally speaking, ecozones vary with elevation, forming a series of bands along the side of Mt. Kenya and the Nyambeni Hills. However, localized variations in rainfall patterns and soil type also influence the ecological conditions. Such diverse ecozones arrayed in close proximity encourage a rich blend of agricultural and pastoral subsistence strategies.

The extreme lowlands, which border the research area to the east, encompass three identifiable zones. Poor, easily eroded lateritic soil and unreliable rainfall of only 60 to 75 centimeters per year limit the subsistence potential of the "acacia-comboretum zone." Even lower annual rainfall coupled with very high temperatures plague the "acacia-commiphora zone." Human exploitation of these biomes consists of the shifting cultivation of drought resistant crops and the herding of sheep, goats, and a few Zebu cattle. The third lowland zone, "sansevieria-bush," is too dry and hot for agricultural subsistence.

The transitional "grass woodland zone" stretches between the highlands and lowlands at an elevation of approximately 900 to 1200 meters. It receives from 60 to 100 centimeters of variable rainfall. Soil fertility varies with parent material, with volcanically derived soils possessing better structure and fertility than soils born of more ancient "basement" rocks. Until fairly recently, malaria and tsetse fly infestation prevented extensive human settlement of the grass woodland zone. Meru families dwelling at higher elevations, however, grew pulses, cereals, and root crops in this region. Herds of livestock also grazed here. In more recent times, the burgeoning populations of the upslope communities have settled and cultivated this territory more extensively.

The "star grass zone," noted for high soil fertility, moderate temperatures, and adequate rainfall, stretches from 1200 to 1675 meters. The most favorable zone both for agriculture and human settlement, this ecozone supports a broad range of food crops--tubers, bananas, maize, cereals and pulses, as well as coffee and citrus fruits. Population density understandably reaches its highest levels in this ecozone.

The "Kikuyu grass zone," between 1525 and 2450 meters with 75 to 125 centimeters of annual rainfall, is suitable for grazing and for many of the same crops grown in the star grass zone. This region is, however, less desirable for human habitation due to cooler temperatures. The high and low "bracken zones," also at 1525 meters and above, have more limited agricultural potential due to infertile, powdery soils and cold temperatures (Bernard 1972).

#### Meru Ethnicity

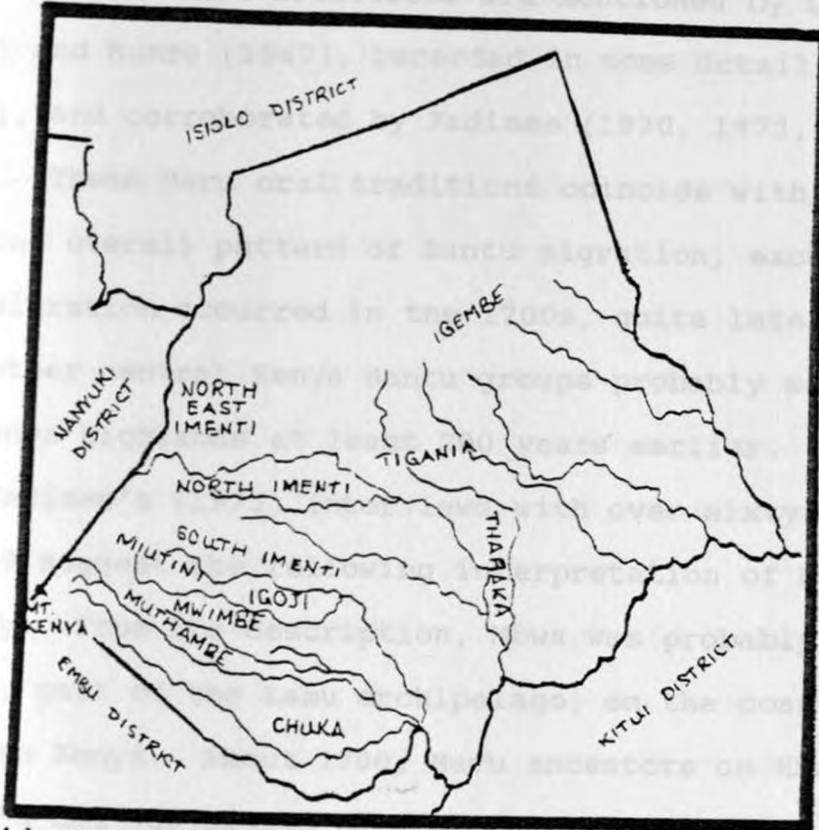
These slopes and lowlands are home for a collection of clans and sub-ethnic groups which since colonial times have been collectively known as the Meru. Originally, small groups of inter-related clans (miiriga; singular: mwiriga) settled these ridges on the eastern slope of Mt. Kenya and formed what Fadiman (1982) termed "ridgetop communities." Most interaction occurred among the miiriga of a single ridge, though communities did combine into larger sub-ethnic groups occasionally for warfare or ritual.

Altogether there are nine Meru sub-ethnic groups: the Chuka, Muthambe, Mwimbi, Igoji, Miutini, and Imenti near Mt. Kenya; the Tigania and Igembe in the Nyambenis; and the Tharaka in the eastern lowlands. (See Figure 4.1.) Each division has subtle differences of custom and language that seem minute to outsiders, but are important to the Meru themselves.

#### Historical and Cultural Traditions

The Meru people boast a rich tradition of oral history. A review of this tradition provides a deeper understanding of the cultural roots which nourish contemporary Meru communities.

The migratory waves that brought current human populations to Meru began approximately 5,000 years ago. Prior to the massive trans-continental Bantu migrations which first reached East Africa less than 2,000 years ago, the chief staging ground for migration into the eastern Kenyan highlands was from the north--Cushitic pastoralists from Ethiopia and Nilotic pastoralists from Sudan (Odhiambo et al. 1977; Ambrose 1982; Phillipson 1985). These three groups--Cushites, Nilotes, and Bantu--constitute the principal genetic and cultural heritage for the peoples of southern Meru. The mingling of these diverse cultures and their subsequent interaction with the varied habitats of the region shaped the culture and subsistence strategies of pre-colonial Meru society.



Adapted from Fadiman (1982)

Figure 4.1: Map of Meru Sub-Ethnic Groups

### The Meru Migration

According to all Meru sub-groups except the Chuka, their Bantu ancestors migrated to the current Meru homeland from a small agricultural community on a coastal island called Mbwa.<sup>1</sup> Mbwa traditions are mentioned by Lambert (1956) and Munro (1967), recorded in some detail by Bernardi (1959), and corroborated by Fadiman (1970, 1973, 1976, 1982). These Meru oral traditions coincide with the accepted overall pattern of Bantu migration, except that the Meru migration occurred in the 1700s, quite late in history. Most other central Kenya Bantu groups probably settled in the Kenya highlands at least 200 years earlier.

Fadiman's (1973) interviews with over sixty Meru elders in 1969 suggest the following interpretation of Meru oral history. From its description, Mbwa was probably Manda Island, part of the Lamu archipelago, on the coast of northern Kenya. About 1700, Meru ancestors on Mbwa were attacked and subjugated by a group of non-African people, probably Arabs, called the Nquo Ntuni, "the red-clothed ones."

As a result of this subjugation, the Meru ancestors left Mbwa and began an overland migration up the Tana River which lasted several generations. During this time, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mbwa dwellers most likely arrived on what is now the coast of Kenya as part of the transcontinental Bantu migration, probably completed by around 400 A. D. (Odhiambo et al. 1977; Ambrose 1982; Soper 1982).

migrants, who called themselves the Nqaa, lived near the seasonal swamps and small streams that flow into the Tana River, exploiting aquatic resources and relying on the skills of certain members of their group noted for hunting and gathering. Eventually, the Nqaa crossed the Tana River and entered the eastern Mt. Kenya lowlands around 1730 to 1750.

#### Ecological Influence on Cultural Development

The Nqaa brought with them a Bantu language and culture--patrilineal clans and a mixed agricultural and pastoral subsistence strategy with secondary reliance on fishing. Somewhere in their cultural history, they had also adopted the southern Cushitic age-set social organization common to East Africa.

When these Meru ancestors reached the slopes of Mt. Kenya, the rugged highland ecology began to wield a subtle influence upon their culture and subsistence patterns. The fertile, well-watered soils, productive forests, and grasslands encouraged a continuation of the familiar mixture of agriculture and pastoralism. However, fast flowing streams sliced these highlands into a labyrinth of high ridges and deep valleys. A large united population could not utilize these small units of arable land efficiently.

Consequently, a period known as kagairo (the dividing) occurred. The original migratory group began to split into smaller clan-based units to exploit the resources of the

mountainous terrain. Moving up the slopes, these clan-centered units continued their custom of staying near water, following small mountain streams as they planted their crops and grazed their livestock on the fertile ridges and valleys.

The Meru miiriga settled on the eastern slopes of the mountain and established strong territorial claims to the ridges they were exploiting. Over the years, separated by the uneven terrain, isolated miiriga gradually lost their common name, Nqaa, and their common sense of identity. A pervasive system of limited warfare between ridgetop communities even developed. Miiriga began to raid neighboring ridgetop communities primarily to obtain the livestock required for bridewealth and status. A complex system of alliances based on ritual kinship (qichiaro) evolved to regulate both warfare and exogamous marriage practices (Fadiman 1982). (See the chart in Figure 4.2.)

Despite their apparent disunity, the clans of southern Meru retained common customs, language, and traditions of origin. Furthermore, ridgetop miiriga coalesced occasionally into larger sub-ethnic units for warfare and ritual. A highly revered hereditary figure, the Mugwe, referred to by some as a prophet (Bernardi 1959; Needham 1960) and by others as a divine right king of the type common in the Ethiopian highlands (Mwaniki 1982), oversaw these area-wide rituals and mediated certain events. Each

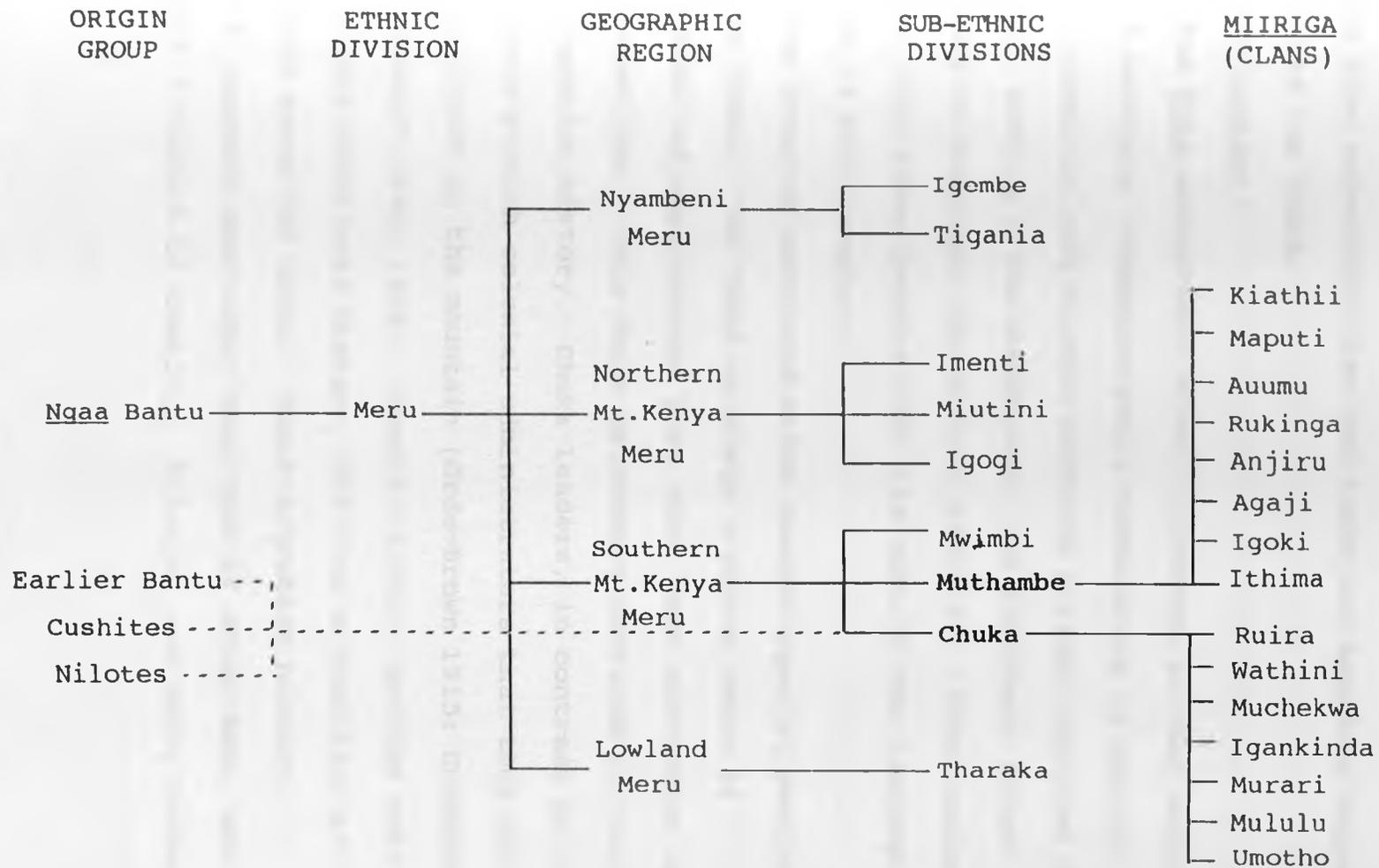


Figure 4.2: Social and Ethnic Divisions in Meru

of the nine sub-ethnicities had their own separate Mugwe, including the Chuka.<sup>2</sup>

### Culture Contact

The Nqaa encountered other influences as they migrated up the mountain. Numerous small communities of earlier Bantu, Cushitic, and Nilotic migrants already occupied these slopes. Barring a few exceptions, the newcomers either absorbed or displaced the initial settlers. Nevertheless, contact with these peoples left its mark on the language and culture of Meru invaders.

One group of survivors which deserve special mention are the Chuka. The Chuka maintain a strong sense of uniqueness and separateness from other Meru sub-groups until the present day. This Chuka detachment surfaces in their oral migration history. Chuka leaders, in contrast to other Meru, told British colonial administrators that they had "always lived" on the mountain (Orde-Brown 1915; Crampton 1927; Lambert 1949, 1956). Mwaniki (1982), probing more deeply into Chuka oral history, did find a tradition of migration among the Chuka. Their migration history, however, appears much older than that of other Meru, and suggests a mixture of Cushitic, Nilotic, and Bantu forbears.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bernardi (1959) for further exposition of the place of the Mugwe in Meru society.

The pressure of subsequent Bantu encroachments later welded these diverse Chuka ancestors into one common ethnic unit.<sup>3</sup>

The Chuka developed a sense of ethnic solidarity and homogeneity uncommon in the region because of the extreme threat to their survival from their neighbors. Except for the Tharaka, all other major surrounding groups, the Mwimbi and Imenti Meru to the north, the Embu and Mbere to the south and the Kikuyu to the west, raided the Chuka with great regularity. Attacks upon the Chuka tended to depart from the regional tradition of only raiding to capture livestock or captives who could be ransomed for livestock (Fadiman 1982). Several organized wars against the Chuka attempted to dislodge them from their land as well.

The Chuka developed a highly regimental lifestyle in which males from the teens to middle-aged stayed in constant military readiness. Women were forbidden to bear another child until their youngest was old enough to run and fend for itself during a raid. Eventually, by the late 1800s the hostilities reached such a height that the Chuka withdrew from much of their land and assumed a defensive posture. They constructed barriers in the forest by felling trees,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Mwaniki (1982), Cushites and Paraniotes from the Ethiopian highlands migrated southward due to drought, mingling with a few hunter-gatherers on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. These early arrivals constituted the Tumbiri clans of the Chuka people. About 250 years later the first wave of Bantuized "Meru" arrived from the coast and settled in the forest above the original Chuka migrants. These became the Thagana clans.

digging pits, and encouraging the growth of tangled underbrush. At their most effective, some of these walls of vegetation were twenty feet wide and nine feet high at the time of European contact (Crampton 1927). The Chuka destroyed several of the roads into Chukaland and built tunnels through the walls of vegetation on the others. These devices required travelers to advance in single file where hostiles could be easily attacked. Through these defensive strategies, the Chuka survived a series of organized allied invasions from numerically superior forces between 1885 to 1900.

Despite their fortress mentality, the Chuka interacted with their neighbors, especially with the Mwimbi and Muthambe Meru. Some Muthambe clans lived in peaceful pastoral/agricultural symbiosis with the Chuka until the early 1800s when these clans joined additional Meru migrants from downslope and moved north to settle in Mwimbiland (Mwaniki 1982). Later, in the mid-1800s, the Muthambe and Mwimbi drove the Chuka from the ridges between the Mara and Tungu rivers, a distance of ten to fifteen kilometers, including the area that is now Karimba. In order to defuse hostilities and limit the constant raiding, many Muthambe and Chuka clans established ritual gichiaro, or blood-brotherhood, relationships across sub-ethnic lines. (See also Orde-Brown 1916; Crampton 1927.)

Thus, migration and settlement of this region was not a single event, but a series of migrations that mingled diverse cultural strands. Even the final Meru migration from the coast was not a single event but "an era" in which various components of the in-coming migrants from Mbwa separated and laid claim to the ridges of the region (Fadiman 1970). The Chuka were fortunate in that they were large and homogeneous enough to resist complete absorption and displacement, although the ensuing struggle left its mark on their history and their ethnic consciousness.

#### Indigenous Meru Society

What social and economic patterns which developed out of these cultural and ecological interactions?

#### Economic Organization

The basic subsistence strategy which evolved in southern Meru combined agriculture and pastoralism with some intra-regional variation, depending on the ecozone. The Meru extensively exploited the advantages of the different ecological zones and developed a very refined subsistence adaptation. Families lived mostly in the healthy middle elevations where temperatures stayed mild and where soil fertility and rainfall were more predictable. Perennial food crops such as bananas and yams grew easily, offering a stable food supply. The higher regions above 1675 meters provided grazing land, forest products, and a little millet. In the zones below 1200 meters, farmers raised millets,

sorghums, pulses, and other annual crops and grazed their livestock. This multi-zonal adaptation minimized risk from drought, disease, and pests and reduced the potential for land degradation in the most populated zone (Bernard 1972).

The political economy that emerged in Meru can be classified as a "lineage mode of production" or a "domestic economy" (see Meillassoux 1981; Rey 1979). The fundamental economic unit consisted of a patrilineal homestead of close male kinsmen and their wives. The Meru sub-divided each homestead into relatively self-sufficient nyumba, matri-centered production units containing a wife, her unmarried daughters and uncircumcised sons. Sons usually inherited the nyumba land their mothers had been given to use (see Brokansha and Glazier 1973).

#### Kinship and Social Organization

Social organization centered around patrilineal clans, the miiriga. Kinship patterns in Meru included clan exogamy, polygyny, and virilocality. Classificatory kinship terminology was used.

Clan-centered social organization met many of the corporate needs of the Meru. Patrilineal clans provided flexible control of ridgetop lands and efficient organization of social and political life on the ridges. Other elements in the system limited the warlike tendencies of ridgetop communities. Clan exogamy established affinal alliances with other clans, serving as one unitary

mechanism, and a system of ritual kinship or blood brotherhood (gichiaro) was used to establish ritual linkages between two communities when hostilities became too intense (Fadiman 1982).

However, occasional inter-clan cooperation was needed. Age-graded social organization provided the mechanism for that cooperation.

### Age-Graded Social Organization

In Meru, formal age-grade systems cross-cut patrilineal clan organization, providing an additional framework for social interaction. At the lowest level, since ridgetop communities usually consisted of more than one clan, the age-grade system united these communities against the raids of hostile neighbors. Furthermore, all inter-ridge cooperative efforts, whether warfare, defense, adjudication, administration, or ritual and sacrifice, coalesced around age-grade social units.<sup>4</sup>

Both generation-sets, keyed to genealogical position, and age-sets, based on circumcision cohorts, existed. Generation sets divided Meru society into two alternating age divisions, kiruka and ntiba. To deliver binding group decisions, representatives from both divisions had to be present (Lambert 1942).

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<sup>4</sup> Age-grades, the social roles and administrative councils associated with them, and the process of transition between age-grades will be discussed more fully in chapter 5.

Far more important, however, were age-sets. Those circumcised together formed an age-set, each group named after some event that coincided with their initiation or after deeds they performed as warriors. A person's movement through the various age grades of the life course was tied to their age-set membership.

Moreover, ridgetop and area administrative functions were carried out by age-graded councils (biama; singular: kiama). Each age grade except for novice elder possessed its own kiama, including that of the older boys, but primary administrative and judicial authority resided in the council of the ruling elders, called the nkomango. A group of very old men formed a select council which listened to the most difficult judicial cases, such as homicides. No council had coercive authority. The kiama exercised influence through persuasion and compromise, backed by fear of the curse (Fadiman 1982; see also Saberwal 1970 and Glazier 1976, 1985).

The most active biama were at the level of the clan or ridgetop community. However, if a dispute arose between members of different communities, spokesmen (agambi; singular: mugambi) from each community kiama were selected to represent that group in a joint council. Such combined councils were called njuri (the council of the few). The selection of council representatives could be made from larger and larger entities until all the miiriga in the sub-

ethnic group were represented. The most widely known of these sub-division councils was the njuri ncheke of the Tigania and Igembe region of Meru (Rimita 1988). (See Table 4.1 below.)

TABLE 4.1: INDIGENOUS ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCILS (BIAMA)

Social Unit	Council Name
One Clan	<u>Nkomango</u>
Two or More Clans	<u>Njuri</u>
Sub-Ethnic Division	<u>Niuri Ncheke</u>

Female age-grades roughly parallel those of the men. Since women married much earlier than men, however, they entered the upper age grades at a much younger age. Women's biama prepared food for feasts, settled disputes between women, and controlled female initiation ceremonies (Holding 1942).

#### The Ecology of Belief

Meru beliefs were closely tied to environmental needs and to social organization. The Meru believed in a single all-powerful god, Ngai, who dwelt on Mt. Kenya or on the top of the Nyambenis. Ngai controlled the all-important cycle of the rains as well as community-wide epidemics and disasters.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, Meru traditions included strict rules regarding the use and conservation of essential environmental resources such as trees and forest watersheds.

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<sup>5</sup> The Kimeru term for rain is also ngai.

Furthermore, the normative foundation of age-graded social organization rested on the principle of respect for seniority. Veneration of lineage ancestors helped give ideological validation to that principle. Subordination to seniors, especially senior kinsmen, was enforced by the ever watchful lineage ancestors. These unseen guardians of tradition brought swift retribution--misfortune, illness, or death--to insubordinate or neglectful descendants. This belief system served as an efficient way of controlling social behavior and preserving fragile environmental resources. Several types of supernatural practitioners, including foretellers, diviners, and traditional healers, facilitated on-going interface with the ancestors (Fadiman 1977).

#### Summary

Thus, social organization--including a respect for seniority, conservation values, and a zonal agricultural subsistence pattern, all combined to produce an admirably sophisticated and complex behavioral adaptation to the ecology of this region. That adaptation wove together strands from the cultural histories of the diverse peoples who settled the area, with the largest debt owed to the latest and largest group of Bantu migrants, the forerunners of the majority of the Meru sub-groups.

This evolved behavioral adaptation comprises much of the fabric for the current social context for aging in

southern Meru. However, far-reaching alterations in that social fabric occurred during the colonial period.

### The Colonial Period

Apart from their cultural history and interaction with area ecology, involuntary contact with the highly stratified, industrialized European political economy in the early twentieth century further shaped the societies of southern Meru.

#### Initial "Conquest"

The peoples of southern Meru had very little contact with Europeans before being brought under official British administration by E.B. Horne in 1908 and 1909.<sup>6</sup> When Horne's expeditionary force arrived, Meru elders struggled to prevent their eager and belligerent warriors from resisting.

Several factors contributed to the elders' reticence to fight the British. Meru prophecies had previously predicted the coming of white (or red) men who would destroy Meru society if opposed. Previous sporadic contacts with the firearms of European trading safaris had reinforced these

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<sup>6</sup> The British administered Chuka and Mwimbi out of a "sub-district" post attached to the Embu District Office. Gatumbi, the present site of Chuka Town, served as the site of that post. The rest of Meru was administered from the District Office in Meru Town. In 1933, Chuka, Muthambe, and Mwimbi were transferred to Meru District for administration (Annual Report for Meru District 1933). Despite being placed in the Meru administrative unit, however, the Chuka continue to see themselves as unique from the rest of the Meru.

beliefs. The tremendous loss of life and property suffered by the neighboring Embu during their resistance of colonial forces in 1906 brought additional confirmation.

Thus, the British occupation of the region occurred without active military opposition except for a few encounters with small bands of recalcitrant warriors (Fadiman 1979). This peaceful acceptance of foreign invaders demonstrated the degree of control the elders exercised over more hot-blooded youthful warriors.

#### Socio-Political Change: The Problems of Peace

Beginning in 1910, the Meru began to feel the effects of imposed European social order. In that year, colonial administrators explored the region more fully, cut new roads, and collected hut taxes more widely. Paradoxically, one of the most immediate, far-reaching, and socially destructive effects of British administration came from the imposition of regional peace. Suspension of the system of limited warfare at the heart of Meru social structure had an immediately disruptive impact. Peace stripped energetic young warriors of role and purpose and denied them their only avenue for attaining the livestock needed for bridewealth, honorable marriage, and future prosperity. Some dislocated warriors went to work on European-owned plantations in Kikuyuland, a role which was temporary, low in status, and brought very small economic returns. Most

stayed home with no clear purpose or direction.

Demoralization followed.

Sexual discipline, strictly enforced upon this age group heretofore, quickly decayed and warriors began to engage in sexual intercourse with unmarried, and often uncircumcised, women on a scale previously unheard of in Meru. This lack of discipline threatened to destroy the seniority principle which was the backbone of social harmony by disrupting prescribed relations among different age-grades. The new sexual abandon of the youth brought disapproval from the ruling elders, elicited disrespect from the younger boys, and created volatile conflicts with the novice elders who by custom had a right to the young women now becoming involved with the warriors (Annual Report for Meru District 1933; Fadiman 1977).

Furthermore, premarital pregnancies began to occur at an alarming rate in uncircumcised young women. A child born out of wedlock, especially of an uncircumcised parent, had no clan and thus no defined place in Meru society. Such infants were a spiritual abomination, a threat to the supernatural security of society. Severe social sanctions customarily descended upon the guilty mother and father. Consequently, a dramatic rise in abortions accompanied the increase in premarital sexual behavior.

British administrators responded by trying to lower the circumcision age for women to encourage earlier marriage and

by fining and imprisoning the midwives carrying out abortions' (Annual Report for Meru District 1933). Inevitably, a large number of illegitimate outcasts were born. These outcasts, along with their disowned and unmarried mothers, either entered the fringes of society as prostitutes or else affiliated themselves with one of the Christian missions which had recently entered the area (Fadiman 1979).

At a more abstract level, stopping warfare also removed one of the primary functions of the age-set social structure and attendant gerontocratic leadership principles. Age-sets died a gradual death over the decades until today they are no longer used to order the life course in southern Meru. Young people who are initiated today retain a special affinity for their age mates but no longer take formal age-set names. Even many middle-aged don't remember age-set names very well.

#### Socio-Political Change: Administration

The method of local administration used by the early District Commissioners initiated further socio-political change. Instead of working through local biana and area njuri, commissioners instituted a hierarchy of appointed chiefs to collect taxes and serve as liaisons with the colonial government. Colonial administrators soon found

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<sup>7</sup> Abortions were primarily induced through manipulation of the uterus and the use of herbal abortifacients.

this arrangement very unsatisfactory. Numerous references in the early Annual Reports of District Commissioners refer to unpopular and ineffective chiefs (Political Record Book of Kenya Province 1901-24). Somewhat later, in the late 1930s, colonial administrators began to work more closely with biama (Lambert 1940). From that point on until 1967, elders' councils served an advisory function to government officials. Nevertheless, changes in the mechanisms of political control eroded the position and influence of elders. Introducing a political hierarchy of chiefs also increased socio-economic stratification and introduced new forms of exploitation.

#### Socio-Political Change: Adjudication

The imposition of a foreign judicial system caused additional social disruption. A formal system of government courts handled criminal cases; most civil cases were referred to "native tribunals" loosely modeled after elders' councils (Annual Report 1913). However, as time passed government officials tried to reorganize the tribunals to make them conform more to a European pattern. Meru participants found such practices--the regularly scheduled meeting times, gazetted membership rolls, reliance on written records, and formal judicial procedures--strange and irritating.

Fundamental differences existed in judicial philosophy. Europeans wanted so-called impartial judges who knew nothing

about the case to render decisions based only on the evidence presented. The Meru felt those who knew the most about a particular case made the best judges; judicial deliberations should not deal with the facts of what happened but with the correct interpretation of traditional law. Moreover, European courts sought decisions which settled matters as quickly and as finally as possible. The Meru simply endeavored to preserve long-term harmony between the disputant families or clans. Often, all Meru litigants desired was for authorities to confirm the incompleteness of some social transaction.

Naturally, confrontation and conflict resulted. Meru communities resorted to passive resistance. Native tribunals rendered decisions acceptable to the British when an officer came and reversed them as soon as he left. More and more civil cases were routed into unofficial "underground" biama, by-passing native tribunals altogether. Some of this conflict was defused in the mid-1930s by using new institutions such as chiefs and native tribunals simply to liaison between indigenous and colonial governments (Annual Report 1939).

Nevertheless, official government courts gradually usurped more and more decision-making power from clan elders, further weakening the role of male elders in community life.

### Economic Change

Economic change entered southern Meru less dramatically and took root more slowly, but nonetheless brought far-reaching consequences. The economic goal of British colonial administrators was, quite logically, to make the colony of Kenya into a paying venture. Attempting to make Meru District contribute to the support of the colony, the government set out to extract labor and salable commodities from the area.

Collection of hut taxes arose as one primary means of restructuring the Meru economy. Hut taxes required farmers to do something to earn money, forcing them to participate in the colonial economy. They either had to sell livestock, which no one wanted to do, grow a crop which could be marketed for cash, participate in public projects such as road building, or work for wages on farms owned by European settlers outside the district.

These attempts achieved only moderate success initially. Though idle warriors sometimes went to work for wages on European-owned plantations in Kikuyuland,<sup>\*</sup> administrators consistently complained about Meru resistance to plantation labor. Early attempts to introduce cotton and other cash crops attained even less success (Annual Report 1916). Many resourceful Meru managed to find ways of

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<sup>\*</sup> As early as 1913, 5000 young men from Meru went outside the district to work (Annual Report 1913).

acquiring money for hut taxes, such as brewing and marketing sugar cane beer, which frustrated efforts to introduce more fundamental economic change.

By the late 1930s, however, extended exposure to formal education and a monetary economy began to have an effect. The Meru slowly showed increased interest in economic innovations. In 1935 the nearby Church of Scotland mission in Mwimbiland planted coffee trees in a demonstration plot (Annual Report 1937). Soon, farmers living in the appropriate ecozones began planting as much coffee as possible on the land they once used for food crops. Today, coffee surpasses all other cash crops in Meru. Only tea, introduced in the 1960s, comes close to rivaling coffee.

In addition to capturing the fruits of Meru labor for the colonial economy, administrators attempted to establish trading centers for the sale of European goods. Initially, these also achieved very marginal success. A market center was established in Chuka in 1914, but records indicate that little was sold in the early years (Political Record Book of Embu 1924-45). The self-sufficient Meru produced all they needed themselves. The perception of need for manufactured products was not easily inculcated.

Nevertheless, continuing pressure to bring the Meru into a monetarized economy eventually succeeded. Growing reliance on cash crops and off-farm wage labor did induce an articulation between the traditional domestic mode of

production in Meru and European colonial capitalism. This uneasy union produced a peasant economy marginally incorporated into national and international structures (see Geschiere 1985).

A fundamental shift in the political economy of the region occurred with the wholesale acceptance of cash crops such as coffee and tea that depend on international marketing. Instead of functioning as self-sufficient domestic production units, Meru farmers became part of the world capitalist system, their economic well-being dependent on price fluctuations and economic forces far removed from their personal control or understanding (see Hyden 1980, 1986, 1987). The economic well-being of local Meru farmers is now closely tied to the international economy. A hierarchy of quasi-governmental bodies noted for their inefficiency and corruption--such as local coffee cooperatives and nation-wide parastatals such as the Kenya Coffee Board--facilitate that linkage.

In a more positive vein, several innovations increased production and improved living conditions. Agricultural productivity rose during the colonial period due to technological innovations such as new maize varieties and steel hoes. A system of roads and markets provided an infrastructural foundation important to current rural development. Improved health care and hygiene reduced infant mortality and increased life expectancy. And, even

the early wage labor sessions in Kikuyuland exposed the Meru to the outside world and helped to prepare them for what was to come.

### Ideational Change

Inevitably, changes in world view accompany the diffusion of technology, economic practices, and social organization. In concert with the gradual erosion of ideology brought by the winds of political, economic, and technological change, Christian missions mounted a direct assault on the Meru belief system. In the eyes of early twentieth century European civilization, Meru beliefs appeared strange and backward at best and evil and demonic at worst. The preferred avenues for this well-meant ideological offensive included establishing hospitals and schools as well as evangelism.

Catholic missionaries, Italian Consolata Fathers, were first to arrive in Meru in 1910. The Methodists followed shortly afterwards in 1912. And, in 1922, Dr. A. C. Irvine of the Church of Scotland established the first Christian mission in southern Meru.

The account of Irvine's coming is still reported with great relish and humor by elderly Meru. Biana of ridge after ridge repeatedly refused Irvine permission to settle as he made his way through the eastern Mt. Kenya slopes. Finally, when he reached Mwimbi, he was offered a portion of ground at Chogoria known to be occupied by powerful evil

spirits. Mwimbi elders wisely felt such a place would be an appropriate test for the powerful medicine Irvine claimed to possess.<sup>9</sup> The Consolata Fathers eventually established a Catholic mission at Chuka in 1934.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of their impact on local customs, the Church of Scotland mission in particular objected strongly to indigenous practices. As a result, converts and school graduates of that mission often became isolated from their families and communities (Annual Report 1933). One District Commissioner complained that the goal of the mission was "to eliminate native customs and to turn its adherents into good Christians as understood by its parent body in Scotland" (Annual Report 1939).

The missions taught against many beliefs and customs. Not only were practices such as traditional healing and veneration of descent group ancestors dismissed, missionaries also objected to their converts joining local

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<sup>9</sup> Irvine, a medical doctor, established a thriving hospital at Chogoria. In a remarkably short time, he developed a wide reputation as a powerful healer. His work is still spoken of very highly by elderly people who knew him. The Chogoria Hospital continues to be operated as a joint venture between the Kenyan government and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, the Church of Scotland's successor.

<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Chuka, Muthambe, and Mwimbi were transferred to Meru District from Embu shortly beforehand. Rapport between the Italian Catholic fathers and the English-speaking British administrators in Embu was quite poor. Consequently, the Embu office had refused to give the Catholics permission to establish new missions in the northern portion of Embu District.

elders' councils, the biama and njuri, because entrance required "pagan" oaths. Much of the training and activity surrounding initiation rites was questioned as well; Christian youths were required to have separate circumcision ceremonies. Furthermore, Irvine took an adamant stand against "any form of initiation of girls" going far beyond the official government position that permitted removal of the clitoris (Annual Report 1933, 1939). That controversy proved especially divisive in the area.

The results of this denigration of custom remain today. An entire generation of people, notably many of those now in their 70s and 80s, hold a very low opinion of their own culture and indigenous beliefs. Many elderly dislike discussing the old customs and refuse to teach their grandchildren the old songs and dances. Such things, they say, are "of the devil."<sup>11</sup> It is now extremely difficult to find any traditional healers or diviners, apart from herbalists, in the area. Most elderly say they have not used a traditional healer since their parents took them for treatment as small children or that they ceased to believe in such things when they became Christians.

Despite their ethnocentric, confrontive approach, these missions, including the Church of Scotland mission, eventually gained community approval because of their

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<sup>11</sup> Even the Kimeru word for ancestral spirits, nkoma, is often translated as "demons" today.

medical services and schools. The comparative advantages of western medicine in the treatment of infectious disease and surgery proved significant. The Mwimbi and Muthambe Meru quickly recognized that Dr. Irvine could heal some diseases that were incurable with traditional medicine. People appreciated those contributions and, as a result, gradually accepted less popular ideological innovations.<sup>12</sup>

Formal education made less dramatic inroads than did western medicine. Mission schools<sup>13</sup> began by first training social marginals, slowly gaining credibility until today practically every parent makes significant sacrifices to educate their children. Education provided several positive benefits. In the early days, it offered a few bright warrior-age youth an alternative avenue for advancement, though that success would take them far away from their families and clans. Over the long run, education and literacy heightened political consciousness and

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<sup>12</sup> The Church of Scotland mission, especially Chogoria Hospital, has had a significant impact on development in the region. This influence can be seen its successful promotion of contraceptive use. Chogorial Hospital, the largest non-government hospital in Kenya, was the first rural health care system in Kenya to initiate a family planning service. That service was begun in 1965 and significantly expanded during the 1970s and 1980s (Krystall and Schneller 1987). Today, the region surrounding Chogoria Hospital has one of the highest contraceptive prevalence rates in the country (Goldberg et al. 1986).

<sup>13</sup> No government schools came to Meru District until very late in the colonial period.

developed human resources that would be needed in an independent nation in the modern international environment.

On the other hand, education had its negative consequences too. The disruptive outcomes of education on indigenous society were recognized by H. E. Lambert, District Commissioner in Meru in the 1930s:

The indigenous Meru educational system is intended to fit the individual to become a worthy member of his group, his clan and his age-grade. The European system, applied to the Meru, is to cram the individual to climb out of his class and this means out of his group and age-grade, out of his tribal environment, and so out of his tribe. So that every academic success is a tribal failure. We must somehow find a middle course....It will be a bad day for Meru when academic learning begins to matter more than social adequacy (Annual Report 1939).

Whether judged to be positive or negative, by the 1940s formal education had helped to produce an ideational climate that was much more receptive of social and technological change.

#### Late Colonialism and Independence

The growing political consciousness and unrest that eventually led to the Mau Mau Movement of the 1950s affected Meru only minimally. Some Chuka supported the Mau Mau, as did a very few from Muthambe. Residents in southern Meru were forced to live in communal camps guarded by soldiers loyal to the government during the night and go out and work in their field during the day. But, compared to the severe disruption of life in Kikuyuland, the effects of Mau Mau in Meru were not pronounced.

The process of land consolidation launched by the Swynnerton Plan did, however, have major effects.<sup>14</sup> Meru forebears, as noted above, adapted to the ecological diversity of the area by cultivating several small plots of land at different elevations. All members of ridgetop communities used communal grazing lands in higher and lower zones. "Ownership" of land on the ridges rested with the clan. Individual families inherited customary use rights for the land their forbears had cleared and cultivated, but the land belonged to the clan. This included the dead and the as yet unborn.

Traditional Meru land tenure created two problems for a modern economic system. In order to obtain agricultural improvement loans to increase productivity, a farmer needed a legal land title for collateral. Clan ownership of land did not provide individual farmers with titles. Second, Swynnerton theorized that farming small bits of land here and there generated inefficiency. Consolidating all portions of cultivated land into single plots of approximately the same size should enhance production. In the process, officials could favor those farmers who showed evidence of progressiveness, further increasing productivity.

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<sup>14</sup> Land consolidation in other parts of Kenya has been discussed by Haugerud (1983), Leo (1984), Davison (1987) and others.

Whether or not land consolidation really expanded productivity remains debatable. What it did do is open the door for greater stratification of society by favoring those with connections to local power-brokers and those with the astuteness to fully understand what was happening. Land consolidation negatively impacted all powerless groups in society, including women. Under the old system of land tenure, a widow kept use rights to her portion of her husband's land until her death. When title deeds were instituted and ownership passed directly from father to sons, widows' rights became more tenuous.

Furthermore, land consolidation in Meru removed another function of male elders, their role as guardians of clan land. The elders' participation in adjudicating the process of land consolidation, which still continues in the lower regions of Meru, is likely to be their last great encore; a relatively just division of ancestral lands, the final requiem to the elders' function in the oral record keeping system so essential to the survival of indigenous Meru society.

### Continuity and Change

The coastal Bantu agriculturalists who arrived on the eastern slope of Mt. Kenya 250 years ago, and the Chuka forebears whom they met, became malleable participants in the dynamic socio-natural system of this region. These human participants were not passive pawns, their behavior

determined by the other parts of the system. Rather they adapted their economic, political, and social behavior to exploit the physical and social environment they encountered, actively choosing and weaving the various threads of their cultural history, their physical environment, and their imposed contact with an alien civilization into a dynamic cultural system. That adaptation, despite its conflicts, continues to provide a satisfactory framework for human interaction and survival.

Within this dynamic adaptive process, we see continuity as well as change. The fact that the Meru settled in an arable region instead of remaining on the arid plains speaks of their continuing reliance on agriculture for subsistence. More recently, when the British instituted an alien mechanism of political control (a hierarchy of chiefs) upon them, indigenous political bodies, the biana, just "stayed quiet." No active revolts occurred; no strident demands for power ensued. The Meru elders just allowed the outsiders to glue their superficial foreign veneer over the natural wood of original political processes. The elders continued to lead underneath the veneer, effectively guiding an unannounced campaign of peaceful resistance until local colonial administrators belatedly realized what was happening and began to work through the elders' councils instead of ignoring them (Annual Report 1939).

Throughout these years, the Meru were known by their administrators as a very conservative or "unprogressive" people, especially by those accustomed to working in Kikuyuland. The Meru less willingly entered the cash economy, seldom frequented the new markets to buy store goods, resisted the introduction of education, and did not like to participate in wage labor outside the district (Annual Reports 1913 to 1939). Despite culture contact, the Meru maintained much of their former communal lifestyle and loyalty to clan.

Even now, conservative values remain very strong. Ties to the land are vital. Fathers try very hard to obtain adequate land for their sons' families. Despite growing off-farm employment and out-migration, many young adults stay in rural Meru to be peasant farmers. Meru teachers and civil servants living in Nairobi or other localities often build retirement homes on their Meru land, even keeping their wives and children at their home villages. Though most of the outward trappings of the indigenous belief system are gone, underlying beliefs and values continue to strongly influence behavior.

#### The Existing Socio-Natural System

Important demographic, social, and economic patterns underlie day-to-day social interactions in southern Meru. This portion of the chapter describes some characteristics of life in contemporary ridgetop communities.

### Demographic Composition

The total population distribution by age and sex for all three research communities is summarized in Table 4.2 below. The overall population profile conforms to an explicable pattern except for some unusual variations in the male to female ratio of the middle age groups.<sup>15</sup>

First of all, this distribution reveals very rapid population growth. Nearly half the population (46%) is below fifteen years of age, with progressively smaller percentages in each ten-year age category thereafter. This pattern of growth naturally impacts population density and land scarcity.

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<sup>15</sup> The presence of a larger number of females in the 15 to 24 and the 24 to 34 age groups is understandable since more young males than females tend to leave their home communities in search of employment. Moreover, the tendency of women to outlive men accounts for an excessive number of females over age 75.

However, certain disparities in the middle years are harder to explain. No demographically significant historical events appear to account for these variations. The possibility that these differences result from errors in age calculation must be considered. The ages of individuals less than 50 years old were simply recorded as reported by informants in the household census. No further attempt was made to verify the accuracy of these reported ages. Thus, the variation in sex ratio between the 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 age group may come from reporting errors.

The disparity in sex ratios between the 55 to 64 and the 65 to 74 age group may result from the fact that no definitive historical events occurred during the 1930s by which to finely discriminate the ages of those of these age groups. Thus, some individuals in their early and middle 60s near the dividing line between these two age groupings may be poorly classified. When the two age groups are collapsed into one (55 to 74), the sex ratio is 133 males to 158 females, much more in line with expected values.

TABLE 4.2: POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

Age	Male	Female	Sub-Total	Percentage
0-14	1052	1083	2135	46.0%
15-23	454	523	977	21.1
25-34	265	310	575	12.4
35-44	191	163	354	7.6
45-54	102	117	219	4.7
55-64	59	92	151	3.3
65-74	74	66	140	3.0
75-84	16	29	45	1.0
85+	13	29	42	0.9
Total	2226	2412	4638	100.0

Secondly, the overall labor supply of this region has not yet been impaired by out-migration. Approximately half of the total population is between the most productive ages of 25 to 54. Furthermore, off-farm labor usually involves the cyclical migration of men between urban jobs and rural homes. For example, all current retirees in the research communities (less than ten) are men. Of those migrants between 45 and 54 who are in external occupations that will lead to retirement, all but one are men. Nevertheless, the sex ratio (the number of men per 100 women) for people aged 25 to 54, those most likely to be involved in labor-related migration, remains relatively balanced, with 94.6 men per 100 women. Thus, despite some out-migration, a solid base of productive labor remains in the region.

During the household census, we attempted clarify the extent and nature of off-farm employment in southern Meru. To do so, we recorded those individuals in each household who maintain very close and regular ties to the homestead,

but who live and work elsewhere. Of the 87 males falling into that category, 29 work in various public sector occupations including civil service, army, police, and ministry of health. An additional twenty work in formal sector jobs and eleven labor in the informal sector, including shop-keeping and casual labor jobs. Sixteen farm another plot of land elsewhere in the region while their families remain in the census community. Interestingly, only two teachers live away from home and both of these are university lecturers. Most primary and secondary school teachers manage to obtain postings near enough to their homes to commute daily or weekly.

Unfortunately, census-takers for two communities did not obtain careful details about females employed off the farm. However, for one community, Mwonge, we did obtain accurate figures for women. Of the 24 females listed in Mwonge as living and working elsewhere, ten are engaged in domestic occupations, four in the informal sector, three in the public sector, and three in the formal sector. Several female teachers who live at home do not show up in these figures. Nonetheless, the participation of women in the formal and public sector remains significantly lower than that of males. The gender of retirees and pre-retirees, mentioned above, further confirms this inequity.

Finally, the demographic profile reveals very small comparative numbers of elderly. These small percentages

obscure the fact that total numbers of elderly are growing at a significant rate in rural areas. The current and future implications of these demographic patterns for caregiving and other aspects of aging will be examined more extensively in chapter 6.

#### Ridge-Top Economy

Current economic life in southern Meru revolves around agricultural cultivation. Small farms, called shambas, populate the flat ridgetops, each farm with a cluster of two or more huts or houses. A single dirt road traversing the center of each ridge links these small shambas to the markets of the outside world. Innumerable side-roads, barely wide enough for a car and a person to pass, criss-cross the main road, leading on to footpaths lined with hedgerow fences and graveria trees, and to narrow mountain trails winding precariously down steep rocky slopes to water holes on the river.

Land is fertile and productive, especially in Upper Karimba and Mwonge. Intensive agriculture is the norm. Strategically placed terraces, stretching everywhere but on the flattest terrain, conserve the soil and prevent erosion. Food crops are abundant in variety. Thick banana groves occupy each uncultivated depression and crowd into every compound. Perennial cultivars such as pigeon peas and cassava mingle with intercropped maize, beans, yams, pumpkins, and sweet potatoes. Slender palm-like papaya

trees, bushy mango trees with foliage so thick and dark that local bats nest in them, and occasional orange trees dot almost every homestead. Rounded wooden bee hives perched strategically among higher tree branches yield honey for home consumption and marketing. Some farmers set aside acreage for millet and sorghum as well.

Despite some diversification in cash crops, coffee furnishes the economic bulwark. Bushy coffee trees cover almost every shamba in Upper Karimba, most of Mwonge, and much of Lower Karimba. Unfortunately, drops in international coffee prices and corruption in local cooperatives and the Kenya Coffee Board have disillusioned area coffee farmers.

In the higher elevations of Mwonge, light-green, chest-high tea bushes cover steep well-drained slopes. Tea at present offers more stable earnings than coffee. The region grows good quality tea, international prices are higher, and the national marketing parastatal--the Kenya Tea Development Authority--currently maintains a more efficient rapport with local producers. The cash crop most in evidence in Lower Karimba is tobacco, though some lowland variety coffee has been planted there in the last few years. Marketed informally, often through kinship networks, tobacco also earns good income.

Generally, these villages are moderately prosperous peasant farming communities, incompletely enmeshed in the

international economy through their reliance on coffee, but at the same time retaining some independence through a domestic economy centered on food production. Nevertheless, despite pleasant appearances, poverty exists. Poorer families, usually living on the rocky slopes bordering the ridgetop, often survive by relying on unstable day labor at neighboring farms, the coffee factory, or in the Chuka Town informal sector. Low coffee prices and rises in expenses such as school fees affect almost everyone and contribute to a generally declining standard of living for all but the most affluent.

#### Seasonal Variations in Agriculture

The yearly agricultural cycle begins with the dry season in August and September. Powdery dust chokes the red clay roads. Grass lies brown and desiccated. Trees stand wilted and fruitless. The stubs of last season's maize stalks protrude from newly tilled fields, lying in wait for planting. Once tilling is completed, the latter days of the dry season offer a brief respite from pressing labor. Rain, if on schedule in late October, brings a new round of intense activity. Both men and women trek daily to their fields, spending long hours up to their knees and elbows in sticky red mud, planting maize and beans or setting out tobacco seedlings with digging sticks and long, broad-bladed knives called pangas.

By late November, all able hands tackle the daunting task of weeding the newly sprouted crops. Coffee harvest follows on the heels of the weeding season in December. Gathering beans begins in late January; millet and sorghum, in February; maize, in late February and early March.

Dwellings are most commonly constructed of mud and wattle walls, smeared with an ash-and-cow-dung mixture that dries to a hard grey finish, and tin roofs. Hard-packed earth serves as the floor for most homes. Partitions of some type, usually lined with old newspapers and decorated with pictures of magazine advertisements, divide interior space. One or two small, shuttered, glass-less windows provide light and ventilation.

Meru women usually cook over a wood fire or a charcoal stove in a separate open-sided structure. A few small huts built on stilts as protection from rats provide storage for grains, maize, and beans. Small corrals constructed of long poles usually confine the cattle and goats. Invariably, somewhere within the compound, a rough hewn bench with post-like legs sunk into the earth, shadowed by a flowering arbor, offers repose to visitors.

During the busy agricultural seasons, many homesteads sit practically deserted during the daytime. In the late afternoon and evening, however, compounds bustle with wives, daughters, and small boys hauling water, carrying wood, starting cooking fires, and peeling bananas, shelling maize,

or sorting beans for the evening meal. Later, surrounded by the smell of woodsmoke, the lowing and bleating of livestock, and the calls of nightbirds, a sense of profound calmness settles over the homesteads of the ridge. Families quietly eat their evening meal, their main meal of the day, warm themselves by the fire, or rest together in the sitting room listening to Kenya Broadcasting Corporation programs on a battery-powered radio.

### Community Social Life

Every ridgetop has some center of communal life. One such nucleus is Magundu Market, a single row of stone and tin-roofed shops and hotels which serves as the hub of Upper Karimba. At all hours of the day, men from the ridge gathered at the market either outside in the shade of the buildings or inside at the rough tables and chairs of one of the small hotels. In the evening, at dusk, a quiet sense of camaraderie descended over these settled peasant farmers. They shared the same history and language, the same joys and pleasures, the same problems and concerns. The same blood flowed in their veins. They had grown up together. Many had never been outside the District. Most of them would grow old and die together. There was great tranquility here.

At the same time, among the young men, an undercurrent of frustration, a latent desperation, a malaise of disappointment and bewilderment seeped through the calm

facade from time to time. Land is scarce now. Through the generations, more and more sons have taken rightful portions of their fathers' shamba until family land holdings are too small for comfortable survival. Besides, those with education, especially with secondary school education, expect more of life than a peasant lifestyle on a small rural farm. But, jobs for graduates are scarce. Those who go to Meru Town or Nairobi in search of employment often come back empty-handed. Sometimes they swallow their dignity and help out with tilling and other heavy farm work. Occasionally they go on another abortive jaunt of "tarmacking" or job search. Otherwise they are "just here," waiting. But, these persistent problems remain beneath the surface. They do not often rear up to spoil the peaceful ambiance of evening male gatherings at the market.

The domestic work load at the homesteads prevents women from participating extensively in the easy social interaction of these market evenings. However, women also find some time to socialize. Primarily, they interact while they carry water or collect firewood, on days when they work together in labor-sharing projects, at Saturday afternoon women's group meetings, or in church on Sunday.

#### Articulation with Other Socio-Natural Systems

Several small urban centers, which developed around colonial government outposts and missions, facilitate interaction between rural ridgetop communities and national

political and economic entities. The nerve center for that articulation in southern Meru is Chuka Town.

Chuka Town functions as the area center of national and local government. The District Officer, District Social Service Officer, and other appointed public officials operate from here. Important political organs such as the local Kenya African National Union (KANU) headquarters, the City Council, and County Council reside in Chuka Town. Coffee farmers must come here regularly for regional farmers' cooperative meetings and to collect their meager earnings. Chuka also acts as a bedroom community for civil servants, teachers, and others who have come to expect treated water, electricity, and other amenities unavailable in the villages.

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Commercially, shops in Chuka Town offer their patrons everything from hoes to pangas and from television sets to cassette decks. A post office, a telephone exchange, a hospital and two banks execute their services here. A thriving informal or jua kali sector manufactures pots and pans, metal window grates, repairs automobiles and electronic equipment, and mends plumbing and electrical wiring. Local carpenters create rustic hand-carved furniture masterworks from the exotic hardwoods of nearby Mt. Kenya. A large municipal produce market and a row of dark red-painted butcheries supply a local outlet for farm-grown produce and livestock.

Several small hotels, which offer warm beer and hot meals of stewed beef or roast chicken, afford animated conversation and male camaraderie in the evenings after work and on weekends. These hotels provide informal arenas for the discussion of local, national, and international events.

Chuka Town appears to an arriving traveler as a frenetic little community sprawled rather haphazardly on a rugged mountain ridge about half-way between Embu Town and Meru Town. The main Embu-Meru Road, an excellent tarmac highway constructed in 1984, slashes the settlement in two, leaving a deeply eroding scar of red earth on either side. (See Figure 4.3.)

The main road serves as the "staging area" for public transport vehicles going in all directions. At busier times, it becomes a cacophony of matatu (bush taxi) conductors banging the sides of their trucks and buses and calling out their destinations, a mass of seething vehicles any one of which could momentarily strike out in any direction without warning.

This part of town bursts with economic energy from early morning until well after dark. Kiosks line the road side, hawking everything from lottery tickets to music tapes. Paper vendors and farm women with bananas descend like locusts upon every arriving vehicle. The staging area is the meeting place. Multitudes stand waiting to rendezvous with friends or just to see who they can see.

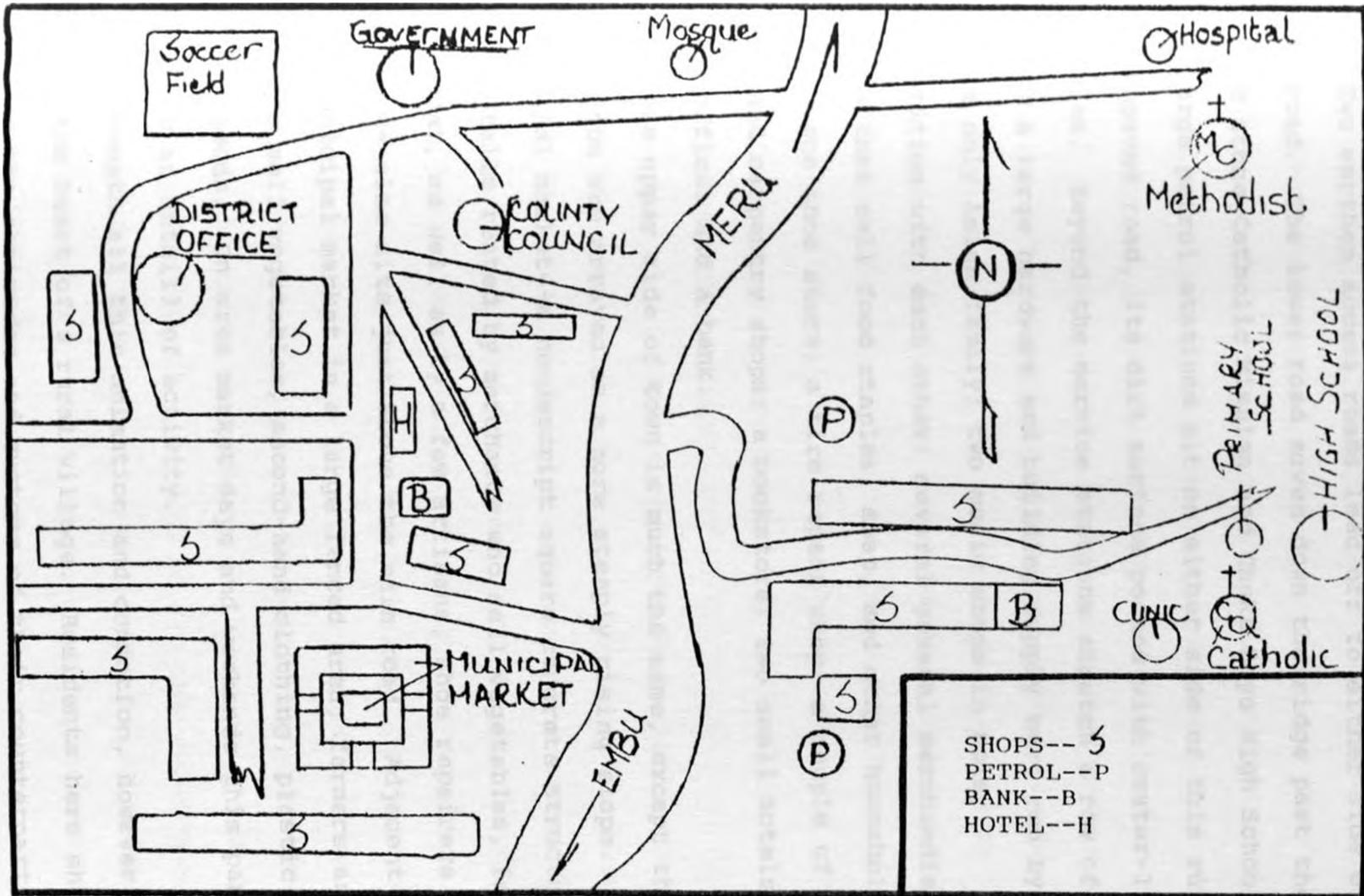


Figure 4.3: Map of Chuka Town

Two earthen access roads lead off to either side of the main road. The lower road moves down the ridge past the gothic stone Catholic Mission and Chuka Boys High School. Two large petrol stations sit on either side of this rutted and unpaved road, its dirt surface pocked with crater-like potholes. Beyond the service stations stretch a row of shops: a large hardware and building supply mart run by the town's only Asian family; two music shops in noisy competition with each other; several general merchandise stores that sell food staples, soap, and other household needs; one shoe store; a tire repair shop; a couple of metal work and carpentry shops; a bookstore; two small hotels; the post office; and a bank.

The upper side of town is much the same, except that the shops are arrayed on a more steeply rising slope. The municipal market--a nondescript square concrete structure with stalls rented by merchants who sell vegetables, fruits, and meat, as well as by a few artisans, shoe repairers and tailors--also sits just above the main road. Adjacent to the municipal market in a large fenced area, farmers and traders sell vegetables, second-hand clothing, plastic and metal goods. On area market days and weekends this part of town is an anthill of activity.

Beneath all this animation and commotion, however, beats the heart of a rural village. Residents here share many of the attitudes and customs of their counterparts in

the surrounding ridgetop communities. True, the workplace for most town residents is the school room, the shop counter, the office--not the shamba. But, everyone still knows almost everyone else. Few real outsiders live here. Even most of the professionals--the teachers, the bankers, the civil servants--are from other central Kenyan Bantu ethnicities with related languages and cultures. Men gather at the local bars after work instead of at the village market. Their wives buy food from vendors and shops and no longer haul water from the stream, but they still mostly go home after work, prepare the evening meal and wait for their husbands to come home.

#### The Village and the Nation

Even with the influence of Chuka Town, living in the villages of southern Meru is like living in a "world unto itself." While there, I experienced a strong sense of being in an "island community," a place linked to the broader national and international world by very tenuous ties.

Of course, many connections do exist. Ridgetop residents were well aware of events in far-off places such as America and the Middle East. The literate invariably confiscated my daily newspaper when I made my rounds in the village. Occurrences in Nairobi and in the wider world were topics of conversational interest. Doubtless, the national government manages to touch nearly everyone in some way.

Yet, the touches of government seem light and cursory, superficial to daily existence; the importance of international political developments, far removed. Apart from times of urgent crisis, political machinations in Nairobi possess great entertainment value, but relate only slightly the tangible realities of life, realities which revolve around the coming of the rains, organizing labor for tilling and weeding, going to Chuka Town to get maize seeds, carrying the coffee to the factory, getting water and wood, and preparing the evening meal.

Government does influence these rural communities through "rural development," by providing services such as hospitals, piped water, public primary schools, and roads. But, most of these services require substantial local "cost-sharing", either on an individual basis in the case of health care and on at the community level through self-help projects in the case of piped water and schools. Although an area social worker from the Department of Social Development resides in Chuka Town, funding and personnel for social programs receive very low priority.

The outside world impinges essentially through national and international economic linkages, the control of payments and agricultural inputs through parastatals, the fluctuation of international coffee prices, the rising cost of secondary school fees, the failure of the economy to generate enough jobs for the armies of unemployed secondary school and

university graduates. Though farmers here still remain very self-sufficient in many ways, the desire for education and consumer goods makes them dependent upon the cash economy and commodity prices. Unfortunately, the national and international economic system they try to embrace has brought confusion and disappointment. Coffee has become unprofitable for small farmers, yet the government refuses to allow them to uproot their coffee trees to plant more profitable crops. Educating children requires great sacrifices, but when those children graduate no jobs are waiting for them.

#### Summary

Thus, the existing socio-natural system in southern Meru mixes the old and the new. Clan-centered social organization is dying. Age-sets are a topic for old people to discuss. Traditional medicine is a lost art. Circumcision of boys is performed in the hospital during school holidays; female circumcision, not at all. Everyone is thirsty for rural development. People have been exposed to the technological advancements of modern life. They want piped water and good medical care. They want better schools for their children and/or more return from their labor so they can pay the higher fees. They want an economy that will provide good jobs for their children when they graduate. They know much about the outside world. They

listen to their radios and read newspapers when they can get them.

But, beyond cars and radios and education and good jobs, life on the ridges still pulses with the rhythm of the seasons and the coming of the rains. Relationships still matter more than anything else. Even those who go to the cities remain bound to the communities where they grew up, to the same ridges that were settled by their ancestors. Community is more important than the individual interests. The good citizen who has the blessing of his community is the one who takes care of his family, respects others, and lives in harmony with his neighbors. Even devout Christians and those who disclaim any traces of traditional belief, admit they sleep more peacefully when they have been blessed by an elder and argue forcefully about the abilities of certain shadowy groups of old men to lay deadly curses on thieves.

Doubtless, the old and new live on side by side in a symbiosis that is sometimes harmonious, sometimes dysfunctional. Past history suggests that the Meru will adapt and survive present and future challenges. The question now addressed is how Meru elderly have adapted to these new social conditions.

## CHAPTER 5 THE LIFE COURSE IN MERU

The previous chapter presented various factors that have shaped the socio-natural system in which Meru old people live. These next two chapters will attempt to describe the Meru perception of old age. Who is an old person? How do old people fit into the overall scheme of social life in Meru? This culturally defined frame of reference forms a significant part of the overall context in which behavior and adaptation occur.

The life course is a useful concept around which to organize the discussion of the Meru perception of old age. The life course refers a series of stages of development from birth to death called age grades. A characteristic set of roles and traits earmarks each age grade.

This chapter first reviews the indigenous life course in Meru and follows with an exposition of the contemporary life course. Differences between the two systems will then be analyzed and the impact of those changes for the elderly highlighted. Finally, the characteristics which define "oldness" in Meru will be discussed along with the way that the Meru themselves categorize old people.

### Indigenous Life Course

The indigenous life course can be divided into two major divisions, active clan and inactive clan. (See Figure 5.1.) Within this schema, active clan includes all those categories of people who are fully involved in current, on-going clan affairs. The designation, inactive clan, does not imply a complete lack of participation in events. The term simply denotes a separate sphere, one separated from active clan members by an important boundary.

#### Inactive Clan

The inactive clan consisted, first of all, of the ancestors/unborn and uncircumcised children. While Meru cosmology did not promote a full-fledged theory of reincarnation, in a very real sense the clan also embodied yet unborn progeny as well as ancestors who had gone before. The dead of recent generations remained closely involved in the affairs of the living clan and family members. These ancestors could seek redress for wrongs endured during their lifetime or for being forgotten after death. Moreover, they were the guardians of tradition and often inflicted punishments for violation of custom. On the other hand, they could bring blessing and good fortune to those who acted appropriately. Thus, in the larger sense, the life course began and ended with the ancestors and the unborn clan members.

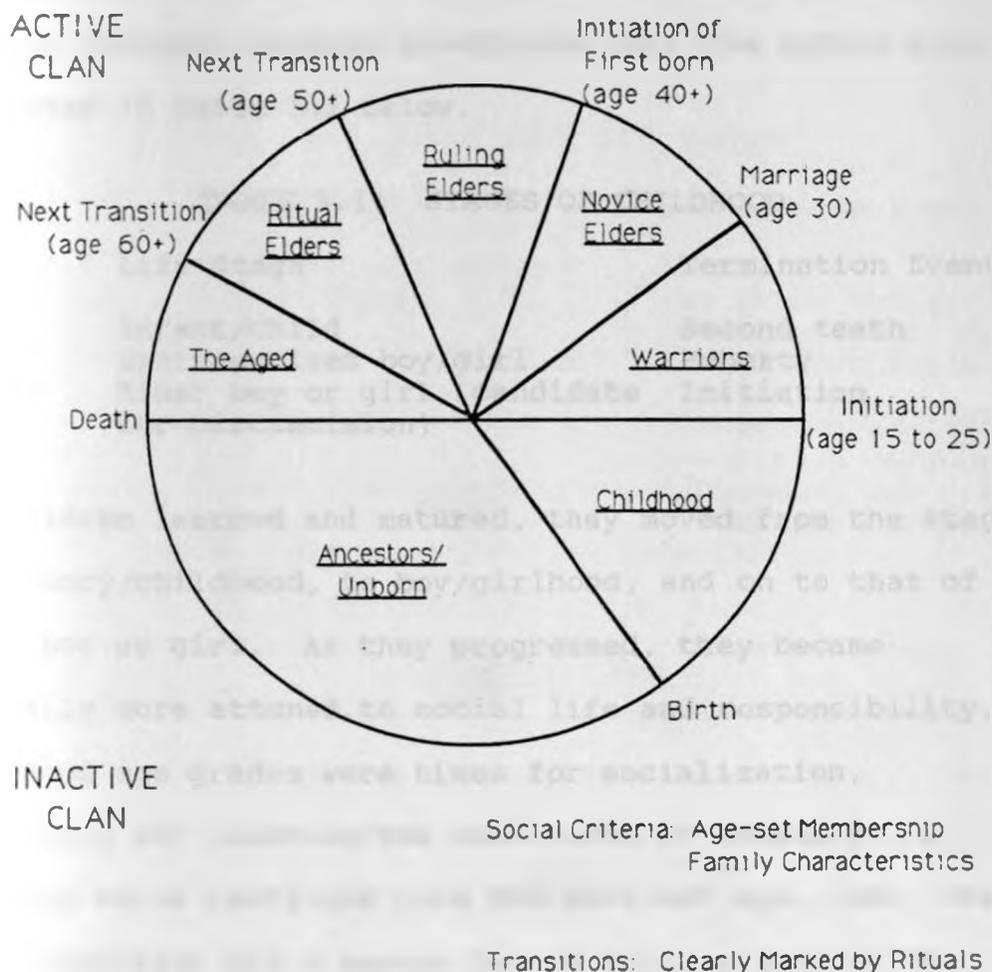


Figure 5.1: Indigenous Life Course

All the stages of childhood should also be considered part of the inactive clan. From the standpoint of the life course, childhood is best conceptualized as a time of gradual movement towards acceptance into the active clan, reflected in Table 5.1 below.

TABLE 5.1: STAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Age	Life Stage	Termination Event
0-7	Infant/Child	Second teeth
7-15+	Uncircumcised boy/girl	Puberty
15-18+	Elder boy or girl (candidate for circumcision)	Initiation

As children learned and matured, they moved from the stages of infancy/childhood, to boy/girlhood, and on to that of elder boy or girl. As they progressed, they became gradually more attuned to social life and responsibility. Childhood age grades were times for socialization, especially for learning the importance of seniority, a critical value instilled from the earliest age. But, only at circumcision did a person become fully a part of the clan. For example, a pregnancy involving an uncircumcised boy or girl was an abomination because the child of such a union will not be a part of any clan. Such a child was aborted, or according to Meru teaching, the youth involved were killed.

Active Clan

After initiation into the active clan, the pre-colonial age grade framework for males followed the pattern given in Table 5.2 below (Fadiman 1982:149):

TABLE 5.2: ADULT MALE AGE GRADES

Age	Life Stage	Termination Event
18-29+	Junior/senior warrior	Marriage
29-40+	Novice elder	Age grade transition ceremony occurring near eldest son's initiation
40-51+	Ruling elder	Subsequent age grade transition ceremony
51-62+	Ritual elder	Subsequent age grade transition ceremony
62?	The aged	Death

The stages of active clan life for men were closely tied to their age-set membership. An age-set consisted of all boys circumcised during a designated time period. Each group was named after some event that coincided with their initiation or after deeds they performed as warriors.

Many factors other than age and maturity determined those who were initiated at any particular ceremony. Individual circumstances, such the ability of a boy's family to afford to pay the livestock fee for his circumcision, could cause a person to be circumcised in a different age-set from his chronological peers. Events such as drought and famine often delayed circumcision ceremonies. Thus,

chronological age at circumcision varied a great deal.<sup>1</sup>

Following initiation, sociological criteria determined the movement of men from one life stage to another. Basically, a man moved through life with members of his institutionalized age cohort. Chronological age mattered very little, except for the fact that members of each age-set tended to be of about the same level of social maturity. When an individual's age-set ascended to the next age grade, he generally moved up with them. However, the system contained a great deal of flexibility. For example, men who married earlier than their age-mates entered elderhood sooner and therefore progressed through the various stages of the life course precociously.

#### Roles Ascribed to Life Stages

A set of ascribed roles adhered to each age grade. Warriors protected community livestock and marriageable women from intrusions by neighboring groups. These activities allowed warriors to build up wealth and prepare for marriage by capturing livestock. Talented individuals also enhanced their status and prestige by developing a reputation for prowess in battle and in dancing.

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<sup>1</sup> Most Meru circumcised males between the ages of fifteen and twenty. The Chuka, however, tended to circumcise at an older age, even as late as 25 to 30. The Meru generally circumcised on regular seven year cycles, but the Chuka followed an irregular five year pattern (Fadiman 1982; Mwaniki 1982).

During the novice elder age grade, men established their family and consolidated their economic fortunes. The role of the novice elder was to marry, have children, begin farming and firmly establish the means to support a family. The importance of this family-centered role, while not as stimulating as going on raids as a warrior or deliberating and arbitrating as a ruling elder, sustained the foundations of social life.

Ruling elders held the responsibility of protecting the harmony of society, both the harmony within the mwiriga and that which existed among relatively friendly neighbors. The ruling elders served as community administrators and judges. They made decisions and settled disputes in accordance with traditional law. Ruling elders also prevented the warriors from making unwise raids on other miriga or stirring up conflicts within the community.

Ritual elders performed communal religious rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies. Closest to the ancestors, they made sure the ancestors of the mwiriga were properly recognized. The final stage of the life course is that of the truly aged. This group was expected to be physically dependent and more or less past the point of engaging in sexual activity. They administered certain very special rituals and oaths.

Both older groups were the foremost guardians of tradition. They observed the life of the community and

should they see members straying toward a dangerous path, they pointed out the error, preventing major community disaster. Further, all elders, especially the very elderly, possessed valuable knowledge of consanguineal, affinal, and gichiaro (fictive kinship) relationships. Warriors depended on this knowledge to identify those groups eligible for attack. To kill someone with whom the mwiriga had a kinship relationship brought serious mugiro (ritual uncleanness) upon the entire community. Marriageable young adults also required the assistance of the elderly to conform to essential exogamous marriage rules.

The status of individuals within each age-grade varied according to family background and personal ability. Warriors who had distinguished themselves for bravery in raids and accumulated large amounts of stock entered elderhood with the resources and prestige to become clan leaders. However, all who established a family and lived harmoniously with their neighbors received respect as a valued member of the community.

Ecologically speaking, this division of roles utilizes human resources to the fullest. Strong, zealous young men defended the community and acquired more livestock and young women to build up the community's labor supply and liquid assets. Novice elders, while still hardy, were assigned the task of establishing a family. Other social roles were removed from novice elders during the early stages of

marriage to ensure that they gave full attention to the production and reproduction on which survival depended. Upon reaching puberty, fertile young women were sent without unnecessary delay into the essential productive and reproductive activities which would occupy them throughout most of their lives. Experienced middle-aged men guided community affairs. Elderly men and women transmitted cultural knowledge to the youth and advised community members regarding interpersonal relationships, traditions, and religious rituals.

#### Age Graded Councils

Every age grade, except for the first childhood stage and novice elder, was further set apart and characterized by a socio-political institution, called a kiama (council) which facilitated their assigned role and function. This institution developed over time as members of miiriga began to scatter and fragment due to internal dissention, migration, and military dislocation (Fadiman 1982). Biama helped preserve the patrilineal social order despite geographic fragmentation and ensured that social obligations were upheld. These councils gave each age group the ability to oversee and administer their own affairs, with the ruling elders making decisions which affected the entire mwiriga.

In the nineteenth century, Meru males would pass through the following set of biama, given in Table 5.3 below (Fadiman 1982):

TABLE 5.3: MALE BIAMA (AGE GRADE COUNCILS)

Age	<u>Kiama</u>	<u>Njuri</u>
7-15+	<u>kiiqumi</u> (for all)	<u>kabichu</u> (for the few)
15-18+	<u>uringuri</u> (for all)	<u>ramare ba ndinguri</u> (council for the older boys)
18-29+	<u>uthaka</u> (warrior-hood for all)	<u>ramare ba nthaka</u> (council of warriors)
29-40+	(No councils)	
40-51+	<u>nkomango</u> (for all ruling elders)	<u>njuri ya mwiriga</u> (for the few)
51-62+	<u>mbiti</u> (for ritual elders and the aged; informal consultation with <u>nkomango</u> as needed)	

Membership in councils was voluntary, but peer pressure assured that virtually all males would join the appropriate kiama. Entry involved payment of fees to existing members, followed by submission to pain (usually beatings) and a period of apprenticeship in which the new member learned behavioral norms and served the older members. This behavior instilled respect for age and self-discipline at every step to the life course. Following apprenticeship came the stage of active authority, gradually increasing as one aged.

Persons with greater natural ability, especially those from families noted for leadership, were chosen by each kiama to be agambi (spokesmen) for their group. Some of these would be recommended for membership in an elite kiama called the njuri (council of the few) which served some larger entity such as a collection of several major lineages or a geographical area.

### Transition Between Age Grades

Rites of passage and other sociological markers made transition between age grades clear and unambiguous. A boy moved from being a "child" to being an "uncircumcised boy" when his second set of teeth appeared. (See Table 5.1 above.) He became an "elder boy," a candidate for circumcision, at puberty. Gutura matu (piercing of the ears) also accompanied this stage (Holding 1942). When he went through initiation and circumcision with his age mates, he became a "warrior." He remained a warrior until he married, at which point he became a "novice elder." (See Table 5.2 above.) When his first son entered warriorhood or when military authority was formally transferred to his son's age group, he became a "ruling elder." When the next age group formally entered warriorhood, his status changed to "ritual elder." And, when the next age group after that became warriors, he was considered one of the very aged.

This movement between age grades was further clarified by the formalized age-set social organization used by the Meru. Though some individual flexibility occurred, most men progressed through the stages of adult life with other members of their institutionalized age-set cohort. As a result, all transitions within the whole age grade system were necessarily interrelated. When a particular group of senior warriors became novice elders, the current novice

elders ascended to the ruling elder age grade, and former ruling elders became ritual elders.

Although the entire system emphasized deference to more senior age grades, age-sets were not always happy to move up to the next age-grade. Senior warriors hated to relinquish their privileged military status for the socio-political dormancy of the novice elder age-grade. Ruling elders very reluctantly traded their secular power and responsibility for the more passive roles ascribed to ritual elders. Thus age grade transition was desirable for novice warriors and novice elders and undesirable for senior warriors and ruling elders. Therefore, alternate age-sets tended to see themselves as allies.

A major area-wide ceremony called the ntuiko marked these age grade transitions. Generally the entire procedure began when enough novice warriors accumulated to drive out the senior warriors. The actual ntuiko ceremony itself was the occasion for significant intergenerational conflict between junior and senior age-sets. For most of the Meru sub-ethnic groups, a divine king/prophet figure, called the Mugwe, mediated during ntuiko.<sup>2</sup> After a lengthy deliberation between the novice and ruling elders in the

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to his mediatory function at the time of ntuiko, the Mugwe was seen as God's representative among his people. He had to bless the circumcision knife and was an essential part of many religious rituals. His person was sacred, especially his left hand. See Needham (1960) for a discussion of the symbolism associated with the office.

presence of ritual elders and the Mugwe, consensus was reached and the age grade transfer occurred peacefully with the blessing of the Mugwe. However, some ritual conflict and liminal lawlessness was allowed, ventilating the long suppressed anger of juniors towards their seniors. Ritual ntuiko conflict usually involved the staged physical expulsion of senior warriors from the gaaru (communal dwelling place of the warriors). Afterwards, a feast of reconciliation occurred.

#### Age Grades for Women

Age grades for adult women roughly parallel those for men. Holding (1942) lists age grades for woman as given in Table 5.4 below:<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 5.4: ADULT FEMALE AGE GRADES

Age	Life Stage	Termination Event
17-18	<u>Ngutu</u> (Marriageable woman)	Marriage
18-28+	<u>Muciere</u> (Young married woman)	Initiation of first born
28-40+	<u>Mwekuru</u> (Wife of Ruling Elder)	Initiation of youngest child
40-50+	<u>Mwekuru</u> (Wife of Ritual Elder)	
50+	<u>Ntindiri</u> (Aged woman)	Death

Little difference existed between male and female age grades prior to circumcision. Following initiation, which

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<sup>3</sup> The ages given by Holding appear to be somewhat low. For example, with female initiation occurring at around age fifteen, a woman would have to give birth to her first child between the ages of ten and thirteen to become a mwekuru at age 28.

involved clitoridectomy and a time of healing and instruction, young women entered a short period of dancing and celebration before marriage. Men, on the other hand, entered warriorhood after initiation and postponed marriage for an additional ten years or so. After marriage, a woman belonged to the same age grade as her husband, despite the difference in their ages.

A muciere (the wife of a novice elder) like her husband, had little status in the community. These women prepared food for circumcision feasts and were sometimes allowed to attend at childbirth as learners. When a woman's first born was initiated or when the appropriate ntuiko occurred, she ascended to the next age grade of mwekuru (the wife of a ruling elder). The women of this age grade provided and prepared food for feasts and ceremonies, settled minor disputes between other women and dealt with certain transgressions of traditional law, initiated and educated girls, and played a role in religious ceremonies during droughts and epidemics. When the next ntuiko occurred and her husband entered the age grade of ritual elder, the woman moved up as well. Holding (1942) says that by this stage all a woman's children had been circumcised. It is more likely, given the young age at which women reach this life stage, that the initiation of the youngest child occurred at some point during this age grade. Although Holding does not specify any event associated with movement

into ntindiri status, this stage was associated with cessation of sexual activity.

#### Age-Graded Councils for Women

Like the men's councils, women's biama facilitated the performance of broader social roles associated with different age grades. Although women were preoccupied with economic and social life in their own nyumba and extended family, women's biama organized food for feasts, arranged for female circumcision ceremonies, settled minor disputes between women, and dealt with minor offenses by women against tradition. Major disputes, even if they only involved women, were referred to appropriate male biama.

A select female committee, a counterpart to the male njuri ncheke, was composed of women consistently active in women's affairs, exemplary in their domestic lives, and married to a man with status and wealth in the community. This council performed certain special sacrifices and other ritual functions.

#### Clarity in Life Course

The life course in Meru had great sociological and psychological clarity. Few ambiguities existed. Sociological criteria clearly specified a person's movement through various age grades. Community-wide rituals distinctly marked transitions. Not only did individuals know without doubt their age grade, everyone else in the community knew as well. Moreover, every age grade,

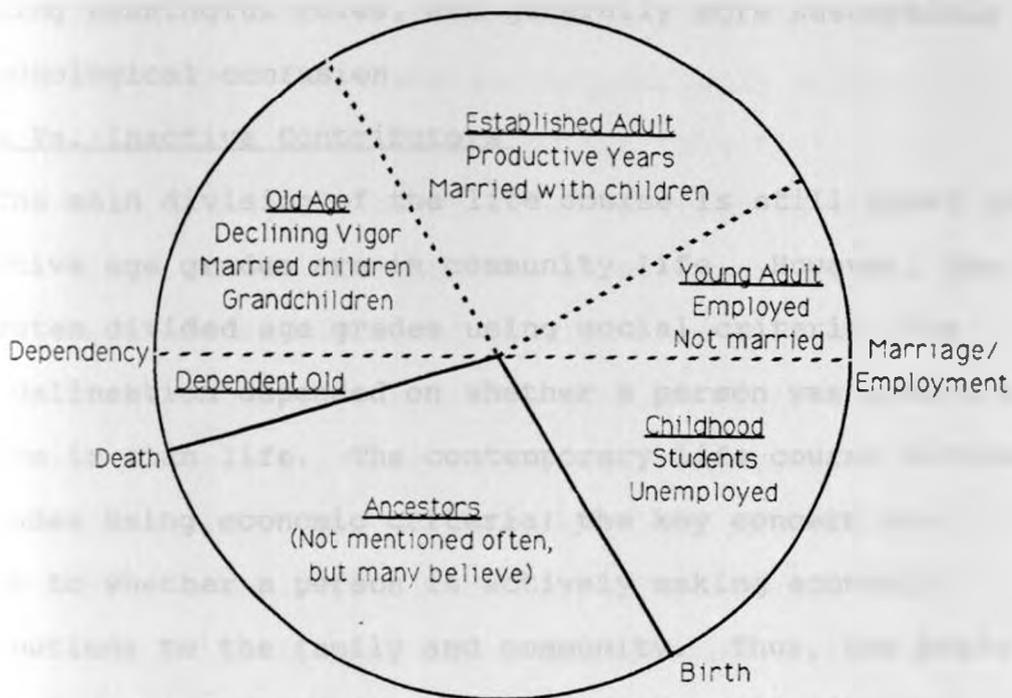
including the aged, had important specified roles to perform for the benefit of the community. Every person, therefore, knew his or her age-related social role and identity. The principle of seniority clearly specified appropriate behavior towards people of other age grades. Although there was room for resentment and dissatisfaction on the part of junior age grades, the ntuiko ceremony allowed these feelings to be ventilated. All juniors knew their time to be seniors was coming. Finally, individuals did not progress through the life course alone. They moved more or less en masse though various age grades with other members of their age-set, giving them a strong sense of social support.

The traditional Meru age grade system thus removed confusion about roles, purpose, and behavioral guidelines. The system was integrally related into the overall workings of society. Individuals of every age grade filled a function appropriate to their general level of knowledge and vigor. Even more to the advantage of old people, the entire system rested on an underlying ideology which venerated clan ancestors and placed high regard upon seniority.

#### Contemporary Life Course

The contemporary age grade system looks very, very different. (See Figure 5.2.) Though some elements remain constant, as will be noted below, the fundamental meaning of the stages of the life course has changed. Age grades have lost their connection to principles of social ideology.

CONTRIBUTORS



NON-CONTRIBUTORS

Criteria: Physical Vigor  
Productivity  
Generation

Transitions: Unclear  
Vaguely Defined

Figure 5.2: Contemporary Life Course

They are now defined more in economic terms. As a result, transitions between age grades tend to be much less clear-cut, much less kind to elderly age grades in terms of assigning meaningful roles, and generally more susceptible to psychological confusion.

#### Active Vs. Inactive Contributors

The main division of the life course is still based on how active age grades are in community life. However, the old system divided age grades using social criteria; the basic delineation depended on whether a person was active or inactive in clan life. The contemporary life course divides age grades using economic criteria; the key concern now relates to whether a person is actively making economic contributions to the family and community. Thus, the basic concern today is not performance of a culturally defined role, but productive and reproductive activity.

The line separating active and inactive contributors has become somewhat vague. For those near the end of life, the critical criterion is loss of physical vigor; for youth, the significant factor is getting married and taking up meaningful employment. Settling down, getting married and establishing a family is the main avenue of social contribution. The importance attached to marriage closely relates to the fundamental societal need to reproduce the community labor supply. Thus, the social criterion of

marriage is closely related to economic criteria, such as providing well for dependents.

### "Non-Contributors"

The inactive members of society in this context means "non-contributors," those who are not directly enhancing the community's productive and reproductive potential. Ancestors and the unborn constitute a portion of this inactive group in the contemporary life course. These days ancestors are seldom discussed openly. Few people pour libations to ancestors at mealtime or make obligatory family sacrifices. Nearly everyone is nominally or actively Christian in belief. But, despite the lack of overt behavior that recognizes the presence of ancestors, many still believe in their importance and in their ability to affect the lives of living family members.

The period of childhood remains in the inactive portion of the life course also. Of course, as children get older, they make more and more contributions to the labor needs of the household, just as the acceptance of uncircumcised children into clan life increased gradually with age and maturity. More importantly, however, in the contemporary life course, the inactive period of childhood has been lengthened to include all the years prior to marriage and gainful employment. The warrior life stage, which used to fill the portion of the life course between initiation and marriage for males, has disappeared altogether. Fortunate

youth now spend most of their late childhood and adolescence in formal schooling. Those not in school often sit idle or work for their fathers as low status farm laborers. Childhood, then, as defined in the contemporary life course, includes all students and all unemployed, unmarried youth, even those in their twenties. A person is not considered a productive community member until they are fully settled, that is, until they have either acquired land or a job and begun a family.

The final group of non-contributors forms an entirely new stage. This new stage consists of those elderly who are no longer physically capable of making active contributions to the family--those who are almost completely dependent. For example, an old woman in this category may still cook for herself and show self-reliance in daily personal care, but be unable to help the family except perhaps by watching the compound when others are away or peeling a few bananas and winnowing some peas. An old man in this category will have relinquished most of his control and management of land, even though technically the land may still be in his name. These elderly are ready to give advice, but are rarely asked.

### Contributors

The contributing stages of contemporary life course can be divided into three segments. First, the young adult stage includes those who are either married with one or two

small children, recently married without children, or planning to marry soon. Young adult males will be employed at an off-farm job or farming enough land for to provide subsistence. Young women will be employed or farming and engaged in the domestic tasks of the household.

Secondly, established adults will be married with several children growing into adulthood, or with some children already married. These are the productive years in which a couple often must pay school fees for their children and care for an elderly parent, while trying to expand and solidify their own economic position for up-coming old age.

Thirdly, old age is a time when a person has married children and grandchildren. Most people are still economically active during this period, though many are slowing down due to declining physical vigor.

#### Ascribed Roles

Naturally, since the underlying basis of the life course has changed, roles ascribed to various life stages are different as well. Notably, contemporary roles possess much more homogeneity throughout life, particularly for males. Granted, some specialized expectations exist for people of different life stages. Youth are expected to stay in school as long as their academic performance and family wealth will allow. Healthy younger adults do the digging and tilling of the fields. Old people are still valued as occasional relationship counselors and advisors. But, most

of the roles associated with today's life stages involve meeting personal and family economic needs at different stages of family development. In other words, life stage tasks now focus more directly on production and reproduction, without intervening variations in social function.

By way of comparison to the old life course, these economic roles are not entirely new. Economic imperatives always formed the bedrock on which social organization rested. People have always had to make a living for their maturing families. However, in the old life course, the only life stage characterized primarily by the performance of economic and family establishment roles was that of novice elder, the adult life stage with the least amount of status and prestige. Other life stages possessed social roles which set them apart and gave them distinctive character. For example, warriors defended the community and acquired livestock. Ruling elders preserved harmony through guiding, advising, and adjudicating.

Now, the life course as a whole, with all its stages, lacks this rich differentiation. Indeed, functions performed by people of different life stages now might better be described not as ascribed social roles, but as variations upon the same essential life task, that of having a family and providing for them. As families mature and develop, this life task undergoes some changes in character.

For instance, a young adult couple first direct their energies towards acquiring land, planting coffee trees, and building a better house. Later, as middle-age approaches, their focus shifts to providing school fees for their children and helping them attain necessary employment or land. These life tasks, however, are just variations upon the same theme--the economic imperative to produce in order to survive and to get ahead.

Thus, instead of discrete, clearly defined roles for each age grade, now everyone does more or less the same thing, within the context of a maturing family and relative to declines in their own physical vigor. The major determinants of self-worth, identity, and daily behavior--at all age grades--are defined in terms of what a person accumulates and what they can do physically.

#### Loss of Councils

Even more conspicuous in their absence are age grade councils. Occasionally, ad hoc committees of old men arbitrate land disputes or settle severe domestic disagreements. Clan and extended family meetings, now open to all men of the clan regardless of age, still meet sporadically to deal with rare issues of major importance to the entire group.

Largely, however, community political administration has been taken over by formal government institutions: chiefs, sub-chiefs, county councils, and the like. These

political organs hold general community meetings to advise and instruct residents or to solicit their input and reaction to certain policies. Such meetings are generally open to all community members, regardless of age or sex.

Further, numerous opportunities exist in community committees, churches, and women's groups for individuals to exercise leadership and participate in grass roots political life. However, membership and leadership in these groups has little to do with age grading. Participation depends more on ability, education, and economic success. When informal age grading of leadership and community participation does occur, it is no longer based on membership in the proper age grade, but, as in Western society, on increasing ability due to greater experience.

#### Loss of Transitions Between Age Grades

Movement from one age grade to another is now much less clearly defined. The declining importance of age-set social organization has reduced the clarity of age grade transitions. As noted earlier, when warfare ceased, one of the primary justifications of age-sets was gone.<sup>4</sup> Warriors

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<sup>4</sup> Age-sets did persist in Meru throughout most of the colonial period, dying out finally only in the 1960s in the southern Meru. The last named age-set in this region was Gichunge, circumcised in the mid-1960s. However, according to my elderly informants, the age group of Guantai, circumcised in the early to middle 1940s, was the last properly ordered age-set. After that, the sequence became confused and organization began to disintegrate.

A weakened age-set structure still is practiced in Tigania and Igembe.

became more of a nuisance than a necessity in that changed context. There was no longer any justification or need for age-sets.

Thus, today, cohorts are no longer organized into age-sets on the basis of common circumcision time. Though circumcision remains important for males, it no longer serves as the universal rite of passage into full adulthood. No Meru male would be considered fully a man without being circumcised. However, traditional circumcision ceremonies are now rare. Circumcision is often performed in hospitals, although in most families it is accompanied by some formal festivities to recognize the changing status of the young man. Female circumcision is seldom practiced, except perhaps in very remote areas. Thus, the rite of circumcision--and its companion social institution, age-sets--now has little consequence.

The decline in importance of age-sets surfaced when young and middle-aged informants were asked how they distinguished old people from young people. Only 20% of the respondents in Mwonge and Lower Karimba listed age-sets as a way of identifying elderly. In Upper Karimba, we asked specifically if age-sets are still used to distinguish between people of different ages and generations. Fifty-one percent agreed that age-sets could be used, but 20% of these voluntarily added that they themselves didn't know the names and orders of age-sets. Another 15% stated quite firmly

that age-sets should not be used because they are not known well these days or are unreliable as a measure of aging. Comprehensive knowledge of age-sets and age-set members is found only among the elderly themselves and among some of the middle-aged.

Naturally, one consequence of the decline of age-sets was the cessation of the ntuiko ceremonies that marked the transition of age-sets from one age grade to another. Furthermore, even though there is still a strong sense of camaraderie among those of the same age, the loss of age-sets means that movement through the life course is more of an individual process. One now moves through life without the formally marked companionship of one's cohort. Today's youth feel a sense of kinship with those of their same age, but group cohesion depends more on growing up and going to school together. Group identity is no longer formally recognized and institutionalized.

Given the decline of age-sets, the cessation of ntuiko ceremonies, and the loss of ascribed social roles for different age grades, transition between age grades has become much less clear. Take the transition to adulthood as an example. Circumcision is no longer the definitive, single indicator of full participation in community life. Other factors are important now, factors that relate to a person's contribution to new modes of production.

Responsible adulthood now is a matter of having control over essential means of production--land and labor--and being a part of a nuclear family productive and reproductive unit. Two sets of criteria now guard the gates of entry into adulthood. One is marriage and beginning a family. The other is getting a job and/or acquiring enough land (usually from inheritance from the father) to begin providing subsistence to that family.

These criteria allow for a large amount of chronological differentiation. A review of census data reveals several young men getting married and having children as early as 21 or 22. Many others wait until much later. Some, especially those with more education, often wait until their early thirties.

Furthermore, the nature of adulthood markers introduces some degree of confusion. Is a person an adult when they start farming their own land? Is getting an off-farm job that produces monetary income sufficient? Does it matter what kind of job is involved? Does a high-paying job with good potential for long-term employment mean more? Is marriage enough, even if a person still lives on his father's land and doesn't have a good job? Or, more likely, should adulthood be considered a multi-layered affair, in which individuals have higher and lesser degrees of status based on their occupation, income, education, and marital status, much like the socio-economic stratification we see

in western nations? However one addresses these questions, it is obvious that the transition from childhood to adulthood is no longer as straightforward as it used to be.

Secondly, the transition to old age is more problematic now. Becoming "old" relies primarily on gradual changes in one's physical health and vigor and in one's control over economic resources. No clearly marked boundaries exist.

When movement from one age grade to another is based on a person's family development and productive abilities, transitions are gradual, unmarked by clear divisions. In the past, the sociological terrain of the indigenous life course was similar to the Meru mountain environment; moving from age grade to another was like going from one ridgetop to ridgetop. The distinction between ridges was obvious. Now the life course terrain resembles the northern lowlands; transitions are marked by almost imperceptible change.

#### Changes in Age Grading for Women

From one perspective, age grades for women and the roles connected with them have remained more constant than those for men. After all, women did not have so much to lose. Most of their important roles were already directly related to production and reproduction. The present emphasis on those roles has not changed significantly. Women are still primarily concerned with growing the food for their families, cooking for them, and taking care of

their domestic needs. Social roles for women outside the family setting were never highly emphasized in Meru society.

On the other hand, social changes have introduced new alternatives for women, alternatives which did not exist before. Although not as many girls as boys go to secondary school, and not as many young women opt for off-farm employment as do young men, a significant and growing number of young women are getting education and jobs that take them away from the community or give them higher income-producing capacity within the family. As a consequence, women with higher levels of education may marry later or choose not to marry at all. Contemporary social conditions at least offer an alternative "life career" track besides that of marrying and farming food crops for one's family.

Thus, for those women who stay within the traditional life course track, the changes are fewer and probably less traumatic. For women who get an education, their status within the family increases, or they may leave the community altogether and pursue an independent career as a teacher, secretary or nurse, or even a doctor or lawyer.

#### Ecological Evaluation of Changes

From an ecological point of view, it is understandable that the Meru would emphasize productive and reproductive contributions at this time in their history. This emphasis constitutes an appropriate adaptive response to social and economic transition. When changes occur in familiar aspects

of the socio-natural system, confusion is reduced by focusing on things directly related to physical survival.

However, some aspects of this response appear maladaptive. The loss of social roles in old age reduces the social input of old people at a time when their knowledge of interpersonal relations could be most helpful. The decline of clearly defined age grade roles, transitions, and cohort identification may heighten the psychological insecurity associated with change. The emphasis on reproduction, already increased by the earlier age at marriage of many young men, certainly contains maladaptive potential. Only if earlier marriage patterns are accompanied by wide-spread birth control and family planning can this negative effect be off-set. On the other hand, the growing tendency for some young women to delay marriage or remain single altogether is a positive ecological response. Although many single career women commonly have one or two children at some point, they have fewer offspring than their counterparts in traditional families. Furthermore, even married women with higher educational levels and off-farm jobs tend to have fewer children.

#### Characteristics of Old Age

Having analyzed the life course in historical perspective, consider now those characteristics of "oldness" which set an elderly person apart in the minds of Meru people. Just, who is an old person? What differentiates the

age grade of "old age" from other age grades? Are there gradations of oldness within old age?

Data for this section come from the interview on attitudes with young and middle-aged informants. In the context of these interviews, informants were asked what distinguishes an old person from a middle-aged person. Respondents were encouraged to mention the characteristics they personally use to identify an old person.

The responses of informants to this question reveal several identifying markers of old age. These are listed in Table 5.5 along with the percentage of the sample who mentioned each factor. Since the question was open-ended, respondents usually mentioned more than one characteristic, sometimes several. Thus, relative weight of percentages should be understood in that light.

TABLE 5.5: MARKERS OF OLD AGE

Characteristics of Old Age	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Appearance	97	75.2%
Activity Level	83	64.3
Physiological Functioning	67	51.9
Age-Set	30	23.3
Time Orientation	29	22.5
Generation	23	17.8
Personal Habits	16	12.4
Mental Acuity	13	10.1
Total Number of Respondents	129	N/A

Those characteristics most central to old age relate to declines in a person's ability to function productively. These include physiological and mental declines and

decreasing ability to perform work. Informants referred to specific physical problems such as loss of mobility (walking slowly, for short distances, bent over, or with the aid of sticks), talking weakly, having poor eyesight, loss of teeth and having to eat soft food. A very few people also mentioned loss of mental acuity, saying old people become childish and forgetful. Very closely related to these concerns is declining activity. Elderly people can't work as much as younger people. Old people work more slowly and can no longer do the strenuous jobs such as carrying heavy loads, digging or tilling the land, and grinding gruel. One middle-aged woman said: "For myself, an old person is someone who can't work because of old age. Some people look old, but are still strong enough to work. I don't think of them as old." "As long as they can provide for themselves, I don't think of them as old," reports a young 29 year-old man.

Menopause, or declines in reproductive functioning, was seldom mentioned as a marker for old age until respondents were specifically asked about it. Only two people in Upper Karimba and Mwonge mentioned menopause as a component of old age in the normal course of the interview. However, in Lower Karimba we asked in a specific follow-up question about the importance of menopause. Fifty percent of these informants agreed that menopause is indeed important, while only 13% said menopause is not important. Furthermore, when

respondents in Mwonge were asked to distinguish among different categories of elderly, females commonly referred to lessening sexual activity and menopause as one way to distinguish among elderly women. Several people also mentioned loss of sexual desire as part of old age for women. Both male and female informants report that a loss of sexual desire usually accompanies menopause. Noticeable declines in sexual desire and activity, however, is not thought to be a part of old age for men. People here believe that men can remain sexually active until they lose all physical strength.

Some respondents also estimate oldness by looking at the ages of a person's children and grandchildren or by determining an individual's age-set. Several informants said that people could be divided according to whether they have married children, whether they have children with gray hair, or by the number and ages of their children and grandchildren. One man of 44 said: "Old people have married children. For example, none of my daughters are married. All my mother's children are married." Furthermore, a small portion of the community still uses age-set membership as a way of distinguishing elderly. As noted in the discussion above, approximately 20% of respondents say age-sets can still be accurately used to some extent in identifying elderly, as long as the person knows the names and orders of age-sets. Most youth and many

middle-aged, however, freely admit they do not have this knowledge. Furthermore, age-sets are not used primarily as a marker for old age per se, but as a way of dividing the elderly themselves into discrete groups.

Further concepts of oldness are reflected in another group of responses designated as orientation and personal habits. Orientation refers to a person's overall values and outlook on life. Elderly, according to Meru informants, tend to talk more about the past than about the future. They are concerned with tradition; they talk a lot about history and past experiences. A 37 year old male said:

You can tell an old person because of their way of thinking and acting. They may look young, but when you talk to them, you know it is the language of an old person. When you reason with them they will tell you about old things and old traditions. They won't listen to modern solutions.

Others report that elderly are more mature, careful, and serious in their speech and actions. Furthermore, elderly are thought to be less "development-conscious." They do not have to worry any more about accumulating more property or paying school fees. One person said elderly are less progressive in farming. Overall, elderly tend to be more oriented to the past, place more emphasis on tradition, and are less concerned with present and future economic success.

Several people also mentioned differences in personal habits. Sometimes, elderly are not as concerned with cleanliness as younger people. They use snuff instead of cigarettes. They speak freely, even using abusive words

when they are upset. They speak less directly, employing lots of proverbs that youth don't understand. One woman of 40 said, "Old people speak in proverbs while young people rarely use them and don't understand them. Old people still talk the way people of the past used to talk."

Appearance is often taken as an indication of bodily changes and declining abilities. Elderly people are often frail and bent. They have gray hair and wrinkled skin. Appearance also indicates generational differences. The very old have pierced ears and sharpened teeth due to the customs at the time of their initiation. Further, elderly often wear tattered, inexpensive, or fashionless clothing. One informant said: "Even if their clothes are smart, they may put them on upside down." Another woman of 40 reports: "Old people don't bother with fancy clothes. My husband's father's brother has very nice clothes, but he rarely puts them on. He claims they make him feel funny."

Thus, two major conceptions tend to define old age in Meru--physical vigor and generation. Appearance and habits are sometimes taken as indications of these factors.

Reference to chronological age is conspicuously absent, though its importance appears to be growing. Eight percent of all respondents refer directly to chronological age as a useful measure of aging. The responses of several others indicate the growing importance of chronology. For example, one 47 year old farmer says: "You can use physical

appearance to estimate somebody's age as it declines with advancing years." Thus, in the minds of a growing number of people, other characteristics of oldness are indicators of chronological age. However, at the present time, physical functioning and generational characteristics far outweigh the importance of chronological age.

Furthermore, significant differences of opinion exist among informants about valid and reliable means of identifying old people. Some vehemently reject the characteristics used by the majority. One young 32 year old man said: "You can't use body strength to determine old age. Aging depends on diet. You may find an older man who is eating well and is stronger than a younger man." Another says: "You can't use menopause to determine old age because a relatively young woman may have reached it and a woman who looks old can still bear children." A third argues: "Physical appearance depends on the problems one has faced, their type of work and feeding. Also those who drink heavily may look old while in fact they are very young." Thus, many don't agree with the mainstream view of old age.

Also, in the minds of the Meru, the characteristics which define old age are closely intertwined. The response of one young woman of 29 reveals the interrelatedness of physical vigor, generation, and appearance: "In our women's group at church, we are separated according to our strength--the young women, the old mothers, and the grandmothers.

This division usually depends on appearance." Another informant made a connection between reproductive activity and appearance, declaring that those who are no longer bearing children look older.

Thus, several different factors influence general ideas of oldness. The Meru are very aware of generational components such as age-set and number and ages of children. Personal habits and orientation to the past are also considered. But the characteristics which matter most are strength, mobility, and ability to do work. Each of these attributes significantly influences how people take care of themselves and contribute to household productivity. Significantly, concern with production also underlies the rationale for the current life course.

#### Divisions Within Old Age

Shifting from the characteristics which set off old age from other adult age grades, it is also important to consider divisions within old age itself. Do the Meru distinguish different types of old people?

In the pre-colonial life course, the ruling elder age grade was analogous to middle age today; both the ritual elder age grade and the aged made up what could be considered old age. Age-set membership clearly determined a person's membership in these age grades. Within the contemporary social framework, indigenous age grades and age-sets no longer discriminate as explicitly between

different types of old people. However, the Meru do distinguish between two groups of elderly: the old and the very old; those who are still active, mobile, and able to work versus those who are inactive, more or less immobile, and primarily dependent on others.

In Upper Karimba, where informants were simply asked if different categories of old people exist, 52% of the sample clearly distinguish between active and inactive elderly. Most remaining respondents used age-sets to discriminate among elderly themselves. This result was biased, however, by the fact that in this initial stage of study, we were probing for information about age-sets. Observations suggest that a much higher percentage of the population conceptualizes old age in terms of activity and inactivity.

Since no single identifiable threshold separates these categories, old age is best described as a continuum that involves gradual transition from activity to inactivity, from mobility to immobility, from self-reliance to dependence. The response of one informant in particular reflects the gradual changes associated with old age:

Old people can be divided into three groups: those with bent backs who need walking aids and can't work, those who can walk straight but can do very little work, and those who are old but can work normally.

The linguistic categories sometimes used to refer to elderly also reflect this continuum. In Mwonge and Lower Karimba, informants were pressed to give the specific terms they use when referring to old people. Several respondents

said there are no special terms for old people and no categories of elderly. One person said simply, "Old people are old people. They have no categories."

However, eighteen percent of these informants categorize old people using some variation of mukuru, a Kimeru word which originally referred to any married adult. In the past, the term mukuru could denote any individual from the novice elder age grade through the very aged. Current usage of mukuru refers to different categories of elderly by adding various adjectives. For example, one 46 year-old male informant said:

I only know two specific terms, mukuru (elder) and muthaka (warrior). If I am pressed hard, I can add an adjective like mukuru mono (an elder very much), but there is no general consensus about what makes a person a mukuru mono. It is relative. It depends on who you are talking with and what they understand you to mean. Your choice of expression would be personal.

Others used such variations as akuru mati anini (elders but small) or baba/maitu (fathers or mothers) to refer to middle-aged, akuru (elders) or akurakuru (elder-elders, or old-old persons) to designate the active elderly, and akuru mono (those who are very much elders) to denote inactive old.

A higher number of informants, 44%, prefer some variation of the generational term, cucu (grandparent). The full range of these terms are: baba/maitu (father or mother), cucu (grandparent), cuncuri (great-grandparent),

and cuncuririria (great-great grandparent).<sup>5</sup> Due to the relatively consistent and extensive usage of cucu derivatives, a fairly comprehensive description of the each category was compiled.

A maitu or a baba denotes a mother or father, a middle-aged person. They are generally able-bodied, strong, and active. They can do everything, including cultivation, digging, looking after livestock and taking care of business matters. Women of this category perform all domestic tasks including grinding gruel. They are still sexually active and giving birth.

A cucu refers to a grandmother or grandfather. A cucu can still do most of the things that a maitu or a baba can do except that most cucu can't dig or carry very heavy loads. They can do most cultivation tasks, look after animals and children, and walk relatively long distances. They still eat normal food. Women can perform all the necessary domestic tasks, like cooking, washing, and cleaning. Most women of this group are past child-bearing and many are less active sexually. Cucu show some outward signs of physical aging--a few wrinkles and a little gray hair.

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<sup>5</sup> These are Kichuka terms. In Karimba, due to dialectic differences between Kichuka and Kimuthambe, these terms vary slightly. The analogous term for cucu is juju; for cuncuri, kijuju; and for cuncuririria, cukuru.

A cuncuri is a great-grandparent. Cuncuri are rather elderly in terms of chronological age. They have lost much physical vigor, but still perform light cultivation near the house and oversee some farm and business affairs. They take care of children and animals and watch the compound in the absence of others. They can walk short distances, usually with the aid of a stick. Women still help with family food preparation, cook for themselves, and do some washing and cleaning. In other words, cuncuri still take care of most of their own personal daily care needs and do some light physical work. However, they only eat soft foods, since many have lost their teeth. They appear very wrinkled and some may have poor eyesight. All women are definitely past child-bearing and very, very few remain active sexually. Men usually continue to be sexually active until weakness and ill health interfere.

The cuncuririria are the ancient ones, the great-great grandparents. Very few cuncuririria are left around. They are totally dependent. They just eat and sleep; they do nothing for themselves. They can't walk at all, except possibly to take a short walk to the toilet. Regarding sexual activity, one informant said: "They don't even remember whether a thing like sex exists."

Again, the same familiar characteristics underlie this linguistic division of elderly. These characteristics either determine or reflect an old person's ability to

perform self-care and make productive and reproductive contributions to the family.

Thus, in conclusion, movement through the age grade of old age involves a gradual transition along a continuum defined by physical vigor and activity. This graduating scale of agedness includes mobility, strength to do work, and ability to perform daily self-care needs. For women, the cessation of child-bearing has some importance, though the influence of menopause is not as significant to perceptions of old age as is physical vigor. Appearance can be used to estimate where an individual lies on the basic continuum.

#### Summary

Both the contemporary life course and current perceptions of old age suggest a sharp decline in social roles of elderly and a corresponding increase in the importance of productive roles. Later, chapter 7 will carefully examine whether the actual behavior of elderly conforms to these perceptions. However, before looking at the behavior of elderly, the deeper ideological meanings of old age in southern Meru will be explored.

CHAPTER 6  
THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF OLD AGE IN MERU

The previous chapter presented a discussion of the place of old age within the life course and delineated the characteristics used to define oldness. At this stage, the Meru perspective on old age will be further clarified by exploring the underlying cultural values which guide community and family interaction with elderly people. Secondly, the way these cultural values affect the care given to dependent old people will be examined. Finally, the interaction between cultural values and one important ecological variable, population demography, will be discussed.

In Meru one particular principle, giteo,<sup>1</sup> touches all behavior in all relationships. Interpersonal dynamics in the Meru socio-natural system cannot be understood without first understanding giteo. Giteo gives meaning to concrete

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<sup>1</sup> The term giteo, which can be roughly glossed into English as "respect," is borrowed from Kikuyu. According to local informants, the original Kimeru equivalent, nthoni, has become uncommon in contemporary usage in southern Meru. Furthermore, the connotation of shyness and timidity which has always been a part of nthoni has gotten stronger; some people now take nthoni to refer primarily to timidity, not to the more inclusive idea of showing respect. For these reasons, the term giteo is used instead of nthoni.

human behavior and decision-making, including that which involves the old.

### Giteo: Respect as a Cultural Value

Meru informants define giteo in terms of specific behaviors. These definitive giteo behaviors can be conceptually divided into several descriptive categories and their broader implications analyzed.

#### Giteo as Deferential Behavior

First, giteo involves deferential behavior. When informants explained how a young person demonstrates giteo to an old person, several descriptive rules for social interaction emerged, primarily "having good manners," "talking well," and "making yourself small in their presence." When asked for behavioral illustrations of how a person "makes themselves small" and what is involved in "talking well," informants produced a long list of conduct guidelines that constitute appropriate giteo towards an old person.

"Talking well" involves the following:

- Do not call an old person by their name; call them cucu (grandparent) instead.
- Youth should not joke around near old people.
- Don't talk about "certain things" in their presence. For example, never use vulgar language or talk about sexual matters. Don't talk about male/female relationships or about romantic things. (This prohibition refers primarily to people of the parents' generation.)

Rules for "good manners" include:

- Young men should not "move with" girls on the road.<sup>2</sup>
- Give way on the path when you meet an old person. Never rub shoulders with them as you pass.
- If they come and you are seated, give them your seat.
- Give them plenty of time to speak in a gathering, such as a clan meeting.
- Serve an old person first.

"Making yourself small" means:

- Never quarrel with an elder.
- Don't disagree with an elder.
- Avoid anything which might annoy an old person. Annoying them is disrespect.
- Never try to compete with an elder for anything, taking seats or giving the right of way.
- Youth should not even speak in an elder's presence unless asked.
- Approach an elder in a humble manner, especially when you want something from them.
- Only old people should drink beer.

These behaviors are very important to the people of Meru, especially to the elderly. Many times, elderly informants lamented the failure of youth to "give way" on the path and the current tendency of young men and women to talk openly in public. Furthermore, these behaviors reflect some very fundamental principles, such as deference to seniority, which will be discussed in more detail below.

#### Giteo as Avoidance and Familiarity Behavior

Another aspect of giteo is avoidance and familiarity behavior. In the past, respect was shown to certain persons

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<sup>2</sup> One informant gave the following explanation: "It is very bad manners for a young man to stand with a woman in a place where they can be seen by their parents or the age-mates of their parents. The reason is that two lovers can get carried away by sexual desire and do indecent things. It would be especially offensive for a parent to see his child in any action suggesting engagement in a love affair."

either by completely avoiding interpersonal contact with them or by engaging in very relaxed interaction. This phenomenon of avoidance and highly familiar, "joking" relationships is well documented in anthropological literature. My purpose here is merely to illustrate how these behaviors formed part of the broader concept of giteo which defines social interaction in southern Meru.

Avoidance relationships existed between opposite sexes of adjacent generations. For example, a father and his circumcised daughter had minimal contact, as did a man and his son's wife. Young women never entered their father's house and did not talk with him directly. Rather, they communicated with him through their mother. One woman said: "A grown daughter or daughter-in-law could not take food to the father. Instead, one of the younger children or the mother took him his food." Likewise, a mother had little contact with her sons after their initiation. The avoidance relationship between a man and his wife's mother was the most stringent of all. These two were never to meet. If a man spoke to his wife's mother for any reason, he had to pay a goat. One informant, a young man in his mid-twenties, tells of being very amused as a child when he saw his father run into the bush to hide from his maternal grandmother. Sometimes his father turned down a different path going in a very inconvenient direction when he saw her coming. She went to similar lengths to avoid him.

On the other hand, very familiar relationships existed between grandparents and grandchildren. Boys spent their evenings around the kiarago (the grandfather's fire) receiving advice and listening to stories. Girls sat with their grandmothers in the kitchen. Boys went with the old men to herd cattle. Girls stayed around the homestead helping their grandmothers with domestic and farm work. Grandparents taught and advised the youth about sexual values and interpersonal relationships. If a young married woman had problems with her husband, she went to a grandmother. Married men sought out their grandfathers.

Channels of communication between these generations were very open and very free. Almost anything could be discussed. Linguistic vocabulary, naming practices, and social organization all recognize this closeness. The Kimeru word for grandparent (cucu) and grandchild (cucu) are identical. Grandchildren were often named for their grandparents and their grandparents' siblings. Further, all Meru age-sets were organized into two generational divisions, formally allying alternating generations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, I wish I had gathered more extensive data on these familiar, joking relationships. At the time, however, I overlooked this less obvious aspect of giteo, and neglected to explore it to the depth I should have. As a result, I do not have reliable data about the joking relationships which exist between certain categories of affinal and consanguineal age-mates.

### Giteo as Submissive Behavior

Another set of behaviors recognizes elders by admonishing youth to submit to their authority. Younger people generally are expected to obey anyone older than themselves, especially the elderly. "Giteo," said one old man, "is obedience. That carries everything. In the old days, once a youth was told to do something they did it without questions."

The specific behavior informants listed more than any other when asked to give examples of giteo was "going when sent." "Going when sent" constitutes perhaps the most basic unit of obedience and submission in Meru society. In the communal lifestyle of the Meru with people of all ages living together, youth are always being asked to run errands. This errand-sending behavior forms an integral part of life. Giteo, according to one informant, means "taking the errands an elder gives you, such as harvesting their yams, tending their bee hives, fetching them some water." Another thoughtful informant went further: "The most important measure of giteo is how often a person is willing to be sent and how quickly they perform the task. In the past, if a youth was given a task to perform for an elder, they did it in the shortest time possible."

Since the right to "send" someone depends primarily on seniority, old people feel quite free to enlist the aid of almost anyone who comes within their sphere, relatives or

not. One incident involving a rather out-spoken 85 year old woman serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of this right to send. Her dwelling sits conveniently beside a well-used path. Over the span of one two-hour visit, she enlisted the aid of my female assistant to peel potatoes, hailed down three young boys returning home from school to cut some grass for her cow, sent two passing girls for water, and asked a young married woman to come in and start her fire!

Additional submissive behavior mentioned by several informants in connection with giteo involves seeking and following elders' advice. Seeking advice demonstrates submission to the wisdom and knowledge of the old and relates directly to the evolutionary adaptive role of the elders.

Often the remarks of older respondents about advice-giving refer to the lack of proper giteo among today's youth. One older informant stated:

Youth today have little giteo. They no longer listen to the advice of the old. They may say, 'You are wasting my time. You didn't even go to school. How can you advise me?'

Another old man complains: "Youth don't take you seriously any more when you correct them." The reason for these complaints echoes in the comment of a young man of 28 who said: "When an old person begins to tell you about history, you think they are wasting your time. You would rather sit with your age-mates and share modern ideas."

Nevertheless, in the minds of young and old alike, listening to advice remains an integral part of proper giteo behavior. Even the concern over the declining interest in the knowledge and guidance of elders reflects the importance that this behavior has in ideal conceptions of giteo.

Not infringing upon an elder's property or person is another important part of giteo, especially once an old person reaches the age of dependency. Violating an elder's person or property constitutes a very serious breach of social order and is censured by severe supernatural sanctions. Madness, death from gitatu,<sup>4</sup> or retribution in kind disciplines the individual who consistently violates an elder's property or person, or one who commits an particularly notable transgression.

Impingement upon basic property rights takes several forms. Sometimes sons show disrespect by impatiently trying to force their father to give them their share of land or other property before he is ready. For example, regarding the inheritance of land, custom suggests that the father should divide his property among his sons as they marry and begin their families. The father keeps the youngest son's portion until he dies. Of course, this transfer of use rights and/or legal ownership occur over a relatively lengthy period of time and young men with growing families

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<sup>4</sup> Gitatu is an incurable illness in which the stomach swells up and fills with fluid. The person always dies. The disease is associated with sanctions of this type.

understandably may become impatient. Unless the father is extremely slow and unreasonable, however, giteo, with its grounding in gerontocratic ideology, requires sons to wait patiently until their fathers decide to bestow the land upon them without pressure. In a slightly different scenario, one informant shared the following incident:

I know of a man who wanted to divide his land equally among all his sons. One of his sons argued and tried to obtain all his father's land for himself. Because he did not want to share with his brothers, the father told the son that when he died, the son should not even live on that land. The son ignored his father's words and died of gitatu disease.

A related complication has arisen in these modern times where the courts instead of elders' councils decide land disputes. These days, people may violate giteo by legally acquiring ownership to land which according to custom belongs to someone else. Several examples illustrate:

Just last year, a man in this community stole legal possession of a portion of the land which rightfully belonged to his father's brother. The old man took the matter to court, but his nephew had money and corrupted justice. When the old man realized what had happened, he called his nephew to him and said that after his death, the nephew must never eat anything from the land he had stolen. The nephew ignored the prohibition and soon after the old man's death, he also died.

Other examples of property violation relate to the use and disposal of liquid assets such as livestock. One woman shared the following example:

I recall the case of a man who took his father's goat by force. Afterwards, the father said that son should not use any of his property after he died. The son ignored the prohibition and went mad.

In another instance, an informant recalled:

I know a man whose father died and left him with the mother. When his sisters married and their dowry was paid, the mother wanted a goat slaughtered for her. Traditionally, under such circumstances the mother was given the liver as her right. However, the man's wife insisted that the liver be given to the children instead in order to prevent them from getting anaemia. When the mother demanded the liver, the man said he had already given it to his children. The mother later told the man that because he had refused to give her the liver, he should not eat the liver from the goats paid as bridewealth for his daughters. Much later, the man slaughtered a bridewealth goat and, since he never took his mother's words seriously, he ate the liver. Soon afterwards he died.

Moreover, should someone--a son, for example--sell an old person's cow or land without their consent, or if they obtain the elder's agreement to sell an item through some false pretense, they have committed a serious offense. One of our informants, an older woman, had recently allowed her son to sell one of her two cows to pay school fees for her granddaughter. She later discovered that he had used the money for other purposes. During the interview, all strands of thought led back to abuse she had suffered from her son. Her denunciation of him was loud and complete.

Of similar seriousness were the rare cases of physical abuse and severe neglect. Several informants shared examples of such abuse. One man gave the following incident:

I know of a man whose father's brother took some family land and planted coffee there. The man believed the land to be his and went and beat his uncle severely. Immediately after the uncle died that man contracted qitatu and died.

Another informant said:

There is one particular example I remember of a man who used to beat and insult his mother. He also refused to take her to hospital when she fell sick. After she died, he became ill with gitatu and died after a few months.

A middle-aged woman recalled:

There is a case of a man who threw his mother away in the bush when she became ill. There she was mauled by wild animals, but she survived. Later she told him he will just collapse on the way and die. One time after she died the man was going to Mwimbi and he fell down and died at Gituntu (a nearby village).

The following story relates a different type of consequence:

I know of someone who quarreled with his father and beat him up. After the father died, the man married and had children and he also used to be beaten by his first born son.

All these examples point out the seriousness of insubordination to elders and its dire consequences.

#### Giteo as Helping Behavior

The last major way that youth show giteo to elderly is by helping them. Many think that helping an old person-- fetching them wood or water, providing and preparing food for them, carrying wood for them, removing a jigger--is the highest form of giteo. One 75 year old woman proudly reports: "I took firewood to Maria [age 95], my mother's age mate, the other day. That is giteo." Doing other small jobs such as looking after an old person's chickens, bringing some fodder for their animals, and helping clean or repair their home falls into the same category. Likewise,

if individuals see old people carrying firewood or some other heavy load, they should assist.

In addition to helping out with day-to-day labor needs, elderly need other types of assistance. For example, sons should make certain their aging parents have adequate housing. Widows expect to be given enough land for subsistence by their sons or their husband's relatives. Certainly if an old person falls ill, proper giteo requires that others in the family help with transportation to the hospital, with medical expenses, and with daily care needs.

Although community members assist elderly in incidental and irregular ways, giteo requires that children shoulder the primary burden of helping their parents. Children who live nearby provide daily labor and subsistence as needed. Children who live and work elsewhere bring gifts, such as clothing and blankets, when they visit.

All such help, in order to be considered the highest giteo, should be offered freely, without the old person having to ask or threaten.

#### The Meaning of Giteo

Although giteo is often translated as "respect," the English concept of respect inadequately conveys the full meaning of giteo.

#### Giteo as Behavior

First of all, giteo is not a generalized idea or value. It is expressed and defined as concrete behavior. In the

discussion above, the long list of behaviors associated with giteo were separated into categories such as deference, avoidance, obedience, and helping. These concepts, however, were imposed during the process of content analysis.

Informants themselves describe giteo in terms of practical tangible actions such as carrying water or wood, yielding the right of way on the path, listening to advice and the like.

#### Giteo as Responsibility

The behaviors associated with giteo reflect a very strong component of responsibility. Such things as helping one's elderly parents, carrying wood or water, and "going when sent" clearly demonstrate a sense of obligation toward the person involved. One of my informants said:

Giteo is when you feel someone is bonded to you in such a strong way that you are ready to do something for them even if helping them means you have to delay or forego entirely some of your own affairs.

Giteo almost invariably involves acting out deeply felt "responsibility" towards another person. By acting responsibly towards those to whom we are bonded, we show respect to them, we demonstrate that we have giteo.

#### Giteo as Relationship

Responsible giteo behavior is embedded in concrete relationships.<sup>5</sup> Giteo behaviors intertwine inseparably

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term "relationship" here simply to refer to a social interaction which has some degree of continuity, or at least the expectation of continuity.

with the relationships in which they occur. Giteo involves continuing social interactions, or at least interactions which contain the expectation of continuity. The following response given by a 29-year old male informant reflects the overlap between giteo and relationship: "Getting food and water for my father's cows, not arguing, being obedient. That good relationship is giteo."

In a very real sense, giteo behaviors validate the relationship which exists between two people. Giteo behaviors concretely recognize a person's right, status, and position in society. This recognition does not even end at death. Through proper giteo people continue receive recognition and remembrance even after they die. One old woman said:

The grave of an old person unites the deceased and those left behind. I want to be buried where my grandchildren can see my grave and be remembering me, even telling their friends, 'This is my grandmother's grave and we were with her in such and such a way.'

Given that giteo is embedded in many different kinds of relationships, appropriate behavior will naturally vary a great deal depending on the relationship involved. Giteo between a woman and her grandmother, for instance, is different from that between a man and his father. Both differ yet again from giteo between an old person and a community youth who are unrelated. Regardless of the variations, however, giteo always involves a concrete

behavioral expression of responsibility towards someone with whom you have a relationship.

### Giteo as Reciprocity

A further connotation of giteo--reciprocity-- has yet to receive sufficient emphasis in the discussion thus far. The giteo responsibility discussed above is mutual responsibility. The value of interdependence--helping each other out and pulling together, especially as a family--runs deep in Meru culture. Giteo incorporates that sense of interdependence.

Some specific examples make this point clearer. Reciprocity lies at the heart of the parent/child relationship. Parents, especially fathers, feel a compelling duty to educate their off-spring and get them a job--if sons, and get them married--if daughters. Furthermore, giteo endows parents with the obligation to provide land and, secondarily, livestock to their children. In other words, parental responsibilities include making sure children have the skills and resources necessary to care for a family. Parents feel the burden of this duty very keenly, especially at a time when population pressure and the national economy makes it difficult to satisfy those responsibilities. One informant, an articulate 50 year old farmer, expressed great discouragement and concern because his son had not found employment. The man sacrificed considerably to send his son to secondary school. But, when

the son graduated, he waited at home without any job prospects.

The reverse side of that reciprocal parent/child bond is the expectation that old people will be cared for in old age by the children they have helped to educate and equip for life. One woman said:

When an educated child gets his salary, he should buy clothes and such like for the parent to show he remembers he was educated by his parent. Giteo is showing you remember what parents have done for you in concrete ways.

Another related:

For young people not to take care of their parents when those parents have struggled hard to bring them up is disrespectful. For example, an old man may seek help from his son who has a job away while that son is home on leave. When the son realizes his father wants his help, that son may go back to his place of work to avoid being bothered. That is not giteo.

An old man lamented: "My son refused to help me buy iron sheets to complete the roof on my house after I had given him land. This is negligence. This is disrespect."

In addition to meeting such long-term reciprocal expectations, giteo also leads to immediate, on-going reciprocal feedback. Not only should people provide well for their families and act as a good neighbor throughout their lives, but they should also display appropriate behaviors towards the youth during old age. For instance, youth with proper giteo will seek advice from their elders. Conversely, when youth come, the elderly must advise them as wisely as they can and not refuse them. As a matter of

fact, elderly should actively seek out and correct any youth they see engaged in inappropriate behavior. To fail to do so gravely abuses the youth. Says one young woman: "If an old person sees you doing something wrong, they must call you over and advise you. If they just ignore what you are doing, they are abusing you."

Furthermore, even old people are not exempt from the behavioral restrictions of giteo. When they interact with youth, they are expected to show an appropriate degree of politeness and respect for the youth. Although elderly have great latitude in what they can say, they should never use dictatorial or abusive language. Moreover, old people should always accept any assistance or gifts they receive in a spirit of blessing, conveying their good will and wishes onto the giver.

In summary, responses to giteo behavior may be immediate or long-term. They may be generalized or limited to the two individuals involved in the interaction. But, every giteo behavior appears to have some expected reciprocal response.

#### Giteo as Recognition of Seniority

While giteo principles apply to some relationships which do not involve seniors and juniors, the core purpose of giteo is to acknowledge the greater seniority of an older person. This giteo towards elderly is, in the words of one informant, "the general and practical acceptance that old

people are senior in all ways, except in physical strength."

The sanctions surrounding infringement upon the person and property of an elder, discussed above, illustrate this point. Failure to respect an old person's property and person leads to dire misfortune or death for the offender. Such sanctions reveal the ideological protection which shields elders from the resentments of younger groups chaffing under gerontocratic domination. The fact that these beliefs survive in contemporary thought and interaction shows the resilience of seniority values.

Note also that giteo applies not just to interactions with "old people," but to all socially senior persons. Consider the dynamics of "going when sent" behavior. For instance, my two primary research assistants, youths in their twenties, often hailed down someone younger than themselves to bring them a glass of water during the course of an interview. Nothing is unusual, of course, in asking for a drink of water. It was rather the verbal and non-verbal behaviors which accompanied the request that caught my attention. The sending, "Boy, bring me some water," was always issued, not with imperiousness or stridency, but with calm assurance and understood authority, much as a teacher might tell a student, "John, bring me that set of books over by the window." The youth invariably dropped whatever he was doing and hurried off to meet the request.

Another example involves a good friend of mine whom I used to visit occasionally on weekends. His younger brother, a university student, also often visited him. Almost without fail, my friend kept his younger brother busy with several small tasks during his stay. This young man meekly washed my friend's car, shined his shoes, and ironed his clothes without uttering a word of dissent.

The right to send, therefore, extends to all relationships which involve a senior and a junior person. However, as noted above in the discussion of "giteo as relationship," the specific character of the relationship determines what a senior can ask a junior to do. If my assistant had asked a youth at a village household to shine his shoes, he would probably have been merely gazed at in amazement. If my friend had asked his younger brother to spend the entire weekend working in his shamba or hauling water and fodder for his cows, then the brother might well have called for a discrete family conference to protest.

Custom gives much greater latitude to elderly people. But, even for old people, appropriate requests vary with relationship. Elderly can make more demands upon their own children and grandchildren than upon younger neighbors. An old man can ask for younger women to prepare food for him, whereas an old woman, unless severely disabled, prepares her own food.

### Summary

Thus, in summary, the concept of giteo has rich and broad meanings in Meru society. Giteo behavior, in its fullest sense, reinforces relationship, expresses responsibility, generates reciprocal responses, and recognizes seniority, the foundational principle of Meru social organization.

### Gender Differences in Giteo

The above discussion did not distinguish between giteo for men as opposed to giteo for women. Some of those differences will be discussed at this point.

Many giteo behaviors relate equally to both senior men and senior women. Such things as "giving way on the path," giving up a seat to an elder, not joking or "moving with" girls in front of them, and "going when sent" apply to elderly of both sexes. Avoidance and familiarity behaviors involve gender as well as generational differences.

Some other types of behaviors affect only men. Since clan meetings are a male domain, giving an old person plenty of time to speak in a gathering applies primarily to men. The prohibitions and rules regarding the distribution of land pertain mainly to men also, since patrilineal inheritance typically involves the father/son relationship. On the other hand, the customs regarding helping elders benefit old women more than old men. Most elderly men have younger spouses who take care of their domestic needs. Many

old women, however, face an extended time of dependency when they will rely on younger people for assistance.

Furthermore, giteo defines appropriate behavior in male-female interactions, such as in a marital relationship. Wives, for example, are expected to obey their husbands. Husbands even have the right to beat their wives to ensure submission. One man lamented: "Women today sometimes refuse to obey their husbands. If beaten, they just run away to towns."

Giteo-defined gender relationships thus form another hierarchical dimension. Meru is both a senior-dominated and a male-dominated society. Old men reap the greatest benefits from giteo. Giteo guarantees their control of property, gives them influence in meetings, and recognition on the roads. Age-related giteo ascribes some deference and services to old women, but the benefits are more limited and less extensive than those granted to men.

#### Giteo: Past and Present

The "past," as used here, refers to what informants remember from their youth and what others have told them about the old Meru traditions. The past, therefore, represents an idealized version of the way things used to be. Using that definition as a baseline, past and present giteo behavior will be compared.

First, elderly informants do appear to idealize the past, especially when referring to the behavior of youth.

The elderly strongly believe, probably with justification, that in the past people knew and met their social obligations with much more consistency.

Current giteo ideals certainly have their roots in the cultural past. The following account offers some insight into this idealized view of old age. This narrative is a compilation of vignettes related by several elderly informants about growing old in traditional households:

M'Mukuru awakened in his small round hut and moved the goats from beneath his bed to stake them out in the grassy compound. As soon as his daughter-in-law saw him stirring, she sent her son, a lad of about seven or eight hurrying over with a gourd of ucuru (gruel), a sour mixture of ground millet.

As he sat quietly drinking his gruel, he recalled the evening before with pleasure. His grandsons and some of their age-mates, almost warrior age now, came and brought firewood for his evening fire. They sat together around the fire. He had advised them to avoid girls until after they were circumcised and told them again the story of Komenjue and the flight from Mbwa.

Just as they left, his eldest grandson who had only been married a short while came and brought him a small packet of tobacco. He sat quietly until the old man asked him to speak. He was having a small problem with his wife. He felt his firstborn son was big enough now to carry a small gourd of water from the stream. That meant he would be able to go in to his wife again. But, the wife was hesitating, not yet ready to send the son to the stream. His grandson was impatient. What should he do? How could he express his feelings to his wife in a proper manner? M'Mukuru had told the young man to find the wife alone and comment about how big the child had grown, how strong he was. That would let the wife know his thoughts in a way that did not embarrass her or cause a confrontation. M'Mukuru would be watching to see how that situation developed.

After finishing his gruel, M'Mukuru took his staff and began to walk up to the men's gaaru for a clan meeting. On the way there, a young warrior met him on the pathway. As the young man got within a few yards, he stepped off into the bushes to the side of the pathway until M'Mukuru was passed, then went on his

way. At the meeting, people of several age grades were present. M'Mukuru was among the eldest, no longer one of the ruling elders, but now one of the ritual elders. When he rose to speak, everyone was quiet, waiting patiently as he carefully chose his words and spoke his mind.

Of course, actual behavior in contemporary life does not conform to this ideal. Youth often overlook overt expressions of respect such as moving off the path for an elder and not talking with members of the opposite sex in public. The basic ideal of strict obedience and submission to seniors has weakened. One old woman complained:

In the past, even if an elder brother told a person something, they would have to listen, much less the mother. Now, children say this is the 'new Kenya' and they don't have to listen.

Even the fundamental ideal of caring for dependent parents is occasionally ignored. Another informant lamented:

Daughters-in-law used to willingly care for their husband's mother. Now they often call them names and abuse them, convincing their husbands to neglect them. I heard a young woman referring to her husband's mother the other day as a swine, saying her pig had no water.

Strict avoidance taboos are also breaking down now. Men even greet their mothers-in-law and shake hands with them.

Respondents singled out several possible causes for the decline in proper giteo. One particularly perceptive informant shared the following analysis:

Giteo is missing these days. Children are reared differently now. In the past, old men had a kiarago (an outside fireplace) where boys used to come and sit for advice and stories. Old women kept the young women in the kitchen advising them. Now the modern kiarago is the sitting room where men and women are mixed and advice-giving does not occur. Also, children go off to

school and are not around. Because of these changes, children are not learning giteo or other traditions.

Moreover, changes in contemporary social life would make certain behavior--most notably, avoidance behavior--difficult to implement, even if the will remained to do so. Many men no longer have separate huts. Families often have sitting rooms where both sexes gather in the evenings. Fathers and daughters may have to travel in the same vehicle together to school or elsewhere. Given such conditions, behavioral norms must change.

On the other hand, many of the underlying principles associated with giteo persist in contemporary behavior and thought. Non-verbal evidences of avoidance and familiarity relationships remain in body language and interaction patterns. Take, for example, the behavior of mothers and sons. I once accompanied an adult male visiting his mother after a long absence. Entering her house, he greeted her in Kimeru. She was obviously very pleased he had come, a smile of quiet pleasure on her face. They shook hands, avoiding direct eye contact, and talked briefly. We then sat in the sitting room while she prepared food. After the food was ready, she came in and visited a little more while we ate, sitting at a discrete distance across the room. Following the meal, he left and spent the duration of the evening with an age-mate.

Likewise, the familiar relationship between alternating generations continues very strong, much stronger in fact

than avoidance relationships. Grandparents remain the primary child-rearers in many instances. Although advising has lost some of its regularity and constancy, grandparents are the preferred source of advice about sex and interpersonal disagreements.

Thus, relationships today are still defined by varying degrees of physical and psychological distance. Conducting oneself in accordance with those guidelines shows giteo. In that sense, avoidance behavior remains part of the contemporary giteo which defines and delineates relationships.

#### Current Care-Giving Networks

The carefully delineated reciprocal responsibilities symbolized in the term giteo form the basis for all social interaction in Meru. Relationship, respect, and a sense of mutual responsibility are inseparable. Naturally, then, giteo shapes the patterns of interaction between young and old, including the support network for old people in southern Meru.

Giteo principles identify who is obligated to care for a dependent elderly person and the care those individuals are expected to give. Giteo does not require that an individual act the same towards all old people. Rather, custom strictly delineates appropriate behavior for each category of relationship, defining the responsibilities each person bears for another.

How qiteo guidelines actually impact behavior is reflected in the data on care-giving. In order to find out care-giving patterns, elderly informants were asked to specify who assists them with five basic life needs--food, clothing, shelter, water/wood, and medical expenses.

The responses to this question are presented in Table 6.1 below:

TABLE 6.1: PRIMARY CARE-GIVERS

	Male	Female	Total
<b>Food Support:</b>			
Self-Reliant	94.1%	83.1%	87.7%
Sons	3.9	14.1	9.8
Daughters	0.0	2.8	1.6
Relatives	2.0	0.0	0.8
Neighbors	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Clothing Support:</b>			
Self-Reliant	76.4	58.2	65.7
Sons	7.3	26.6	18.7
Daughters	14.6	12.7	13.4
Relatives	1.8	2.5	2.2
Neighbors	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Shelter Support:</b>			
Self-Reliant	76.4	40.0	55.4
Sons	12.7	41.3	29.2
Daughters	5.5	13.3	10.0
Relatives	3.6	0.0	1.5
Neighbors	1.8	5.3	3.8
<b>Water/Wood Support:</b>			
Self-Reliant	85.0	67.6	75.4
Sons	11.7	27.0	20.1
Daughters	1.7	2.7	2.2
Relatives	1.7	0.0	0.7
Neighbors	0.0	2.7	1.5
<b>Medical Support:</b>			
Self-Reliant	80.4	55.7	66.1
Sons	13.7	38.6	28.1
Daughters	3.9	5.7	5.0
Relatives	2.0	0.0	0.8
Neighbors	0.0	0.0	0.0

The sources of support identified by informants were summarized into five categories: self, sons, daughters, relatives, and neighbors. The category of "self" includes the respondent, his or her spouse, and hired laborers. The classification of "sons" encompasses sons, sons' wives, and sons' children. "Daughters" alludes simply to daughters and their families. The category of "relatives" refers to any relatives other than children and grandchildren. This grouping includes all members of the extended family. In the sample, however, the only relatives other than children regularly assisting old people were brothers (or a brother's family). The final category, "neighbors" includes individual neighbors and community organizations, such as churches and women's groups.

#### Self-Reliance

One clear fact which arises in the above data is that elderly largely provide for themselves. This behavior reflects giteo ideals. Giteo encourages an old person to remain self-reliant and to participate in interdependent reciprocal interaction for as long as possible.

Despite wishes and efforts to the contrary, however, many elderly reach a point when they can no longer care for themselves. The disabled and very old need care from some source. Long-term giteo-defined reciprocal patterns determine those liable for providing that care.

In keeping with the findings of other recent African aging research (Peil 1985, 1988; Dorjahn 1989; Cattell 1990), the kin group in Meru provides primary support for dependent elderly. Responsible individuals include children (primarily sons), extended family (mainly brothers), and, to a much lesser degree, the community as a whole.

### Sons

Giteo customs anticipate that children, those with the largest life-long reciprocal debt, will serve as care-givers to elderly parents should the latter become dependent. Original giteo principles specified that youngest sons should care for dependent parents. These days educational achievement and/or off-farm jobs may take the youngest son away from home. In those cases, parents live with older sons. More and more informants now say they will rely on "just any child who will help." In reality, however, nearly all old people continue to depend on one of their sons.

The figures in Table 6.1 show that practically all assistance provided to dependent elderly comes from their children. Furthermore, in accord with giteo ideals, sons and their families offer far more care than daughters. For example, 9.8% of elderly receive food assistance from their sons; only 1.6% get food regularly from their daughters. Sons and their families provide water and wood for 20.1% of old people while daughters assist in only 2.2% of cases. Only in the area of clothing needs does the assistance

received from daughters (13.4%) approach that received from sons (18.7%).

Respondents explained this greater dependence on sons as a matter of convenience. Daughters marry, move away and live with their husbands' families. Since they live afar in many cases, daughters only visit sporadically. Furthermore, daughters become part of their husbands' families; their primary care-giving responsibility lies with their husbands' parents. Only if her husband is willing and able and if the distance between the homes is not too great, can a daughter provide significant assistance to her parents. Daughters, when they visit, bring gifts such as clothing, sugar or other small consumer items, but the main burden of care falls on the son with whom the parent resides.

The degree of reliance on sons is further emphasized in the residential arrangements introduced in Table 6.2 below. Almost all elderly live near one of their sons. All who are either partially or totally dependent, barring two exceptions (both widows), live adjacent to their children or grandchildren, often within the same compound.

TABLE 6.2: CO-RESIDENCE WITH CHILDREN

Residential Arrangement	Male	Female	Total
Adjacent to adult children	67.3%	88.5%	79.2%
Active spouse; dependent children	29.0	5.7	16.0
Alone	3.6	2.9	3.2
No spouse; dependent children	0.0	2.9	1.6
Total	99.9	100.0	100.0

A substantial majority (79.2%) live adjacent to adult children in a good position to receive care when needed. This category also includes two childless old men who live with their brothers' children. An additional 16% of elderly live with an active spouse and dependent children. Most of these are males with younger spouses. Only 4.8% of elderly in the sample live a long distance from adult children. Of those few who do live alone, most have adult children somewhere in the same sub-location. However, their own immediate family responsibilities prevent these individuals from providing substantial daily care to their aging parents. Thus, co-residence with adult children is an essential prerequisite for adequate care.

Ideally, given giteo values, support in old age should develop the way it did for 76 year old Ciambuba and her 90 year old husband Njoka.<sup>6</sup> Their two sons and daughter are all well educated; one son even completed university. The university-educated son works in a government ministry and lives away from home. The other son, a teacher, lives adjacent. The daughter is married and lives in another district. Ciambuba and Njoka live with the family of their university-educated son.

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<sup>6</sup> The pseudonyms Ciambuba and Njoka are common names in the area. The names of all informants mentioned are changed to protect their privacy.

They maintain very cordial relations with all their children, and interact extensively and regularly with the son's wife and grandchildren with whom they stay. Ciambuba feels that relationship is mutually beneficial. The son's wife does most of the cooking for them and takes them to the hospital if they have medical problems. The grandchildren bring them water and firewood. Ciambuba takes care of her grandchildren while the daughter-in-law works and supervises hired laborers when needed. Their other son and daughter help out with gifts of clothing and other small items from time to time.

Njoka gave most of his four acres to his sons; he retains only a small portion of land on which he and his wife cultivate a little food. Njoka says he contributed enough to his sons by providing them land and livestock and by paying the dowry for their marriages.

Both Ciambuba and Njoka feel their old age has worked out very well. They can still do a lot of things for themselves, but their children willingly assist them when they need it. Neither fear becoming more dependent. They are confident that their children will care for them quite well.

#### Brothers and Others

Outside the immediate family, ideal community expectations of care-giving responsibility closely trace the lines of kinship. Brothers and their families generally

care for elderly without children, say the vast majority of respondents. Indeed, this expectation was usually realized, though the quality of care was inconsistent. As noted above in Table 6.1, a small number of elderly receive assistance from "relatives," in other words, from brothers and their families.

Perhaps the best example of concern and assistance provided by a brother's family is that given to an 88 year old man who spent most of his life working in Nairobi and "never bothered" to marry and have children. He lives in a small but neatly constructed house in the middle of the compound of his deceased brother's family. He is always well-dressed and his basic needs are adequately met. However, the old man appeared to suffer from loneliness. His brother's children spent little time with him and he seldom had visitors like many other old men around. He seemed absorbed within himself and more or less waiting to die.

The only other childless dependent old man in the research area also lives with his brother's family. He likewise never married, though he spent most of his life in Meru. He is estranged from his brother, but still lives with his brother's son. That son is quite poor. He owns only a half acre of land and regularly does casual day labor to supplement his income. The old man complains a lot about the care he receives. He says he can't eat the hard food

they prepare and often survives on bananas alone. Yet, he is involved in the life of the family and community. He watches the children of the family while the others work. The little ones call him cucu (grandfather). He regularly visits a nearby age-mate. In evidence to his discontent, however, he plans to go soon to an old age home in Nairobi run by the Salvation Army. The local SA church came and asked if he would like to go and he agreed. He is the only person in all three communities who has gone to such a place. Despite his complaints and obvious dissatisfaction, he nevertheless appears to receive a reasonable amount of care given the economic status of his hosts.

Childless women, or even women without sons, constitute a more serious problem. Giteo specifies that widows are the responsibility of their husband's lineages. Ideally, a widow lives with her sons and farms a small portion of her husband's land as long as she is able.

A widow with only daughters will also be given land for subsistence by her husband's family. However, she will find it hard to get help with daily care and labor if she becomes disabled. An example of a woman in this situation is a 90 year old widow, still fairly active, who has only two daughters, both married and residing relatively far away. She still manages to farm one acre of her deceased husband's land, surviving mostly by cultivating food crops and selling bananas. Her daughters visit her a couple of times a month

and help out however they can. Her grandson built her house for her and helps her with medical expenses. She asks her neighbors to carry her firewood and water when she is unable to do it for herself. She is very old and weak and would like to reduce her subsistence activities, but there is no one to do them for her.

Though no childless women were encountered in the research communities, their predicament would be even worse. Informants say childless widows would be allowed to use a small portion of their husband's land to farm, but for labor and daily care needs, such a person would depend almost entirely on their neighbors and community members. The primary constraint faced by both childless widows and widows without sons is that of labor and daily care. No one is available to assist them regularly in times of ill health and disability.

Women who are divorced or estranged from their husbands face a very different problem. They must return to their family of origin in search of the means of subsistence. Often, this means going back to their brothers and asking for land. Understandably, brothers do not always welcome these errant sisters back home with open arms. Whatever is given to the sister and her children is taken from the brother and his children. These days, land scarcity compounds this issue.

In one instance, a divorced woman of 58 has been carrying on a quasi-legal battle with her brother for several years over ownership of a small portion of inherited land. She currently uses slightly over one-half acre. The brother wants to seize that acreage from her; she is trying to get more from him. They have even come to physical blows over the matter. Only because she is very tough and tenacious has she managed to keep control of the small portion she currently occupies. Another 45 year old woman, divorced for 10 years, now lives with her three unmarried daughters on a portion of land large enough only for a hut and a few vegetables. This land has been loaned to her by the local coffee cooperative. She originally lived on land belonging to her brother, but he ran her off, burning her hut to the ground.

In summary, the extended family safety net for childless men is relatively intact. For a childless widow on good terms with her husband's family or a widow with daughters, the probability of obtaining the means and resources of production remains very high. She will nearly always be given a small portion of land on which to erect a hut and grow some food. As long as she is active, she can survive, though probably not in ease or comfort. If she reaches an age when assistance with labor and daily care become vital, her life will become very marginal. Neighbors and daughters with family responsibilities far away will

find it hard to care for her. For a divorced woman with children, the battle becomes one of obtaining the resources of production from her brothers. Her life and that of her children will be extremely difficult in almost all instances. Arguably, a childless divorced woman will be in the greatest predicament of all, having no socially approved access to either labor or land.

#### Sources of Community Assistance

Community assistance as defined by giteo offers little more than symbolic expressions of respect and deference--a little wood, a gift of tobacco, a small packet of sugar. Neighbors are not expected to offer primary daily care to an abandoned old person. Community assistance is by nature sporadic and unorganized. Sometimes a women's group will build a house for an old woman. Perhaps a local church will take some food or temporarily organize labor assistance. As in the case of the divorced woman mentioned above, a local land-holding organization may release token plot for someone with no where to stay. But, neighbors, churches and other local groups seem to lack the will and organization to provide extensive daily care over a period of years.

Table 6.1 reveals that only a very small minority of elderly report receiving significant assistance from neighbors or community organizations. The major area of community relief comes in the form of housing, with four percent reporting shelter assistance, reflecting the

activity of women's groups. Less than two percent of old people say they receive help from neighbors with important daily care needs such as water and wood.

In practice, therefore, most extra-familial community assistance is meager and manages only to prolong bare survival. Proper giteo requires a person to marry, have sons and daughters, provide for them, and accumulate some property. Those who fail to follow the path may find the last miles of life to be rather rocky.

Take Rose, for example. Rose is an disabled 86 year old widow with two surviving children, a son and a daughter. Both live outside her community. Her son invited her to go and stay with him. But, she has lived in this community all her life; all her memories are tied to this land. She chose to remain here. When land was demarcated just a few years ago, her husband's land was given to others. She now lives in tiny clearing in the middle of someone else's maize field. She inhabits a small, run-down hut and cultivates a few rows of beans just outside her door. She depends on neighbors for nearly everything, since her children rarely visit. The eaves of her hut are always stacked high with firewood. She usually has a small packet of tobacco near her. But, she complains that those who bring her food are unreliable and often never come. Once, when we passed by at three in the afternoon, she said she had not eaten since noon of the previous day. She leads a very solitary

existence. She doesn't even have the strength to climb the hill to the market some 200 meters away. The only company she gets is neighbor children sent by their parents to haul her water, carry her firewood, or bring her a meal.

Relatively strong reciprocal bonds bind elderly with children to those off-spring. On the other hand, those who have no children, or who have tenuous ties to them, often face impoverishment, hard work, and loneliness in old age, despite the support network spawned by giteo.

#### Formal Non-Giteo Assistance

Theoretically, since southern Meru is part of a modern African nation, formal support structures independent of traditional giteo could step in and offer humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, elderly in these communities, except for a few retirees, can expect little help from the government or NGOs. The Ministry of Social Development carries out a few social programs that involve elderly in other parts of the region, but no official activity was encountered in the three research communities. NGOs, such as Helpage Kenya, are active in other parts of Kenya, but do nothing at the present time in southern Meru. The closest old-age homes are far away in Murang'a District (Kikuyuland) and Nairobi. We visited two homes for destitute elderly in Murang'a and found only one resident from Meru District. From the three research communities, only the man mentioned above who is moving to the Salvation Army Home in Nairobi

has had any contact with such institutions. In pragmatic terms, the safety net provided by formal organizations here is virtually non-existent. No old person in the sample reported receiving any assistance from the government.

Thus, in actuality, if qiteo-based reciprocity fails, an old person who become dependent has few places to turn.

#### Demography and Care-Giving

The care-giving behavior described above takes place within the broader socio-natural system. One aspect of that system which directly impacts care-giving is the demographic composition of the community.<sup>7</sup>

#### Elderly Support Ratio

Of primary concern is the relative number of elderly compared to those who provide support for them, or the elderly support ratio. The elderly support ratio comprises part of the overall dependency ratio. The dependency ratio attempts to measure the overall support burden shouldered by productive members of any population. The standard dependency ratio assumes that everyone between zero and fourteen years of age and everyone over 60 is inactive and all those between fifteen and 59 are active (United Nations 1985). Since most elderly in the research communities contribute to the welfare of their households well into their 70s or longer, for the purposes of this research only

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<sup>7</sup> The overall demographic profile of the research communities was presented in Table 4.2 and discussed in chapter 4.

those between zero and fourteen and over 70 were designated as inactive.

Using these parameters, every economically active person supports approximately two dependents. However, old people comprise a minuscule percentage of these dependents; the elderly support ratio, using the above formula, is 14.9 active persons for every dependent old person.

The current strain placed on the working population by caring for dependent elderly, therefore, appears minimal. Unfortunately, these low support ratios may mislead. Complex issues surround care-giving to dependent elderly. Though comparatively few old people live in these communities, over half the respondents between 25 and 54 claim to assist an old person regularly (either daily or weekly) and 26% say they give significant care to an elderly person on a daily basis. Furthermore, 78% of respondents in the aging attitudes survey find caring for dependent old people to be a heavy burden. Such care-giving, they say, interferes with their work and consumes a large amount of resources.

A puzzle arises. Why should care-giving to so few elderly be perceived as an onerous burden, especially since many old people provide most of their own care? Such a small burden shared by so many should not be significantly felt. Part of the answer lies in overall economic conditions. Community resources are stretched to the limits

due to low coffee prices, high school fees, and rising costs of living. Stories of sons and daughters who drop out of school for want of fees are common. Given these rather stark realities, caring for elderly, few though they may be, creates a burden. Secondly, usually the family of one child, nearly always a son, acts as the primary care-giver for a dependent parent. When an old person reaches extreme old age and can no longer feed and dress themselves or even go to the toilet alone, the weight placed on the care-giving family becomes extremely great.

#### Elderly Sex Ratios and Care-Giving

Elderly women outnumber elderly men worldwide. The Kenya censuses of 1969 and 1979, however, both recorded more men than women over age 54. Kinsella (1989) questioned the accuracy of this data because of higher life expectancy figures for Kenyan women (63 as opposed to 59). The current data adds weight to his suspicions. A sex ratio (the number of men per 100 women) was found of 83 men per 100 women for those 65 and over. That figure coincides closely with the one reported for sub-saharan Africa (84 per 100 for those over 60) in other demographic studies (United Nations 1985). For those over 75 years of age, a dramatic difference, a sex ratio of only 50 men per 100 women, was noted.

This difference in sex ratio means that far larger numbers of women will reach a time when they must depend on the care of others. Moreover, not only are women twice as

likely to live into extreme old age, Meru social organization and ideology places men in a position to acquire property and a younger spouse on which to rely in old age. Many more women than men will, therefore, necessarily require care from their children or their neighbors in old age. In this sense, women depend more than men on the perpetuation of strong reciprocal giteo relationships.

#### Out-Migration and Support for Elderly

Other studies suggest that the migration of younger and better educated males to urban areas erodes the prime support base for rural elderly (United Nations 1985). The overall sex ratio in these communities, along with ethnographic data, reveals that such migration is a reality in southern Meru. However, out-migration has not yet brought accompanying deterioration in the support system for elderly. Commonly, families have some of their members living elsewhere and working; almost never do all children in a family work away. Additionally, the wives and children of off-farm workers often live on the farm; these family members customarily provide daily care for elderly even when the husband is home.

#### Future Demographic Trends and Support

Although the ratio of old to young presently remains quite small in southern Meru, demographic data support the prediction that absolute numbers of elderly in Africa will

increase as larger cohorts reach old age, even if percentages remain stable (United Nations 1985; Kinsella 1988). The number of elderly, especially those in the very old age group that require extensive care, is rising dramatically. Increases should not swamp community resources any time in the near future, but expanding care needs will be felt.

Furthermore, the elderly support ratio in these communities may become less favorable. Barring major changes in subsistence, land scarcity limits the number of additional households that can derive a satisfactory livelihood from this region. Inevitably, more and more offspring will migrate elsewhere in search of employment and land. The number of elderly will continue to climb as larger cohorts reach old age and as urban employed community members return to their rural homes for retirement. The result will be more and more old people depending on fewer young and middle-aged family members.

#### Summary

The underlying principles of reciprocity and responsible relationship, symbolized as qiteo, guide nearly all human interaction in southern Meru. Given the emphasis on seniority in those reciprocal principles, qiteo serves as a buffer for the rights of elderly in the face of social and demographic change. Nevertheless, even the extensive social ties and emotional bonds of qiteo are not entirely

inclusive. A great deal of variation exists in the quality of care actually provided to dependent elderly.

Furthermore, the interaction of giteo values with changes in demography and other systemic factors create a complex and dynamic context for aging in southern Meru.

The final two chapters will look at the relationship between the reciprocal behavior of old people, both life-long and current behavior, and their success in achieving the culturally desirable outcomes of old age, including the assistance of their children, as anticipated by the principles of giteo.

## CHAPTER 7 ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR IN OLD AGE

As was shown in the preceding two chapters, aging in southern Meru occurs within a complex system of social reciprocity that stretches over the whole life course. A person's obligations and contributions to others do not end with the coming of old age. In Meru, people of all ages are highly interdependent. The ideology of giteo defines those reciprocal obligations, including the way family and community members assist old people and how old people respond. Moreover, social change has altered the meaning of the life course and the expression of giteo.

The present chapter looks at activities of old people within this changing social context. In so doing, focus will be placed especially on those activities which meet reciprocal obligations by contributing to family and community welfare.

### Activities of Old People

"The really old people should do nothing but rest," is a view echoed by many young and middle-aged people in southern Meru. Yet, when we visited feisty old Mukwanjiru, nearly 100 years old and member of the oldest age-set still alive, she sat in the middle of her son's compound, busily peeling a mountain of bananas and tossing them into an

enormous pot for the evening meal. She must start cooking soon, she reports, and can't visit too long. She apologizes for the unclean state of the compound. She has just returned from an extended visit at her other son's homestead six kilometers away. If we come back in a couple of days, the difference will be noticeable, she promises.

Elizabeth, Mukwanjiru's age-mate, lives just down the path. Probably the oldest person on the ridge at almost 105 years of age, Elizabeth was spreading her freshly washed clothes on the grass to dry when we arrived. Another time, we found her shelling corn for the chickens. Old M'Njaji, also belongs to the oldest age-set. Too weak to work, he watches the grandchildren while his younger wife and his son's wives go off to farm.

Just where are all these "resting" old people? How do old people actually spend their time and energy here? Do they in truth "just rest"? Or, do they continue to contribute to social and economic life?

#### Data on Activities

A review of the characteristics of the data base on activities of old people will facilitate deeper exploration of this question. The data base includes both self-reported and observed activities, as well as the results of a time allocation study. Another set of data dealing specifically with dependent elderly is also important to this discussion.

### Self-Reported Activities

First, elderly informants were asked about their economic, domestic, and social activities. Tables 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 below summarize these responses. Since questions about activities were open-ended, most individuals reported several activities. For example, a person could list farming a cash crop, farming a food crop, and animal husbandry as economic activities. The percentages reported in these tables, therefore, do not represent a frequency distribution, but simply reflect the number of respondents who listed each activity as part of their usual routine.

TABLE 7.1: SELF-REPORTED ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Reported Activity	Males		Females		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Farming Food Crop	31	55.4	64	85.3	95	72.5
Animal Husbandry	47	83.9	48	64.0	95	72.5
Farming Cash Crop	47	83.9%	35	46.7%	82	62.6%
Selling Food at Mkt	1	1.8	12	16.0	13	9.9
Off-Farm Job	7	12.5	2	2.7	9	6.9
None	3	5.4	5	6.6	8	6.1
Total	56	N/A	75	N/A	131	N/A

TABLE 7.2: SELF-REPORTED DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES

Reported Activity	Males		Females		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Food Preparation	10	17.9%	65	86.7%	75	57.3%
Sweep/Clean	25	44.6	44	58.7	69	52.7
Collect Water/Wood	14	25.0	41	54.7	55	42.0
Wash Clothes	2	3.6	22	29.3	24	18.3
General Repairs	3	5.4	5	6.6	8	6.1
None	18	32.1	0	0.0	18	13.7
Total	56	N/A	75	N/A	131	N/A

TABLE 7.3: SELF-REPORTED SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Reported Activity	Males		Females		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Church	35	62.5%	49	65.3%	84	64.1%
Advise/Arbitrate	20	35.7	22	29.3	42	32.1
Women's Groups	0	0.0	31	41.3	31	23.7
Childcare	5	8.9	24	32.0	29	22.1
Clan Meetings	20	35.7	0	0.0	20	15.3
Committee Member	20	35.7	0	0.0	20	15.3
Social Events	8	14.3	3	4.0	11	8.4
Visiting	3	5.4	7	9.3	10	7.6
Midwife	0	0.0	3	4.0	3	2.3
None	2	3.8	2	2.6	4	3.1
Total	56	N/A	75	N/A	131	N/A

#### Long-Term Observations

In addition to asking elderly people what they do, we also observed and recorded their activity when we arrived at their homestead to interview them. The majority of these arrivals were unannounced, though some visits were scheduled in advance. Since informants were randomly chosen for interviewing, these observations include a representative sample of elderly from the community. Furthermore, these observations cover a very broad time span, stretching over an entire year.

However, observation times were not randomly assigned. When we made these observations, our primary goal was to visit the person at a time when we could interview them. Therefore, we avoided Saturday afternoons, a common time for women's group meetings and community social events. We also avoided Sunday mornings because many people attend church. Furthermore, we did very few interviews in the early morning

hours when people perform essential household chores such as carrying water for the day. Neither did these observations include the evening hours which are often filled with social activities. As a result of this lack of systematic coverage, some activities may be under-represented.

Table 7.4 below reports the frequency distribution for these observations. We recorded valid observations for 56 males and 68 females. Reported percentages reflect the number of persons observed in a particular activity.

TABLE 7.4: OBSERVED ACTIVITIES

Observed Activity	Males		Females		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Economic:</b>						
Farming Food Crop	5	8.9%	15	22.0%	20	16.1%
Animal Husbandry	13	23.2	5	7.4	18	14.5
Farming Cash Crop	16	28.6	1	1.5	17	13.7
Selling Food at Mkt	1	1.8	3	4.4	4	3.2
Non-Farm Job	3	5.4	0	0.0	3	2.4
<b>Domestic:</b>						
Food Preparation	1	1.8	19	27.9	20	16.1
Collect Water/Wood	0	0.0	3	4.4	3	2.4
Sweep/Clean	0	0.0	3	4.4	3	2.4
<b>Social:</b>						
Childcare	2	3.6	8	11.8	10	8.1
Visiting	7	12.5	3	4.4	10	8.1
Advise	1	1.8	0	0.0	1	0.8
Committee Meeting	1	1.8	0	0.0	1	0.8
<b>Self-Care:</b>						
Rest\Sleep\Eat	6	10.6	8	11.8	14	11.4
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Economic activities account for 49.9% of observed behavior, domestic activities for 20.9%, and social activities for 17.8%. The remaining 11.3% of observed

activities fall into the realm of rest, relaxation, eating and the like.

#### Time Allocation Study (TAS) Observations

The time allocation study consists of 208 observations of fifteen men and eighteen women over 55 years old from Mwonge Sub-Location. The observations were made by two observers over a two week period in early May of 1991. They observed participants at 45 minute intervals between 8:00 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. every day except for Sunday.

Participants were randomly selected and stratified by age and sex. In all, we made ninety observations (43.3%) of male participants and 118 observations of female participants (56.7%). Table 7.5 below gives the percentage of observations by age.

TABLE 7.5: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF TAS OBSERVATIONS

Age of Participants	Number of Observations	Percentage
55 to 64	52	25.0%
65 to 74	61	29.3
75 to 84	43	20.7
85 plus	52	25.0
Totals:	208	100.0

Except for a slight under-representation of participants in the 75 to 84 age group, observations are very well distributed.

We also randomly assigned times of observation to each participant. To make certain that we observed every participant at all times of the day, we divided our

observational day into three segments--8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., 12:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.-- and assigned an equal number of observation times per segment to each person. Each participant was observed an average of six times during the two week period: twice in the morning between 8:00 and 12:30, twice in the afternoon between 12:30 and 5:00, and twice in the evening between 5:00 and 9:30. We made 73 observations (35.1%) in the morning, 70 observations (33.7%) in the afternoon, and 65 observations (31.3%) in the evening. Of the total number of 208 observations, 140 (70.4%) were direct observations of participants. In 59 cases (29.7%) other household members reported the activity of participants who were away from the homestead at the time of observation.

Unfortunately, the small number of total observations limits the study's overall importance. Moreover, we made all observations during a two week time period in early May. The study, therefore, does not take into account the variation in agricultural activities during the course of the crop year. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the time allocation study serves as a valuable objective check on less systematic long-term observations and on the reports of interview informants.

Table 7.6 summarizes the TAS results. Activities are grouped according to five categories. The content of each category parallels those used in the tables above. Since

the TAS reveals the overall amount of time old people spend in different types of activities, percentages in this table refer not to percentages of individuals, but to percentages of observations. For example, for 33.9% of the time, females were observed in an economic activity.

TABLE 7.6: TIME ALLOCATION OBSERVATIONS

Observed Behavior	Males	Females	Total
Economic Activities	50.6%	33.9%	41.0%
Social Activities	24.7	16.5	20.0
Domestic Activities	2.4	32.2	19.5
Self-Care\Relaxation	21.2	13.9	17.0
Receiving Care\Ill	1.2	3.5	2.5
Totals:	100.1	100.0	100.0

Cash crop cultivation accounts for slightly more than one-third of the observed economic activities (35.4%), caring for livestock for an additional one-fourth (23.1%), followed by food crop cultivation (17.1%). The remainder of participants observed in an economic activity were away from home on business or assisting relatives elsewhere with farm work. Interestingly, men were observed in economic activities more often than women. However, since the results are based on a single two week period, fluctuations in the agricultural cycle account for some of this finding. Early May comes just prior to coffee harvest and is not a time for extensive food crop cultivation. Furthermore, men are more likely to take care of cattle and other livestock,

making it appear that their economic activity is more extensive.

Food preparation accounts for 74.4% of domestic activities. We also observed a small number of participants collecting water or wood, sweeping, washing clothes and guarding the homestead.

Childcare or talking with grandchildren accounts for 35% of social activities observed and visiting with friends and age-mates away from the homestead accounted for another 35%. We observed 17.5% of participants talking with other adult family members. One person was away checking on a sick relative and two others were away paying school fees. We observed no one advising, telling stories, or attending a meeting.

The activities categorized as self-care and relaxation include eating (29.4% of self-care observations), resting (23.5%), sleeping (14.7%), reading or listening to the radio (14.7%), bathing or changing clothes (11.8%). Only four observations were made of people who were ill or receiving care, two had gone to hospital and two were sick in bed at home.

#### Data on Declining Elderly

The final data set introduced here relates to the activities of a group termed "declining elderly." Only after old people begin to experience poor health and physical weakness do their activities show noticeable

changes from those of younger adults. Therefore, in order to produce a finer grained analysis, frequency distributions were computed for the responses of respondents who exhibited signs of growing dependence on others.

Two criteria delimit this group. First, an examination of responses in the total sample of elderly over 55 years of age revealed that very few people younger than age 70 rely significantly on others for daily needs. Therefore, all individuals over the age of 70 years were included. Secondly, anyone less than 70 years who showed signs of approaching dependency were also incorporated.

The concept of "dependency" was operationalized by elders' own self-rating of self-reliance, their self-rating of health, and whether or not they receive regular assistance from others on five basic survival items--food, clothing, shelter, water/wood, and medical care. If individuals rated themselves less than three out of five on the self-rating scales and/or received assistance on three or more survival items, they were categorized as declining elderly also.

In all, seventy-eight elderly fell into this classification, of which only seven were less than 70 years old. The youngest was 62 years of age; the oldest, 100 years old. The mean age of the group was 79.5. Approximately one-half (48.7%) were married and the same percentage were widowed. One person had been divorced;

another had never married. Given the demographic distribution by sex at this age, females significantly outnumber males, 64.1% to 35.9% respectively.

Both self-reported and long-term observation data for declining elderly are summarized in the following tables. In compiling this analysis, elders' self-reported economic and domestic activities were divided into five categories based on vigor. These categories, along with representative activities, are: (1) Inactive: no activities at all; (2) Sedentary: sorting coffee beans, crafts, peeling bananas, washing, cooking for oneself; (3) Light: weeding near the house, tending animals, sweeping and cleaning, occasionally cooking for the family; (4) Normal: regular cultivation and harvesting--including going to lower shambas, cutting and carrying grass, cooking regularly for the family, collecting wood and water; and (5) Heavy: tilling or digging the soil for planting, grinding grain for gruel, carrying heavy loads. Data are presented in the tables according to a continuum of vigor, from least vigorous to the most.

TABLE 7.7: SELF-REPORTED ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, DECLINING ELDERS

Vigor of Activity	Percentage of Observations
Inactive	11.5%
Sedentary	7.7
Light	37.2
Moderate	38.5
Heavy	5.1
Total:	100.0

The analysis of the domestic activities of declining elders omits males. They seldom participate in domestic activities due to the cultural division of labor. The results of the analysis of domestic activities is presented in Table 7.8.

TABLE 7.8: SELF-REPORTED DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN

Vigor of Activity	Percentage of Observations
Inactive	4.0%
Sedentary	12.0
Moderate	32.0
Normal	46.0
Heavy	6.0
Total:	100.0

Self-reported social activities of declining elderly are summarized in Table 7.9. Activity classifications used in this table include: (1) None; no social activities reported; (2) Minimal: going to church, visiting friends, sporadically caring for children, occasionally telling stories; (3) Some: participating in women's groups and community social activities, regularly caring for children, occasionally giving advice; (4) Active: regularly advising, settling disputes, and telling stories within the family, occasionally advising outside the family; (5) Very active: regularly advising and solving disputes in the community, participating in clan and committee meetings, acting as a midwife.

TABLE 7.9: SELF-REPORTED SOCIAL  
ACTIVITIES OF DECLINING ELDERS

Reported Activities	Percentage of Observations
None	5.1%
Minimal	30.8
Some	25.7
Active	23.1
Very Active	15.4
Total:	100.1

Long-term observations of declining elders are summarized in Table 7.10. Categories are self-explanatory given the above explanations.

TABLE 7.10: LONG-TERM OBSERVATIONS OF DECLINING ELDERS

Observed Activity	Percentage of Observations
Resting	23.4%
Social	20.8
Light Econ/Domestic	29.9
Moderate Econ/Domestic	22.1
Heavy Econ/Domestic	3.9
Total:	100.1

#### Activities of Elderly: Analysis and Discussion

The preceding section presents the relevant data base on activities of elderly. These data support four conclusions about the contributory value of activities of elderly: (1) The importance attached to the traditional advisory function of elders has declined. (2) Old people have compensated by emphasizing their role in productive economic and domestic activities until very late in life. (3) Given the declining importance of cultural knowledge,

the need to accumulate property and control the labor of others becomes very critical for old men. (4) Significant differences exist between the contributions of men and women.

### Social Contributions

According to the ecological hypothesis advanced earlier in chapter 2, old age in human populations evolved because of the need to accumulate cultural knowledge and to transmit that knowledge to coming generations. Elderly were best fitted for the task of transmission. As a result, younger adults diverted material and labor resources into extending the life span of valued elders. Thus, the role of knowledge broker and other associated social roles came to be associated closely with elderly in pre-industrial societies.

### Pre-Colonial Social Contributions in Meru

This overall pattern held true for Meru as well. Old people in pre-colonial Meru filled essential ritual and educational roles. Harmonious community life and survival without the elders would have been unthinkable. The elders were repositories of many types of knowledge essential to community life. For example, they knew the relationships among the different miiriga, relationships which determined who could marry whom as well as which communities could be raided for cattle. Mistakes in either realm brought certain supernatural wrath from ancestral guardians (Fadiman 1982).

Elders were charged with the task of transmitting their historical and practical knowledge to the youth, especially to their grandchildren. A boy gained most of his essential education from an elder kinsman, usually his paternal grandfather. From the time a boy's permanent teeth appeared, he accompanied the old man to herd cattle every day, learning various skills. In the evenings, the young man and his friends sat by the old man's fire (the kiarago) and listened to stories about the importance of cleverness, courage, and the consequences of departure from tradition. Young men also received regular instruction from the older men at the gaarus where they went to live before and after circumcision.

Girls spend much of their time with their grandmothers as the older women performed various agricultural and domestic tasks. Their grandmothers taught them about cooking, farming, and childcare. In the evenings, while the boys sat around their grandfather's fire, the girls stayed in the kitchen with their grandmothers, listening to stories, learning songs, and being instructed in proper behavior. A young unmarried woman, as she approached circumcision age, was stringently advised about not "moving with" boys at the dances and later about proper ways to relate to her husband's family.

Moreover, in pre-colonial society, as the social roles associated with the "ruling elder" age grade faded and

political and judicial power dwindled, old men entered the "ritual elder" age grade and began to perform sacrifices and rituals. Those who carried out this function were expected to be more or less sexually inactive; successful in their endeavors (i.e., blessed by God); and known for their wisdom, generosity, and good conduct. Wives of these elders led in the ceremonies which involved women. For example, these elderly women, during times of drought and famine, formed a special council which petitioned God on behalf of the community. Likewise, the head of the extended family (usually the most senior male) and one of his wives officiated at all family sacrifices (Chege 1985).

#### Current Social Contributions in Meru

What is the contemporary importance of the role of elders as educators and cultural specialists? Other cross-cultural gerontologists have observed a significant decline in the importance of the role of advisor and guardian of cultural tradition as societies become more enmeshed in the political, economic, and social institutions of contemporary life. It is essential to determine if that is also the case in Meru.

Generally speaking, most elderly report significant involvement in the social life of their families. Only 3.1% of the elders interviewed said they have no social activities at all. In the long-term observation sample, 17.8% of elderly were actually observed in some type of

social activity. Similarly, 20% of elderly observed in the TAS were involved in a social activity.

However, many of these social activities do not involve cultural knowledge. Some activities make no important contributions to the life of the family and community at all. A high percentage of the social activity of elders simply revolves around recreational visiting with age-mates and passive church attendance.

Other activities, which do contribute, are only peripherally related to the knowledge role. For example, 35.7% of elderly males fill socio-political roles in clan or community committee meetings and about 41% of women are involved regularly in women's groups. Neither type of activity, however, is particularly unique to old age. Socio-political power roles were traditionally assigned to the "ruling elder" age grade, usually those from about 45 to around 60 years of age. Participation in women's groups cuts across all age boundaries.

Childcare constitutes another significant social contribution of elderly. Twenty-two percent of elderly (8.9% of males and 32% of females) report regular childcare activities. Yet, in the long-term observations, only 8.1% (11.8% of females and 3.6% of males) participated in childcare. This figure corresponds closely to the TAS in which 7.1% of observations involved childcare. Furthermore,

childcare is not exclusively associated with old age and only indirectly depends on cultural knowledge.

Turning to those activities which do directly derive from cultural knowledge, advising and arbitrating disputes are by far the most prominent. Arbitrating, especially settling land disputes, draws on elders' knowledge of past history and customs of land use and ownership. Settling domestic disputes and advising people on proper behavior, on the other hand, recognizes elders' experience and wisdom in interpersonal interaction, as well as their understanding of the proper giteo for particular types of relationships. Giteo behavior, for example, played a large role in the following dispute between a man and his wife, related by a 68 year old man:

Towards the end of last year, I attended a clan meeting. The wife of an elderly clansman refused to prepare soft food for him. She is younger and can still eat hard food. We warned her if she repeated that offense, we as clan members would thrash her thoroughly. The problem was solved and up to now there has been no more problem.

Giteo demanded that the younger wife prepare special soft food for her husband. When she refused, he took the matter before the clan elders for arbitration. Acting in accordance with cultural tradition, they ruled in his favor. In many cases, this knowledge of customary behavior helps to preserve order and harmony among family and community members.

In terms of the relative importance of these advisory and conflict-resolution activities, nearly half (46.8%) of the elderly informants say they gave advice at least once during the past year. Approximately one-fifth (18.2%) reported advising the week prior to their interview. Arbitrating disputes runs a close second to advising. About one-half (46.8%) of the elderly men report helping to settle a dispute within the past year. About one-third of the old women helped to settle disputes during the past year, mostly within their families. A lower percentage of elderly women involved in conflict resolution is anticipated since solving disputes is generally regarded as more of a male activity, especially outside the immediate and extended family. Finally, in another knowledge-related activity, about four percent of the old women act as midwives and one male elder is well-known as a herbalist.

On the whole, then, half of all elderly report occasional advice-giving and half the older men report occasional arbitration. Other data, however, suggest that these reports of advisory behavior may be inflated. Only 16% of the young and middle-aged people interviewed said they had been to an elder for advice or arbitration during the past year. In the long-term observation sample, only 1.6% of males and no females were observed advising. In the TAS no one was observed advising. Thus, even for those who do advise, this behavior is quite irregular, occurring only

when disputes, conflicts, and other difficulties arise. The average old person encounters few opportunities to advise or to settle disputes. As one elderly woman said:

As a person gets old, they become less important. Opportunities to advise or settle disputes don't arise that often. If there are no disputes, then you are doing nothing. You have become almost useless.

Activities that promote the continuation of traditions and the transmission of cultural knowledge to youth are even fewer than those such as advising which help preserve harmony. In this realm, grandmothers are more involved than grandfathers. Nearly one-third of old women (31.9%) say they tell stories, sing songs, and show grandchildren how to prepare traditional foods. Only 8.8% of the men say they tell stories to their grandchildren and only seven percent say that they recite oral history. Less than two percent of the young and middle-aged informants said they asked elders about traditions such as oral history or marriage customs during the past year.

Just as was the case for advising and conflict resolution, occasions to recite oral history and tradition are very rare, even for the few who still try to do so. One old man reports sharing with his grandchildren once a year at Christmas when all the family comes together. Others say they pass on the traditions only when school teachers send students out on special social studies assignments. For example, one man of 66 says:

I tell stories to my grandchildren when they come. They usually come when they are instructed to do so at school. The last time was about a year ago.

Even though elderly spend little time engaged in knowledge-related behavior, a high value continues to be placed on the knowledge-transfer role, especially on advising. Paradoxically, though elders report more advisory activity for themselves than do the youth, the youth place a much higher importance on that behavior. A high percentage (92%) of young and middle-aged informants in the attitudes survey say that the most valuable thing that elderly do for their families and communities is to give advise and council, primarily about interpersonal problems such as disagreements between husbands and wives. Moreover, 59% also mentioned the importance of elderly in settling disputes. A few people (13.5%) even mentioned oral history, stories and oaths. The only other role that rivaled advising in perceived importance was that of looking after the children and household while others work; 86% of respondents naming this childcare role as most significant were female, a result that is understandable since these domestic activities reduce the work load of younger women. Without doubt, then, young and middle-aged respondents continue to place significant emotional value on the role of elders as family counselors and advisors, particularly within the context of the extended and immediate family.

The elderly themselves, on the other hand, definitely perceive a decline in the importance of their advisory role. They do not think advising is nearly so significant nowadays. When asked if they are important in preserving customs and traditions, 42.1% of the elderly said "no," primarily because youth were no longer interested, 27.7% said they were useful because they give advice or settle disputes, and 21.4% said that their knowledge of oral history, stories, songs, and other traditions from the past was also valuable.

Significantly, even the minority who see themselves as very active and important in preserving tradition feel thwarted by the youth's lack of interest. Many complain that youth no longer listen to them and do not follow their advice and counsel when given. One man of 68 reports:

As a clan committee member, I help to teach young men about Meru customs and traditions. We would like to counsel them so our country's moral problems would disappear, but they have become disrespectful and ignorant.

A vibrant, dynamic old woman, who was occasionally observed sharing local history with girls from the nearby secondary school, echoes the same lament:

I try to preserve our traditions, but youth today are not willing to learn. They claim this is a 'new Kenya' and they have no time for traditions. I tell stories both to my grandchildren and the students from the secondary school. They come to me every year for stories and local history. I also help them make traditional attire when they are required at school. I try to give advice also, but no one seems to take it very seriously.

Another elderly woman commiserated:

In the past old people were very respected. Once a young person was told something, even by an elder brother, let alone their mother, they would listen. They had to obey. Now, youth are no longer obedient. They say this is the 'new Kenya' and they don't have to listen.

Elderly cite a variety of reasons for the decline that they perceive. Some refer to changes in lifestyle.

Children go away to school and have no opportunity to learn traditions from their grandparents. One 62 year old man says:

I don't give advice much anymore, only when the young ones come to visit me and that is rare. I don't blame them, because school work takes up all their time these days. When they come, I just tell them to study hard and help their parents with the farm work.

Others lament the loss of traditional avenues for advice-giving, the kiarago and the gaaru. An old man in his 90s said:

In the past, young men would come bringing a little wood and sit around my fire in the evenings listening to my advice and counsel. Now they seldom come, and only if they have a serious problem. The behavior of youth now makes me very unhappy. If you see them misbehave and correct them, they don't take you seriously. Only a very few come at all.

Thus, in summary, approximately one-third of elderly still see themselves as important advisors. Advice-giving is even more highly valued by the young and middle-aged. On the negative side, a very small amount of their time is spent in these activities. Furthermore, advising and arbitrating do not center strongly on preservation of tradition and transmission of culture, but on maintaining

harmony within family and community. Emphasis now is placed on relationship counseling and settling disputes over land. The need for elders to administer oaths and perform rituals and sacrifices has largely disappeared. Oral history and traditional customs have lost their appeal for the youth. Only those aspects of the advisory function that relate to the role of counselor are still viable and fill an important need in the community.

#### Elderly as Producers

Given these declines in the importance of cultural knowledge, elderly compensate with other activities. When asked to specify their most important contribution to family and community, only 19.1% said advising was their most important function. A much larger number (63.1%) said providing for their families economically or domestically, either now or in the past, was their most valuable contribution. These results suggest that socio-cultural roles have been replaced by activities that directly contribute to family and community productivity. These productive activities fall into two categories: those that derive from a person's own labor potential and those which depend on a person's control of land, livestock, and the labor of others. Given the overall changes in the socio-natural system, including the changes in the life-course defined earlier, this switch from an emphasis on the

preservation of knowledge to economic productivity is not at all surprising.

First, consider the labor contributions of old people. Very high percentages of old people, both males and females, participate regularly in cultivation, marketing, and animal husbandry. In other words, old people do pretty much the same things that everyone else does. Their activities don't change all that much. For an old person in these farming communities, there is no such thing as "retirement" from active work, just a gradual decline in the amount of work done.

The data supporting this conclusion are extensive. In the first place, only 6.1% of elderly report no significant economic activities. The vast majority claim to be economically active in cash and food crop cultivation and animal husbandry (Table 7.1 above). These claims are fully corroborated by observational data. Long term, non-random, observations (Table 7.4 above) confirm that large percentages of old people do indeed spend a lot of time in economically productive pursuits. Seventy percent of elderly in the total sample were observed in economic or domestic work that directly contributes to household welfare. Another 8.1% were taking care of children, a more sedentary activity that indirectly enhances the labor supply of the household by freeing younger adults. In all, only

21% of elderly were engaged in what could be considered purely social or resting behavior.

Further, TAS results (Table 7.6 above) show elderly people spending slightly over 60% of their time in economic and domestic activities. An additional 8.1% were observed either in child care or caring for sick relatives. Thus, "non-productive" social or resting behavior accounts for 31.9% of TAS observation compared to 21% of the more non-systematic long-term observations. However, since the times of observation in the TAS included the evening hours which are often filled with relaxed social contact, higher percentages of non-productive behavior were expected.

Overall, then, these data convincingly reveal that old people work hard at normal day-to-day farming and household tasks deep into old age. By so doing, they remain largely self-reliant, reducing their drain on communal resources. Just as significantly, their labor and material resources increase the productive potential of their families.

#### Vigor of Activities

These figures do not imply that nothing changes with age. Even if the kinds of things a person does varies little with age, the vigor with which they do them does decline. A person may still cultivate coffee or beans when they are 85 or 90 years old, but instead of farming for most of the day like a younger person, they will only cultivate a couple of hours. The value of an old person's labor is,

therefore, less in most cases than that of a young and vigorous person.

Declines in activity levels occur very gradually. Overt changes in vigor of activity begin to be observable in the late 60s and early 70s. Few healthy people cease being largely self-reliant, however, until their late 80s.

The data on declining elderly, in Tables 7.7 and 7.8 above, support these assertions. The vast majority of declining elderly (largely those over 70 years of age) remain involved in either normal or light levels of productive activity. Only a very few declining elders participate in heavy, demanding labor; all who do so are less than 75 years of age. Moreover, only one inactive person is less than 85 years old. On the other hand, all those over 90 rated themselves as either inactive, sedentary, or light in activity level. No one over 90 years of age was active even at the moderate level.

Long-term observation data of declining elders (Table 7.10) provides similar results. No one over 90 years old and only one person over 85 was observed in an activity judged to be heavy or moderately heavy. The results of the TAS (Table 7.6) are slightly less dramatic, but noticeable. While 37.5% of those 55 to 64, 38.6% of those 65 to 74, and 35.7% of those 75 to 84 were observed in a moderately heavy activity, only 13.5% of those over 85 were observed in such an activity.

This analysis supports the assertion that Meru elderly tend to stay economically and domestically active. It further reveals that the vigor with which these activities are pursued does decline later in life, most noticeably in those over 85 years of age. Most old people, however, overcome physiological declines and continue to work and remain self-reliant until very late in their lives. Even elderly in their late 80s and 90s often perform small tasks around the homestead. The fact that only two percent of those observed in the TAS were rendered inactive due to illness further confirms the ability of elderly to remain self-reliant.

In summary, old people spend most of their time working--though less vigorously than younger adults. Nevertheless, their labor provides most of their own daily needs, frees the labor of others for more demanding tasks, and contributes to the total food and cash flow of the family. Overall, then, despite declining vigor, the net benefit in most cases still flows from the elderly person to the family group.

#### Gender Division of Labor

The existence of a well-defined male/female division of labor in Meru looms large in the contributions elderly men and women make to their families and communities.

In terms of reported economic contributions (Table 7.1), men spend more of their time cultivating a cash crop

than do women (83.9% compared to 46.6%). Women are much more likely to cultivate a food crop (85.3% compared to 55.4% for men). Men are somewhat more absorbed in livestock husbandry (83.9% as opposed to 64.0%) and with off-farm employment.

Observations of behavior over the entire course of research (Table 7.4) confirm differences in male/female economic contributions even more strongly than reported behavior. Only 1.5% of women observed were farming a cash crop compared to 22% who were farming a food crop. Contrarily, 8.9% of men were farming a food crop compared to 28.6% farming a cash crop. Further, men were much more likely to be tending livestock (23.4% compared to 7.4%).

As a result of the gender division of labor, therefore, men and women contribute to their families in different ways. Men have more resources to tender to the household cash flow. Women, on the other hand, contribute directly to the food supply of the household.

The contrast between the contributions of male and female elderly stands out even more clearly in domestic activities. Nearly all women report some domestic activity (Table 7.2). Food preparation is the most often mentioned task (86.7%), followed by cleaning and collecting water and wood. On the other hand, almost one-third of the men (32.1%) disclaim any domestic activity, often saying that such things are the duty of their wives. Those who do

report some domestic activity usually refer to sweeping out their house or occasionally assisting with the collection of wood. In the long term observations (Table 7.4), over one-third of the women (36.7%) were engaged in some type of domestic activity. TAS results (Table 7.6) further confirm that women fulfill nearly all of the domestic needs of the household. Men were observed in domestic activities only 2.4% of the time. Domestic contributions, thus, dramatically increase the value of older women to their families.

Finally, gender differences can also be seen in the effects of social change. Social change has devalued the roles of old men more than the roles of old women. For example, changes in livestock husbandry practices removed a function previously filled by old men. Taking the animals out daily in search of grass and water used to be the prerogative of old men and young boys. However, as common pastureland became unavailable and as more farmers turned to grade cattle, the practice of "zero grazing" became the norm. Now farmers bring grass and water to the animals, not vice-versa. Cutting the grass and carrying it to the homestead is a task mostly done by women. Old men give the animals their feed once it has been brought to the homestead and take them to the cattle dip occasionally, but the overall importance of old men in the process of animal husbandry has been greatly reduced.

### Control of Land and Labor

Another type of productive contribution derives from a person's control over material resources and the labor of others. Age gives astute persons the opportunity to accumulate resources and gain more control over the labor supply. By successfully accumulating resources to use and to give to others, individuals increase their productive value in old age.

Indigenous Meru cultural patterns gave old men a strong gerontocratic power base from which to solidify their control of essential material and human resources. In general, as mentioned above, men of the "ruling elder" age grade were assigned the role of administering local affairs. Furthermore, highly respected men who were past the "ruling elder" age grade continued serve as advisors and observers in men's councils and as adjudicators. In addition to enhancing social prestige, men who used these opportunities well could consolidate their economic position.

In current society, both ruling elder roles and the role of older men in adjudication have been heavily diluted outside the immediate, and occasionally the extended, family. A few respected old men still adjudicate in land and interpersonal disputes. A very small number of elderly men participate in clan meetings and an even smaller number meet rarely in a larger area-wide judicio-political body that decides particularly intractable disputes. However,

government officials have largely taken over judicial and political roles. The decisions of clan elders continue to carry weight only in land disputes. During the time of land demarkation, this role was very important. Even after demarkation, occasional disputes arise between family members over division of inherited land and between neighbors over common borders. But, on the whole, gerontocratic power roles are an anemic shadow of what they used to be.

Despite this loss of power roles in broader society, most men still have the opportunity during the course of their lives to accumulate property and prepare themselves for old age by making sure they have land, coffee, and cattle. Men, thus, have much better opportunities to gain personal control of vital productive resources than do women.

These unequal opportunities are reflected in the land holdings of declining elderly men and women. The mean amount of land owned by elderly men, in the dependent group, is 5.75 acres, with a range of 0 to 22 acres, and a standard deviation of 4.56. The mean amount of land owned by declining elderly women is only 0.29 acres, with a range from 0 to 5.3 acres, and a standard deviation of 1.01. Moreover, when Kendall's tau, a non-parametric correlation statistic, was computed for the variables of gender and acreage owned, the resulting correlation was .73 ( $p=.0001$ ).

This correlation confirms that a strong relationship exists between gender and ownership of land.

However, men must plan carefully in order to capitalize on their opportunities. For an old man to make significant productive contributions in old age, he must have acquired livestock over the course of his lifetime. He must have gained or retained control of land of sufficient fertility to support coffee or tea production and have planted the perennially bearing crops years in advance. Furthermore, he must have been organized enough to provide land and/or education to his sons. Otherwise, their legitimate demands will harass his happiness and well-being in old age. Nevertheless, old men, if they use their opportunities wisely, can consolidate their financial position and be quite comfortable in old age, retaining control of sufficient land, cash crops, and livestock to meet their needs.

Women, in most cases, are not in a position to obtain control of land, although many women do own some livestock. They must depend on their sons or their husband's relatives for access to land. However, women do have other compensating advantages in old age. Some of the roles customarily performed by women can be carried on more easily as a person grows older and weaker. Very old women often are self-reliant in daily care and even assist others with household domestic tasks. Even after losing most of her

strength and mobility, an old woman can cultivate beans and maize near the house, care for small children, cook, peel bananas, shell maize and sort beans. These tasks require little strength, yet take lots of time. Men depend much more on the domestic labor of younger wives or their sons' wives. Customary behavioral expectations do not equip old men with the skill or motivation to do these essential domestic tasks. Old women, therefore, place a much lighter burden on their primary care-givers for most of their lives than do old men.

Further, older men are in a much better position to control the labor of others. A look at the number of married and widowed males and females in the "declining elder" group is revealing. A large majority (85.7%) of males are married compared to 28% females who are married. On the other hand, 10.7% of the men and 70% of the women are widowed. Thus, a man, with at least partial control over the labor of a younger wife, looks forward to the fruits of her toil in his declining years. Society conveys no such prospects on her. A woman must be more concerned about firmly establishing affective bonds with her children. As she gets older, she will probably live with a son who is independent of her control.

#### Belief-Based Contributions

Given the current complex of beliefs in Meru, elders' ability to enhance a person's success in life by conveying

their good will remains an important contribution. People covet the good will of the community as a whole. They want to be known as responsible community members who display proper giteo for others. Living within this invisible net of good feelings is believed to be essential to an individual's well-being. If your neighbors and family do not think highly of you and your behavior, you will not prosper. By way of example, a fairly well-to-do member of the community once refused to participate in an interview. As we left, my assistant confided that the man was not well thought of in the community and, consequently, his business and fortunes were in decline. According to my assistant, that explained his ill humor.

While anyone can bestow good will by giving a blessing, the blessing of an old person is especially desirable. Their blessing holds special power to convey future prosperity. The blessing of an old person, one woman said, makes you feel "happy and safe."

Blessings were traditionally given by gently spraying saliva on the person being blessed and pronouncing words that express good wishes. Both the saliva and the words transmit the blessing. One of the most treasured of all blessings is: "You will bear sons and daughters." This blessing ensures that a person will be complete and whole. Daughters bring wealth in dowry. Sons care for a parent in

old age. When a person has both, their security is guaranteed.

Blessings are given rather freely, especially whenever an individual helps an old person. An elderly man explained very simply: "When someone helps you generously, he will be blessed." Blessings are also connected with an inheritance or a gift. Whenever an old person gives someone something, their blessing accompanies the gift. An old man reported:

A blessing can be either spoken or given as an inheritance. Giving property is another way of blessing. When you leave your bee hives, yams, or bananas to your son, you are blessing him.

One young woman spoke with pride and conviction about a blessing she had received:

When my husband's father was alive, I helped him a lot. Just before his death, he prayed for me to live for a long time. I believe it. Since then I have had very few problems. He also blessed me with property. He gave me a cupboard and a ladder. These things are mine and my children's from now on. No one else in the family can ever disturb me about them.

Thus, the blessing of an old person, conveying as it does a deep sense of well-being and optimism for the future, is a treasured thing. Although blessings do not necessarily contribute in a tangible manner, they must not to be underrated. They provide a valuable psychological and emotional buffer against the anxiety and stress of an uncertain world.

On the other hand, belief in the blessing has its dark side. Just as surely as old people can convey prosperity by their blessing, they can--if wronged--precipitate future

calamities through their curse. Though anyone of any age can utter a curse, curses only take effect after the death of the one who has been wronged. Therefore, the curse of an old person is most feared.

Just as blessings are given to show gratitude for care received, curses are elicited by serious abuse or neglect.

One woman declared:

If you misuse old peoples' property by selling their stock or their land, or if you neglect them, they can curse you. Cursing is still common. Even the 'saved ones' do it. Christian old men will say, 'God will help you,' when you mistreat them. This is a very heavy curse because it means no one else will help you but God, and God doesn't help those who don't help others. If an old person says this, he is very annoyed. It is very bad.

Another informant confided:

A mother's curse is the most serious, because she carried you in her body and had the greatest burden in rearing you. If a mother curses you she may 'tap the stone' [one of the stones used for the cooking fire] and say, 'you will be just like this stone' [i.e., lifeless and immobile]. That curse is so serious it could even affect future generations. Other people from the family and clan will go to a person making such a curse and implore them to revoke it.

People believe the curse causes either madness, an incurable disease called gitatu in which the stomach swells, or sometimes a general lack of success in life. One informant related an incident about a man who gained legal control of his father's land against his father's wishes. The father told him he must never eat food grown on that land. After his father died, the man ignored the prohibition and contracted gitatu. He went to several

hospitals, including Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi, but he still died.

While the curse itself is not a contribution, it does serve to heighten the value placed upon blessings. The threat of the curse enhances the desire for blessings. Living according to traditional precepts invites being blessed and precludes being cursed.

Despite the emotional importance of beliefs surrounding the blessing and the curse, only two people out of the total sample of elderly mentioned blessing as their main contribution. Moreover, giving blessings was singularly unemphasized by the youth when they were asked to specify the main way elderly helped them. Although statistically unverifiable due to small samples, blessing appears to gain importance as a means of contributing only when a person becomes unable to assist actively in other ways. The fact that women are much more likely to mention blessing as one of their contributions (see Table 7.11) may confirm this point. Elderly women, as a group, tend to be older than elderly men; thus, more elderly women are inactive.

TABLE 7.11: BLESSINGS AS CONTRIBUTIONS

Importance Placed on Blessings:	Males	Females
Blessing Not Given	71.4%	38.0%
Blessing Is One Function	14.3	31.0
Blessing Is Most Important Function	14.3	31.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Giving blessings, then, only becomes an important contribution for those who are dependent, especially for inactive women. The individual who can still cultivate, cook, and carry firewood will emphasize those contributions, even though they also give blessings. But when old people can no longer contribute in an active way, they maintain their sense of usefulness and importance by focusing on their blessings.

#### Summary

Old people in southern Meru help their families in several concrete and demonstrable ways. Although many elderly eventually spend a short time "just resting," nearly all find ways to assist their households for most of their lives. Their chief contributions have a distinctly "economic" flavor.

Elderly do enhance family harmony and community social order by acting as counselors and advisers. Old people who are relatively inactive contribute to the psychological and emotional well-being of their families and neighbors through their blessings. But, for the most part, contributions that derive from traditional beliefs, cultural knowledge, and the wisdom of age are in decline. The role of repository of oral history and tradition now has negligible importance, as do former power roles of a judicio-political nature. Furthermore, the actual frequency of advising, counseling, and settling disputes is relatively rare.

Old people cherish their ability to provide for their families and lighten the work load of other members of the household by performing normal work activities. In other words, elderly value their ability to maintain "productive" roles, albeit less vigorously. Old people have more perceived worth to themselves and to their families while they are still producing members of the household. Fortunately, the rural agricultural economy allows most elderly to make some productive contributions until they become almost completely disabled. For the most part, old people spend their time in the same farming and domestic activities which occupied their youth and middle age--cultivation and animal husbandry, and, for women--cooking, food preparation, and child-care as well.

It cannot be said, however, that these economic contributions fully compensate elders for declining social roles. The role of advisor and transmitter of unique and highly valued cultural knowledge placed elderly in a privileged position. Old people alone held the keys to continuation of essential cultural knowledge. Now, they are just like everyone else. Their contributions, apart for their role as counselors, differ little from younger people, except that they have less strength to do them. Thus, the meaning of their lives has diminished, the overall value of their contributions has decreased, and their statue in society has fallen.

## CHAPTER 8 THE OUTCOMES OF ELDER BEHAVIOR

The previous chapter discussed the behavior patterns of elderly in southern Meru. This final chapter examines those behavior patterns from the standpoint of some important concerns arising from the model. First, the outcomes and goals of behavior will be examined. Various behaviors will be evaluated for their effectiveness as strategies to gain security in declining years. Secondly, behavior will be analyzed in terms of systemic outcomes, particularly with reference to how the activities of old people influence the socio-natural system as a whole.

### Desired Individual Outcomes: Ideal Old Age

The outcomes of behavior are evaluated, first of all, from the perspective of Meru societal values and ideals. "Ideal old age" in southern Meru, of course, grows out of the ideology of giteo: ideal concepts of old age are embedded in the reciprocal obligations and interactions of the larger social network.

### Attributes of Ideal Old Age

To discover local views of ideal old age, 25 to 54 year old respondents in the aging attitudes survey were asked to identify one old person in the community whom they most admired and wanted to emulate in their old age.

Subsequently, informants were asked why they chose that particular person. Table 8.1 summarizes the traits they mentioned. Since responses were open-ended, percentages do not reflect a frequency distribution.

TABLE 8.1: CHARACTERISTICS OF IDEAL ELDERS

Characteristic Admired in Elder	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Currently Self-Reliant	69	52.7%
Harmonious Community Relations	42	32.1
Has Responsible Children	32	24.4
Healthy	25	19.1
Manages/Provides for Children	24	18.3
Religious	14	10.7
Clean Habits	12	9.2
Respected Advice-Giver	6	4.6
Totals:	131	N/A

Analysis of these traits reveals a very strong desire on the part of most people to remain active contributors. Giteo principles of reciprocity encourage a person to be self-reliant and interdependent as long as possible. Ideal old age in southern Meru does not mean sitting down and doing nothing while your children wait on you. "Retirement" is a foreign concept. The ideal old person lives his or her life so as to have adequate material and human resources to meet their own needs (and indeed even those of their offspring as well) to the very edge of the grave.

On the other hand, giteo norms strongly imply that children should help older parents who are in poor health and experience the weakness of extreme old age. Ideal

elderly, thus, are not only self-reliant, but they also have willing and able children waiting to assist them should needs arise.

If giteo has been followed properly, elderly parents will have assisted their children by rearing them, giving them educations, helping them get mates, and enabling them to find jobs and/or get land. Once it becomes necessary, these children should reciprocate as much as they are able. Community disapproval, and possibly curses, will descend on those children who can help and do not. However, children are seen only as a secondary line of security to be relied on in extreme old age or during unavoidable dependency.

#### Attributes of Model Elders

A further way of exploring the data on ideal old age is to look more closely at the lives of the specific old people whom informants most wanted to emulate. The two women most often named as ideal elders had followed the culturally prescribed life course by marrying, having several children, assisting their husbands to accumulate at least a moderate amount of property, and helping to educate their children. Currently, one of the women is widowed; the other is married to a man who is often identified as an ideal male elder. Both women live adjacent to adult children. Both experience good health. One is 72 years old; the other, 100.

The responses of the informants who chose these women pointed most often to their good health and activity ("she

has aged well and can still work unlike most of her age mates"), access to property ("she has enough property to support herself"), and strong reciprocal bonds to children ("she has educated her children well"). A few respondents also mentioned the harmonious personality and good character of these individuals ("she doesn't curse;" "she talks nicely, not always complaining about petty problems").

The characteristics of the men most often identified as ideal elders differ slightly. More emphasis is placed on accumulation and control of property than was true for the women. Two of these men, in their 70s, are married; the other is 92 years old and widowed. All followed a culturally acceptable life course--marrying, having and educating children, and gaining property. All live adjacent to adult children. All retain control of significant amounts of land (14, 15, and 23 acres respectively) and some livestock, ranging in value from 12,000 Kenya shillings to 54,000 Kenya shillings. All are farmers, though one used to work for the Ministry of Agriculture. Each possesses good health. Some respondents also mention that these elders live in harmony with others and give good advice.

One particularly revealing case involves Mbogo,<sup>1</sup> the 92 year old widower mentioned above. Mbogo was identified by almost everyone on his ridge as the ideal elder. Mbogo practically incarnates giteo ideals. From his neatly

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

dressed, ramrod straight appearance to his large, efficiently run shamba of tea, coffee, macadamia nuts, and food crops, everything about Mbogo speaks of vigor and progressiveness. One of the few in his age-set to get some formal education, he has always been a community leader--the first to plant his crops in rows, the first to visit the Farmer's Training Center in Embu many years ago, eventually hired by the Ministry of Agriculture to administer its local agricultural extension programs. A former polygynist, he has numerous children and grandchildren. He remains mentally alert and physically active. He oversees work in his shamba and makes a daily walk to the market two kilometers away to visit and keep up with local events.

Consistently, the people who chose Mbogo as their ideal referred to his generosity as well as his economic success. Although Mbogo is financially comfortable, he is far from the richest man in the village. People admire him most for how he uses his property. Beyond guaranteeing his own self-reliance, he educated and provided land for his children and many of his grandchildren! The fact that Mbogo assists even his adult grandchildren elicits especially high esteem.

#### Summary

Thus, the primary goals of ideal old age are self-reliance and accumulating enough resources for self and family. However, achieving an ideal old age requires a lifetime of work and reciprocity--providing for family,

educating children, giving land to sons--all of which also create social debts. These social debts, if giteo is followed, guarantee assistance from offspring when and if needs arise. If real needs do not overtake an old person, children just give token assistance--a new dress, a bag of sugar, a little tobacco--as a gesture of gratitude and respect.

#### Undesirable Individual Outcomes: Outcast Elderly

Looking at the opposite end of the spectrum, at those who are least admired, throws the discussion of ideal old age into bolder relief. Some excluded or outcast elderly end up in old-age homes. These individuals have completely missed out on familial support. Therefore, interviews were conducted with 22 residents of the two nearest old-age home in a neighboring district in Kikuyuland.

These interviews revealed one personal tragedy after another, some due to poor choices and others simply to ill fortune. Many residents are crippled, blind, or handicapped. Some have no children or other immediate family, either due to deaths, divorce, or failure to marry. Others have strained relationships with what family members they do possess. Nearly all came here very poor.

#### Examples of Outcast Elders

Joseph is severely crippled. Injured in a motor vehicle accident, he moves crablike, by scooting on his hands and buttocks. He left home when quite young and lost

touch with his family. He married but later divorced and his children stayed with their mother, as is the Kikuyu custom. Andrea "forgot to marry." He also left home very young and just enjoyed life too much to settle down. Later he was detained during Mau Mau. By the time he was released, his father and mother were dead. His sister had married far away in Kambaland. His father left him some land, but the clan insisted he sell it to pay bridewealth debts. After that, he was very poor. Paulo and Wachira have enmitous relationships with their relatives. Wachira, who also never married, is so estranged from his younger brother, he refuses to return to his home community to check on land he inherited from his father. Paulo is very upset with his only son and never sees him. He is also very poor because he lost his land to relatives during Mau Mau.

Among the women, there is an even higher incidence of disability than among the men. The effects of family problems and poverty again are prevalent. Beatrice married, but had no children. After she became crippled with a bone disease, her husband divorced her. Life was hard when she went back to her father's home. He had died and since she could do very little to help, she was a great burden upon her mother and brothers. She feared what might happen when her mother died and came willingly to the home when given an opportunity. Anna married but had no children. She was mistreated severely by her brothers after her husband

divorced her. A serious farm accident blinded Monica. Later, her son became mentally ill and beat her severely. She has a volatile temper and refuses assistance from two daughters who try to help her. Njeri never married because of epilepsy. After her parents died, her siblings shunned her. They were afraid their children would contract her disease. Ruth says her husband died in a fire set by jealous, land-seeking relatives, who confused his mind with sorcery. After he died, they took his land and left her with no means of support. Old Mariamu came after her grandson murdered her husband in a property dispute.

#### Attributes of Outcast Elders

Even in neighboring Kikuyuland where customs vary slightly, the processes of giteo are evident in the lives of elderly outcasts. For many residents, disabilities lower their productive potential and reduce their ability to participate in the reciprocal network. Many failed to conform to community norms for building stable life-long interdependent relationships. They either did not marry or were divorced. Those who did marry often were unable to have children or left those children for their spouses to raise. Moreover, discord tarnishes the lives of several. Their stories reveal conflicts with sons, brothers, clan members, a sense of persecution by others, a general inability to get along with people. Furthermore, they arrived at old age in poverty. Some were cheated of their

land while in Mau Mau detention. Others lost their inheritance through ineptitude and poor choices. Still others just lived from day to day and failed to accumulate anything of lasting value.

#### Comparison of Ideal and Outcast Elders

A comparison of exemplary elders with the residents of old-age homes further highlights the importance of giteo principles. The following chart (Table 8.2) contrasts the qualities most often found in each group.

TABLE 8.2: COMPARISON OF DESIRABLE AND UNDESIRABLE TRAITS

Desirable Traits (Ideal Elders)	Undesirable Traits (Old-Age Home Residents)
Established a family in rural home (married and had sons and daughters)	Left rural home while young (either did not marry or divorced)
Accumulated (and retains control of) adequate land and stock for self-care	Failed to accumulate property; currently in poverty
Provided well for children (gave them land and education; continues to help periodically)	Often childless, or has lost contact with offspring
Maintains strong reciprocal interdependence with adult children (lives adjacent)	If there are children, may have a strained relationship
Retains good health and physical vigor	Often disabled or handicapped
Preserves harmonious community relationships (gives good advice and counsel to youth)	May harbor bitter feelings toward community of origin due to land disputes/other problems

The specific individuals specified as ideal elders by informants appear in every case to have conformed their

lives to proper giteo. And, not insignificantly, they experienced good fortune; these principles worked out well for them. In the life of almost every old-age home resident, on the other hand, either the individual violated some principle of giteo or could not participate in normal reciprocal activities due to a disability or other misfortune. Some social or physiological flaw explains their exclusion from home and community. Comparing these flaws with the traits of model elders deepens our understanding of the giteo-based ideals of old age and the kind of old age people most desire for themselves.

#### Actual Individual Outcomes

Given these ideals of old age, how well do most old people in Meru achieve these goals? Some quantifiable interview data reveal how well elderly achieve self-reliance and how much their children assist them. Interview data also divulge how old people feel about their old age, an important measure of subjective satisfaction.

Since the basic concern here is with those individuals who have begun to experience some need for assistance, data on "declining elders" will be used most extensively. The parameters of that data set are described earlier in chapter 7. In brief, declining elders refer to all elderly over 70 and seven other elders, all in their 60s, who revealed signs of approaching dependency.

### Self-Reliance

The concept of self-reliance refers to an old person's ability to provide most of his or her own daily care and subsistence needs. Self-reliance in Meru does not refer to complete independence and certainly not to isolation. A self-reliant elder has the physical and material means to maintain customary patterns of reciprocity. Such a person continues to function within the network of communal interdependence. In other words, a self-reliant elder receives some assistance from younger adults, but does not depend on that assistance for survival. Furthermore, with self-reliant elders, assistance flows both directions. For example, an elderly couple whom I knew often asked me to take an enormous burlap bag stuffed with food from the farm to their daughter's family in Nairobi. The daughter, for her part, never came home without small gifts of clothing and special foodstuffs.

When measuring self-reliance, the amount of land actually under cultivation by an old person is the most objective gauge. Reported reliance on others for basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, water and wood, and medical expenses) provides another relatively objective measure. Other appraisals, such as inventory of livestock and inventory of household items, furnish somewhat less reliable indicators. In addition, elderly informants rated their

degree of self-reliance on a scale of one to five, using a small five-runged ladder as a visual aid.

Land is the basic resource necessary for production in this agricultural economy. As noted above, having land to use in old age is a major goal for most people. Most old people appear to be doing relatively well in this regard. For the sample as a whole, only seven (5.3%) elderly out of 131 reported having no land to cultivate. Six of this number are women, the seventh is a very elderly man who never married and lives with his brother's son's family. An additional 9.9% cultivate less than one-half acre. Assuming that one-half acre is the minimum needed for comfortable food subsistence, approximately 85% of elderly over 55 years of age currently cultivate enough land for their own personal subsistence.

There is, of course, a major difference in the amount of land cultivated by males and females for their own use. Gender disparities in land use reflect the patrilineal patterns of inheritance and land control in Meru. Women have far fewer opportunities to gain control of the means of production than do men.<sup>2</sup>

For the sample of declining elderly, Kendall's nonparametric tau shows a positive correlation of .40 (significant at  $p=.0001$ ) between gender and amount of land

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, men usually must support more dependents. Women are more likely to be widowed, live with a married son, and only support themselves.

used. Table 8.3 presents the range, mean, and standard deviation of land used by gender. This comparison confirms that males control and use more land than females.

TABLE 8.3: GENDER/ACREAGE USED

	Males	Females
Range	0-10	0-3
Mean	2.5 acres	.85 acres
S.D.	2.26	.84

In compiling these figures, the land used by men refers to the acreage cultivated by them, their wives, and dependent children. In other words, when a man lists the land he "uses," it refers to all the land that he personally controls. Land used does not include acreage a man legally owns but which is cultivated by his adult sons and their families. For women, land used refers to acreage they or their dependent children actually cultivate themselves. Of course, computing acreages in this manner gives an inaccurate picture of the total amount of land used by elderly. Considerable overlap will exist between the acreage reported for men and that reported for women. However, breaking down the acreage in this manner more accurately communicates gender differences in land usage and control.

Turning now to the degree of reliance on others for basic needs, assistance received was calculated for five items: food, clothing, shelter, water and wood, and medical

expenses. Those designated as non-dependent for a particular item reported relying on themselves or their spouses most of the time. Spousal labor was included as part of the informant's self-help because a husband and wife are a single economic/productive unit. Other helpers include sons, sons' wives, daughters, grandchildren, relatives, neighbors, and community organizations. Table 8.4 reports the percentages of elderly who say they are self-reliant compared to those who say they rely on others.

TABLE 8.4: SELF-REPORTED RELIANCE ON OTHERS

Need	Self-Reliant			Relies on Others		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Food	87.2	79.7	83.9	12.7	20.3	16.1
Clothing	76.4	59.7	66.7	23.6	40.3	33.3
Shelter	76.4	41.1	56.3	23.6	58.9	43.7
Water/Wood	87.9	70.4	78.3	12.1	29.6	21.7
Medical	74.5	52.0	61.5	25.5	48.0	38.5

These figures also show a high degree of self-reliance by most elderly. Regarding food self-sufficiency, 83.9% say they are self-reliant, almost identical to the number who cultivate at least one-half acre of land, as noted above. A very high percentage, 78.3%, also say they are self-reliant in terms of getting their own water and wood, a very important daily task that requires some physical health and vigor. Receiving other types of assistance (clothing, shelter, and medical expenses) may simply represent expressions of reciprocity from respectful children to able parents.

Self-reliance varies significantly with age. The mean age of those who rely on others for at least one item is 78.8, with a range of 62 to 95. This figure is noticeably higher than the mean age of 72.4 (with a range of 55 to 95) for the entire sample of elderly. A mean age of 88.2 (with a range of 73 to 95) for those who rely on others for their food needs is dramatically higher.

For the older group of declining elders, 25.6% reported regularly relying on others for food needs, 52.5% for clothing needs, 62.8% for shelter, 35.9% for water and wood, and 60.3% for their medical needs. In every case, for this older group, the percentage who receive assistance is substantially higher than for the entire sample of elderly.

Significant gender differences exist in amount of assistance received for shelter, clothing and medical expenses. Several factors account for these differences. First, in the traditional division of labor, males build the houses; therefore, women rely on others for their shelter even when they are still vigorous. Secondly, men have more control over cash crop income and less need for assistance on items such as clothing and medical expenses that require money. Furthermore, women tend to live longer than men and outlive their older husband/providers. That fact alone makes them generally more reliant on their children than men.

Finally, elderly rated themselves on their degree of self-reliance using the five-point ladder scale. Table 8.5 presents these self-ratings.

TABLE 8.5: SELF-RATING OF SELF-RELIANCE

	Males	Females	Total
Very High	31.5%	11.4%	20.2%
High	11.1	27.1	20.2
Average	31.5	37.1	34.7
Low	22.2	20.0	21.0
Very Low	3.7	4.3	4.0

These figures further confirm that the majority of elderly view themselves as relatively self-reliant and many see themselves as very self-reliant. Only 25% of elderly consider themselves below average on self-reliance.

In summary, old people currently achieve considerable success in meeting the goal of self-reliance. Seventy-five percent of people over 55 years of age view themselves as at least average or better in terms of self-reliance.

Significantly, only about 15% of the total number of old people rely significantly on others for food needs. Even for declining elderly, primarily those over 70 years of age, only 25% receive assistance with food. Assistance with other items in many cases does not indicate poor health or dependency on the part of the old person so much as it represents symbolic expressions of giteo on the part of the giver.

### Reciprocal Relationship With Children

Ideal old age calls for "children in waiting," offspring ready to willingly assist an aging parent should need arise. Such willingness denotes proper qiteo in response to parents' earlier sacrifices in rearing and establishing their children.

The following indicators were used to measure the strength of reciprocal relationships with children: residential status (with whom does the old person live), frequency of contact with children, and how much regular assistance children provide on the basic survival items.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, obtaining clear quantifiable data on reciprocity proved very difficult.

Statistics on residential status and frequency of contact are straightforward and show very strong evidence of continuing reciprocal relationships between old people and their adult children. Regarding residential arrangement, 91.0% of the sample of declining elderly live with--or immediately adjacent to--adult children and/or their families. An additional 5.2% live with their spouses and/or dependent children or grandchildren. Of the remaining 3.8%, one individual lives with his brother's son's family and two elderly women, who have adult children or grandchildren

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 6.1 for one tabular presentation of the data on assistance received. These data are summarized in a different format in Table 8.4 above. See Table 6.2 for data on residential status.

living in other communities in the region, live alone. Correspondingly, 86.8% of declining elderly had contact with one of their children on the day of the interview, 5.3% during the last week, 2.6% during the last month, and 5.3% during the last three months. These figures show that nearly all elderly in this region interact regularly with their adult children. Although this finding says nothing about the content of that interaction, it does show that children are at the very least physically available to elderly parents.

Confirming that children do actually assist their parents to a satisfactory degree becomes more problematic. The data on "self-reported reliance on others" given in Table 8.4 above is one logical place to seek for that confirmation. Approximately one-half (49.6%) of those over 55 years of age receive significant assistance on one or more of the basic survival items. In 93% of these instances, the helper was someone in the old person's immediate family--son, daughter, daughter-in-law, or grandchild. Thus, elderly appear relatively successful in obtaining reciprocal assistance from their children when needed. However, these figures actually only reveal that significant numbers of elderly are assisted by their immediate families. No conclusions about the amount or adequacy of assistance can be drawn from this data. Even those elders who regularly receive assistance may need far

more than they are given. Some who report themselves as self-reliant may need assistance which is not forth-coming.

### Life-Long Preparation and Self-Reliance

What are the causal antecedents of these desirable outcomes? One reasonable hypothesis is that economic success over the life course increases self-reliance in old age.

In testing this hypothesis, the independent variable of life-long economic success was measured by assessing both individual property in old age and the property of the old person's family/household. Several types of data on personal economic well-being were obtained: value of livestock, value of a selected inventory of household items, type of dwelling, and amount of land owned.<sup>4</sup> For each household, economic data were gathered for: value of livestock per capita, value of inventory per capita, type of dwellings, cash crop acreage per capita, and total acreage owned per capita.

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<sup>4</sup> The amount of land owned should be distinguished from the amount of land used or cultivated. In the research communities, land adjudication and consolidation has been completed and most individuals hold legal title to their land. Since many elderly retain legal titles long after allotting portions to their married sons, land "ownership" provides a rough measure of the land a person accumulated over the course of his life. On the other hand, land "used" provides an approximation of the amount of land a person actually controls in old age. These categories are far from clear-cut, however. Some men keep the title to all their land in their own name until death. Others deed over the land title and ownership much earlier. For the purposes of statistical computation, I assumed that old women share in the ownership of their husbands' land.

Measures of the dependent variable, self-reliance (discussed in detail above), consist of the amount of land under cultivation by the old person, self-reported reliance on others for basic needs, and self-rating of self-reliance.

Using Kendall's nonparametric tau, very little evidence of causality was found among these variables. Only a very small and moderately significant positive correlation was noted between total acres per capita and the amount of land used/cultivated (.19 at  $p=.0248$ ) and a somewhat stronger positive correlation between the amount of land owned personally and the amount of land used/cultivated (.39 at  $p=.0001$ ). However, the close conceptual relationship among these variables precludes any real support for the hypothesis.

A small but significant negative correlation was found between amount of land owned personally and reported reliance on others (-.22 at  $p=.0053$ ) and a small, moderately significant positive correlation between amount of land owned personally and self-rating of self-reliance (.17 at  $p=.0267$ ). These correlations do offer minimal support for the hypothesis.

#### Life-Long and Current Reciprocal Relations

As outlined earlier, the strength of current relationships is rooted in the qiteo behavior of a lifetime. The assistance an old person receives is part of a life-long pattern of reciprocity. Therefore, the contributions a

parent makes to their children over the life-course should correlate positively with the stability of the relationship elderly have with their adult children, including the assistance those children provide to their parents in old age.

Concrete indicators of the independent variable--life-long reciprocity--include marital status, parental status, and educational level of children. Marital status was divided into three categories: married (including widows), divorced or separated, and single/never married. Parental status consists of the following classifications: those who are childless, those with living daughters, those with living sons, and those with both sons and daughters. Also, the number of living sons and daughters was calculated. Finally, the amount of assistance elderly gave their children over the course of their lives (in other words, the amount of social debt elderly have inculcated) was operationalized as the average educational level of sons and daughters and the highest educational level achieved by any child. Other quantifiable data which might be used to measure life-long reciprocity, such as the amount of land given to sons, was not collected.

The dependent variable, current reciprocal relationships, is operationalized as: residential status (whether or not an old person lives with or adjacent to an adult child), frequency of contact with adult children, and

self-reported reliance on other for the five basic subsistence needs. These measures are described above.

Before discussing correlations between independent and dependent variables, the limitations of some of the concrete measures should be pointed out. Frequency distributions of marital and parental status reveal remarkably little variation. Only one person in the sample of 78 declining elderly had never married, an old man of 87 years who spent much of his life as a herder and was living with his brother's son. One woman of 63 was separated from her husband and lives with her adult son and his family. Only two old people in the sample had no living children. One was the old man just mentioned and the other, an old woman of 80 whose two sons died after reaching adulthood. She lives with a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Five individuals have daughters, but no living sons, and six have sons, but no living daughters.

Further discussion of educational achievement is also in order. The mean average education of sons of declining elderly is 6.8 years with a standard deviation of 3.3 and a range of 1 to 16 years. The mean average education of daughters of declining elderly is 5.5 years with a standard deviation of 3.6 and a range of 0 to 11. The mean of the highest education achieved by any child of each elder is 9.2 with a standard deviation of 3.8 and a range of 1 to 21.

These figures suggest that elderly Meruians highly valued the education of their children. By deduction, many elderly parents must have made significant efforts and sacrifices to provide educational opportunities for their children. It is unwise, however, to place too much credence on educational achievement as an individual measure of social debt. Many factors influence education level, including academic ability and economic well-being.

Turning now to the relationship between life-long contributions and current reciprocal relationships, again correlations were computed using Kendall's tau. Given the small amount of diversity in marital status, with only two individuals not married or widowed, no correlation was computed between marital status and the dependent variables. Regarding parental status, no significant correlations were found between having a son and having a daughter, on the one hand, and the frequency of contact with adult children and residential status. There was a small and slightly significant positive correlation between having a son and reliance on others (.19 at  $p=.0338$ ) and having a daughter and reliance on others (.17 at  $p=.0343$ ). As noted above, however, the validity of this data as a measure of assistance received from children is very questionable. The small variation in parental status data further limits the validity of these correlations.

Further, few significant correlations were discovered between measures of educational level and residence status, frequency of contact, or total assistance. The only relationship of significance was a small negative correlation between average daughter's education and total assistance received ( $-.23$  at  $p=.0063$ ). Perhaps this relationship exists because daughters who achieve a high educational level tend to move out of the community in search of jobs.

#### Current Contributions and Assistance

Rearing and educating their children and helping them get established in family life is only a portion of parental responsibility. Individuals continue to contribute to their families and societies in old age. The labor of old people increases the productivity of their household units and elders serve as advisers and conflict resolvers. According to the theory advanced earlier, high levels of contribution by elderly to the welfare of their families and communities should increase the amount of assistance given to them by younger members of society.

The independent variable in this hypothesis consists of two components: productive contributions and advisory contributions. Productive contributions are operationalized as the level of vigor displayed in observed behavior, self-reported economic behavior, and self-reported domestic behavior. Advisory contributions are measured by looking at

self-reported social behavior, involvement in community activities, perceived importance of advisory role, and frequency of advising. Perceived overall usefulness to family and community measures both productive and advisory contributions. As explained above, the dependent variable, reciprocal relationship with children, was operationalized as residence status, frequency of contact with children, and self-reported reliance on others.

No significant correlations were found between productive contributions and the dependent variables of residence status and frequency of contact with children. Small, but significant positive correlations exist between frequency of advice-giving and residence status (.27 at  $p=.0025$ ) and between perceptions of usefulness and frequency of contact with children (.22 at  $p=.0054$ ). However, logic suggests that living with adult children produces an increase in frequency of advising, not vice-versa. The same is true for frequency of contact with children and feelings of usefulness. Thus, these correlations offer no confirmation of the hypothesis. Rather, they simply suggest that elderly who live with their children and have frequent contact with them will give advice more often and will see themselves as more useful.

Negative correlations were found between all measures of the independent variable and reported reliance on others. These range from a high of  $-.42$  at  $p=.0001$  for economic

activity to a low of  $-.16$  at  $p=.04$  for involvement in community activities. These negative correlations seem to disprove the basic hypothesis. However, the self-reported reliance measure is very problematic, as discussed above. Logically speaking, those who have higher levels of vigor in their activities (and thus higher levels of contribution) will also have less need for assistance. Therefore, correlations with self-reported reliance reflect the degree of self-reliance far more than they reveal a lack of reciprocal assistance from children. The primary problem is that the best "contributors," those who most completely fulfill the ideal of old age, do not need assistance.

#### Contributions and Subjective Satisfaction

Having searched for causal relationships in the more objective measures of success in old age, the discussion now turns to subjective feelings about the experience of growing old. Subjective satisfaction in old age should be higher for those elderly who were successful in long-term material accumulation and social reciprocity and for those who continue to contribute actively to their families and communities.

To measure elders' satisfaction with old age, informants were asked to use the five-set "ladder" again and rate their life in comparison to other people of their own age group. The scale used for this question ranged simply

from very bad to very good. The results are summarized in Table 8.6.

TABLE 8.6: LIFE COMPARISON RATINGS

Self-Rating	Male	Female	Total
Very Good	3.6%	8.3%	6.3%
Good	8.9	23.6	17.2
Average	62.5	34.7	46.9
Bad	19.6	26.4	23.4
Very Bad	5.4	6.9	6.3

Furthermore, at another point in the interview, a completely open-ended question was asked about how elderly felt about old age. These responses were later reviewed and rated on a five-point scale similar to the one in Table 8.6. Table 8.7 presents these responses.

TABLE 8.7: FEELINGS ABOUT OLD AGE

Rating	Male	Female	Total
Very Good	3.6%	6.7%	5.5%
Good	32.1	11.1	19.2
Good & Bad	28.6	44.4	38.4
Bad	32.1	35.6	34.3
Very Bad	3.6	2.2	2.7

Overall life comparison ratings correspond almost perfectly to a normal "bell curve" distribution. The responses on feelings about old age skew only slightly towards the negative side. These statistically neutral distributions suggest that old people are neither unusually happy or unusually dissatisfied with their lives. Perhaps, given the degree of social change in Meru, that alone is significant.

Interesting differences exist between male and female responses to these two questions. When elders compare their lives to those of their age-mates, more women than men rate themselves as "good" or "very good," whereas more men than women say they feel that old age is "good." The difference in male and female response on the life comparison rating may result from the fact that the majority of elderly who experience extreme poverty are females. Older women, therefore, may rate themselves slightly higher than males because they compare themselves to poor age-mates. Perhaps, on the other hand, males tend to focus more on material possessions when rating themselves vis-a-vis their age-mates. If so, their responses may reflect an awareness of increasing economic stratification.

Contrary to the life comparison ratings, the question regarding feelings about old age did not call for a comparison with other individuals. Rather, it asked respondents for a much more personal evaluation, tapping into their private ideals and goals. Gender differences on this question possibly suggest that men do slightly better than women in old age, possibly the result of their control of property and labor.

Turning now to causality, positive correlations are anticipated between the independent variables discussed above and these subjective measures of satisfaction. First of all, however, no significant correlations were found

between economic indicators and life comparison ratings except for a very small correlation with household dwelling type (.18 at  $p=.0203$ ). Likewise, a small positive correlation was discovered between feelings about old age and household dwelling type (.17 at  $p=.0339$ ). On the other hand, success at long-term reciprocity has more demonstrable influence on subjective satisfaction. Although no significant correlations were found between current contributions (including activity levels) and satisfaction, several small positive correlations were noted between measures of long-term reciprocity and subjective satisfaction. Correlations between these measures, both significant and insignificant, are summarized in Table 8.8.

TABLE 8.8: CORRELATIONS OF RECIPROCITY AND SATISFACTION

Measures of Reciprocity	Measures of Satisfaction			
	Feelings @ Old Age		Life Comparison	
	r	p	r	p
Marital Status	.06	.4789	.16	.0435
Having a Son	.25	.0021	.19	.0152
Having a Daughter	.17	.0313	.13	.0883
Ave. Educ. (Son)	.03	.7592	.19	.0352
Ave. Educ. (Daugh.)	.05	.5773	.24	.0048
Highest Education	.14	.1074	.18	.0313

Further, positive correlations were anticipated between self-reliance and subjective satisfaction and between assistance currently received and satisfaction. Although no significant correlations were noted between objective measures of self-reliance and satisfaction, a positive

correlation exists between self-rating of self-reliance and life comparison (.24 at  $p=.0021$ ). For measures of reciprocal relationships with children, positive correlations were present between residence status and feelings about old age (.2 at  $p=.0136$ ) and between residence status and life comparison rating (.17 at  $p=.038$ ).

Finally, as would be expected anywhere, highly significant positive correlations were noted between self-rating of health on the five-step ladder and subjective satisfaction. Between health and feelings about old age, the correlation was .24 at  $p=.0026$ ; between health and life comparison, the correlation was .35 at  $p=.0001$ .

#### Discussion of Data Analysis

Overall statistical patterns strongly suggest that most elderly manage to remain self-reliant. Approximately 75% of declining elderly provide for themselves on at least three of the five basic survival items. Elderly also appear to maintain strong reciprocal relationships with their adult children. Most (95.2%) live adjacent to adult children and 86.8% have regular daily contact with them. The vast majority (93%) also receive regular assistance on at least one survival item. Furthermore, the "normal bell curve" distribution of responses on measures of subjective well-being reveals that elderly are relatively well-satisfied with the level of assistance they receive.

The data also suggest that the most important influences on subjective well-being are health and a strong reciprocal relationship with children (particularly having a son or daughter and living with an adult child). Weak, positive correlations with household dwelling type and some measures of educational level suggest the possible importance of community prestige as well.

On the other hand, identifying the reasons for individual success or failure in achieving specific goals of ideal old age proved more difficult. A small positive correlation exists between life-long material accumulation and self-reliance in old age. However, little evidence was found to support the hypothesis that the level of productive and advisory contributions influences the strength of the parent/child bond in old age and the assistance adult children give to their elderly parents. Only one very small positive correlation was noted between parental status (having a son/daughter) and self-reported reliance on others. Statistical evidence, therefore, failed to confirm that the contributions of elderly impact reciprocal responses of younger members of society.

However, even if the hypothesis cannot be proven at the individual level, overall community behavior patterns offer some confirmation. First, marriage and parenthood, two essential markers of proper giteo, are almost ubiquitous among Meru elderly. Moreover, old people do help the young

and middle-aged with their on-going productive contributions and with their skills in advising and conflict resolution. Advising and dispute-solving by the elderly remain highly valued by younger Meruians. Second, old people do receive significant assistance from their children. Elderly are highly integrated into family life. Nearly all elders live with their adult children and grandchildren. They see those children on a daily basis. Most receive some assistance from them.

The contributions and usefulness of elders to their families and communities must, of course, be evaluated within the context of the changing life course. Some of the content of reciprocal behavior has changed. In the past, giteo meant helping domestically and economically until old age and then switching to even more highly valued social roles. Now, giteo means helping out economically and domestically throughout the entire life course, with elders making a much smaller social contribution. Old people partially retain the role of family and relationship advisor and some value continues to be placed on an elders' memory of land boundaries, social debts, and former curses incurred by a family or lineage. However, overall, the importance of old people has dropped; old age has become a period of declining usefulness. Diminished practical value is accompanied by declining control over labor resources and a reduction in the quality of assistance and care. Elderly

compensate by working longer for themselves and for their families, by depending on property accumulated earlier, and by relying when essential on the blessing and the curse.

It can be argued, therefore, that community behavior patterns support the basic hypothesis that the value placed on the contributions of old people influences the quality of care they receive. Adequate hypothesis-testing, however, calls for cross-cultural comparison.

#### Systemic Outcomes

So far, only the interaction between the behavior of old people and others in their proximate social context has been discussed. From a broader ecological perspective, the behavior of individuals within the socio-natural system impacts the remainder of the system. Feedback occurs. Ecological theory posits two types of feedback: positive feedback which produces change in overall systemic relationships and negative feedback which tends to maintain current relationships in equilibrium.

The behavior of elderly will now be explored for evidences of positive and negative systemic feedback. The discussion will be limited to two behaviors which best illustrate these processes in Meru. First, elders' support of education for their children has had demonstrable systems-changing impact on the socio-natural system. Second, the continuing importance of blessing and cursing

behavior creates negative, system-maintaining, feedback, at least initially.

#### Positive Feedback: Support for Formal Education

First, consider the elders' support of education for their children. The educational levels of 337 adult children of Meru elders in Upper Karimba reveal a mean of 7.01 years, with a range of 0 to 16 years, an achievement which is quite high for a rural community of this type. Furthermore, levels of education correlated positively with subjective rating of satisfaction with life. This correlation indicates that those elders whose children achieved greater educational advancement have a stronger sense of accomplishment.

The emphasis on formal education represents a major break with past cultural and educational behavior. Formal education, introduced by missions in the early part of this century, is foreign to indigenous Meru society. Moreover, initially, attempts to educate Meru youth were stringently resisted by Meru elders. Numerous Annual Reports of Meru District Commissioners in the early and even middle years of Colonial rule commiserate about the "backwardness" of the Meru and their adamant refusal to participate in formal education. Thus, the subsequent support of formal education by Meru parents represented a significant break with the past.

Given that the current generation of old people in Meru helped their children to get an education, what effect did this change in behavior have upon the socio-natural system as a whole? In what sense does this behavior introduce positive feedback?

Note, first of all, the relationship that exists between educational level and the likelihood of living outside their community of origin. For all adult children of elders in Upper Karimba, 65% still live in Upper Karimba or in nearby communities, 15% live somewhere within Meru District, and 20% live outside Meru District. Within this group, a highly significant positive correlation was found between the level of education and place of residence (.34 at  $p=.0001$ ). Therefore, elders' support of their children's educational advancement has had an important impact on population dynamics in Meru. Educational achievement increases the probability of out-migration, thereby reducing local population pressure. Exporting excess population helps maintain a workable carrying capacity on the land and lessens the possibility of agricultural involution.

Furthermore, linkage exists between elders' support of formal education and the flow of external, non-farm wealth into the community. Among the same group of adult children of elders in Upper Karimba, 56% are farmers and 44% have off-farm jobs of some type. A highly significant positive

correlation exists between educational level and having a non-farm occupation (.34 at .0001).

Table 8.9 reveals more clearly the actual relationship between education and non-farm occupations. The educational groupings used in this table conform to the divisions in the old Kenyan system of education in which primary school ended in Standard 7 and "O" level secondary school ended in Form 4 (i.e., after 11 years). Those who completed "A" level secondary school (13 years) and university (16 years) achieved significantly higher prospects of good off-farm income, but frequently at some distance away.

TABLE 8.9: EDUCATION AND NON-FARM OCCUPATIONS

Education	Farm		Non-Farm		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
0 to 7	148	77.9%	42	22.1%	190	100.0%
8 to 11	33	26.4	92	73.6	125	100.0
12 to 16	1	14.3	6	85.7	7	100.0

Educational level doubtless increases the potential of household members to obtain off-farm income. The actual flow of wealth into the community from these off-farm jobs can be seen in the positive correlation between educational level and several household wealth indicators. For the sample of declining elderly, no correlations were noted between education and those indicators of economic well-being most directly related to farming, such as amount of land owned, acreage in a cash crop, and value of livestock. However, in other, more consumer-oriented measures--the type

of household dwellings and household wealth based on an inventory of household items--the story is quite different. These correlations are presented in Table 8.10.

TABLE 8.10: EDUCATION AND WEALTH

	Household Wealth	Household Dwelling
Average Education of Sons	.16 (p=.1036)	.39 (p=.0001)
Average Education of Daughters	.21 (p=.0256)	.21 (p=.0195)
Highest Education of Any Child	.22 (p=.0152)	.39 (p=.0001)

These correlations suggest that educational success by an old person's children augments the flow of off-farm wealth into that elder's household, at least in the areas of building construction and the purchase of consumer items. An examination of specific articles in the household inventory reveals more "modern" goods such as sofa sets, radios, and lamps. Only the very well-to-do, also usually highly educated, can afford such things as automobiles and gas cookers.

The greater wealth of those households with highly achieving students and off-farm job holders increases economic stratification within the community. For example, the range on the household inventory wealth index (from zero to 125,000 Kenya shillings) reveals growing economic inequality within the community. Such inequality has the potential to alter political economic relationships at the grass roots level and solidify economically based class

divisions. Moreover, increasing dependence on off-farm income further erodes the economic self-sufficiency of these farm communities. Thus, formerly independent rural villages become more fully incorporated into the international economy. From an ecological systems standpoint, this incorporation exposes the local socio-natural system to many unpredictable influences which are far beyond the control and even the comprehension of many local people.

#### Negative Feedback: The Blessing and the Curse

Despite massive changes in the practice of original Meru religious beliefs and rituals, the desire for elders' blessings and the fear of their curse remains an integral part of giteo ideology and a pervasive influence on behavior. A large majority (75.8%) of declining elderly strongly believe in the curse and its influence on behavior, 15.2% believe the curse has moderate influence, and only 9.1% think the curse has become ineffective. Perhaps more significantly, 90.4% of adults between ages 25 and 54 report that the desire for blessings or the fear of curses motivates them to assist old people at times.

Interestingly, the importance of the blessing and the curse does not appear to be declining. If anything, their importance has increased. Fadiman (1977) describes how the curse in indigenous Meru society functioned primarily to preserve harmonious relationships. When someone had a grievance, cursing was a very visible means of ventilating

feelings and assuring that the community rallied to insist on a settlement of the differences. Should someone die before their curse was lifted, those who had been cursed merely consulted a traditional healer, made the proper propitiary sacrifices and nullified the effects of the curse. Now, however, the curse takes on a more somber aspect. Informants reported almost to a person that these days traditional healers are gone and "the end of the curse is the grave." Practically every informant knew someone who had gone mad or died of mysterious diseases due to an elder's curse.

Thus, an evolution of beliefs has occurred. The Meru--the survival of their indigenous ideology challenged by missions, formal education, and other political and economic changes--maintain their belief in the blessing and the curse as a buffer against the total loss of cultural values. This "strategy," if it can be called such, has proven quite successful thus far. Despite the changes in the economic, political, and social structures over the last eight decades, the bedrock beliefs and core values of giteo remain intact.

But, how does this maintenance of core beliefs influence the socio-natural system? Although belief in the blessing and curse helps preserve certain elements of ideology, it is by no means clear that this belief has a

completely conservative influence on other aspects of the socio-natural system.

On one hand, keeping a robust qiteo ideology strengthens affective bonds between the family and those children who go off to far places in search of education and jobs. One oft-quoted proverb in Meru is: "You can run away from me, but you can't out-run my words." In other words, as in the case of educated children, no matter where they go to live, the words (i.e., the curse) of an elderly parent can follow.

However, strong affective bonds between elderly parents and educated adult children augment economic linkages between urban and rural sectors, reinforcing local ties to the national and international economy. These ties enhance the potential for rural development and for the distribution of resources from the urban center to the rural periphery. Furthermore, educated adult children often build retirement homes and keep their wives and families in their community of origin. Doubtless, the presence of these families in the rural areas increases the demand for better schools, good medical facilities, piped water, and even rural electrification.

Thus, paradoxically, maintaining qiteo with the blessing and the curse--a type of negative feedback for cultural beliefs, values, and behavior--may actually have

positive feedback on the overall socio-natural system by increasing the development of the community as a whole.

#### The Adaptive Process in Review

Returning now to a specific consideration of the ecological model presented in Figure 2.1, the first portion of the model, "antecedents" and "the existing socio-natural system," outlined how past and present systemic processes interact with individual characteristics to shape behavior in old age. The second portion of the model, "the adaptive process," focused on the behavior of old people and on how those behaviors can have a feedback influence on the socio-natural system itself. Figure 8.1 below concretely demonstrates how the behavior of elderly in Meru fits within the model.

The following discussion of Figure 8.1 reiterates the behaviors which were identified earlier as the principal strategies used by elderly to meet their physiological and psychological needs. It then traces the feedback effects of these behavioral strategies on systemic processes.

#### Establishing a Family

The primary behavioral alternatives available to elderly in Meru all derive in some way from the ideology of giteo. Marrying, having children and providing well for them lies at the core of giteo norms. Provision for offspring entails either giving children land or educating them to get jobs off the farm. Educated children tend to

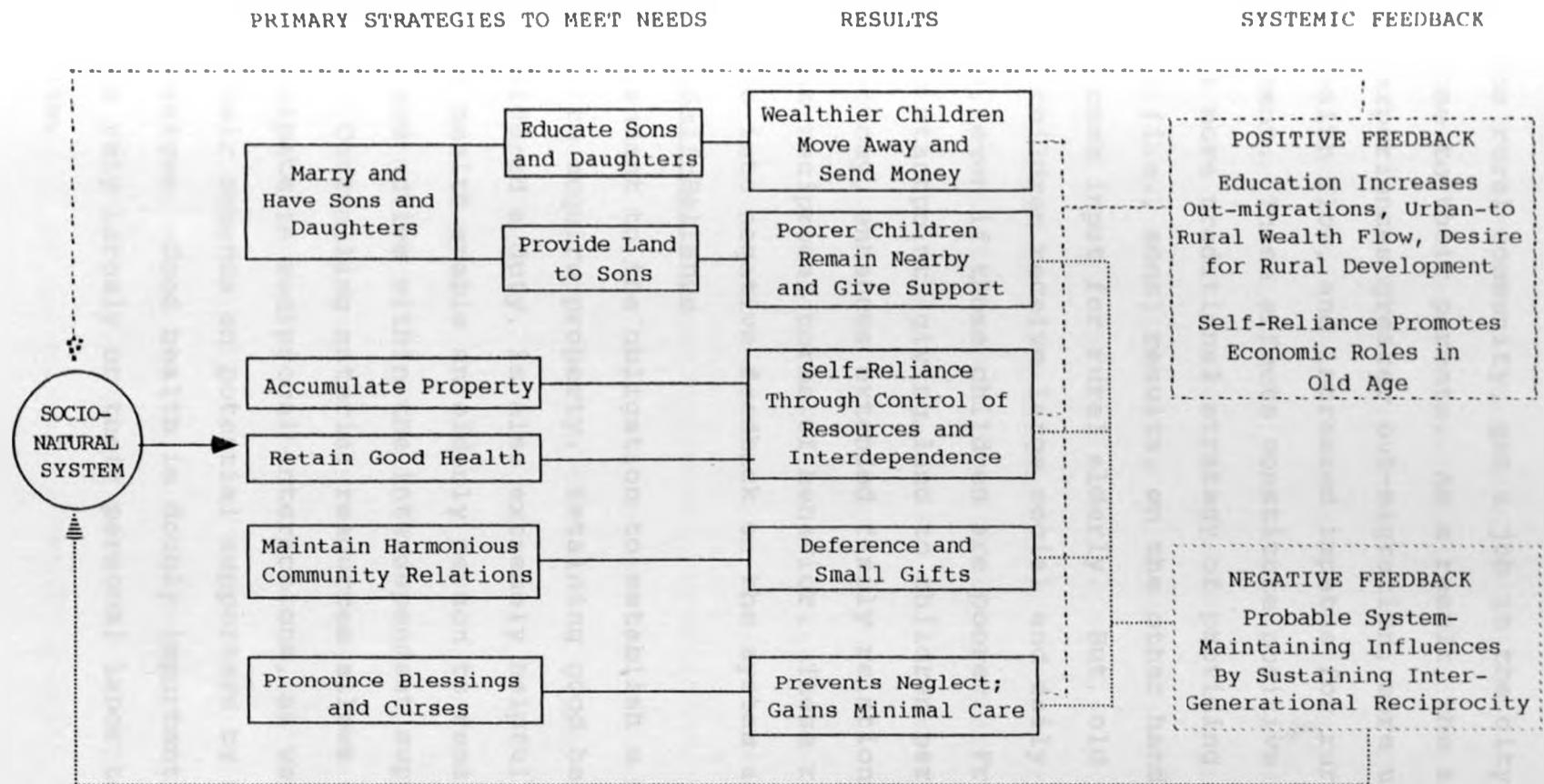


Figure 8.1: The Adaptive Process in Review

leave the rural community, get a job in the city, and send money home to their parents. As a result, the socio-natural system experiences greater out-migration, more urban-to-rural wealth flow, and increased impetus for rural development. These effects constitute positive feedback.

The more traditional strategy of providing land to children (i.e., sons) results, on the other hand, in a smaller cash input for rural elderly. But, old people with near-by children receive large social and daily care benefits, even if those children are poorer. From a systemic standpoint, giving land to children perpetuates the rural economy, enhances extended family relationships, and maintains reciprocal norms of behavior. These results translate into negative feedback on the system as a whole.

#### Achieve Self-Reliance

Attendant to the obligation to establish a family is the duty to acquire property. Retaining good health, though not considered a duty, is also extremely helpful. Property and good health enable an elderly person to remain self-reliant and active within the interdependent support network. Controlling material resources allows old people to participate in reciprocal interactions, as well as to reduce their demands on potential supporters by providing for themselves. Good health is doubly important to old women who rely largely on their personal labor to contribute.

Self-reliance and interdependence appear to have largely negative feedback upon the socio-natural system. Both preserve the behavioral interactions and norms of interdependence upon which Meru society rests. Yet, in another sense, pursuing self-reliance makes it easier for old people to assume productive economic roles to replace the traditional social roles they are losing. This process involves positive feedback.

#### Maintaining Harmonious Relationships

In addition to personal and family components, an old person with proper qiteo keeps good relationships with others in the community, including advising the youth. Although this particular behavioral strategy generally does not elicit significant material assistance from community members, it does enhance a person's reputation and status and, therefore, meets important psychological needs. Thus, this particular strategy also reinforces qiteo, introducing more negative feedback.

#### Blessing and Cursing

Finally, as noted above, continuing belief in the potency of the blessing and curse of elders offers a passive means of participating in the reciprocal network for those who have lost the ability to take part in a more active manner. The blessing and the curse ensures only minimal access to material assistance. However, the blessing and the curse allow an old person to retain a small amount of

power over others and some self-control over their own destiny. The blessing also enables an old person to contribute to others in a small way, reinforcing self-esteem and providing meaning.

As in the case of self-reliance and harmonious relations, belief in the blessing and the curse exerts primarily negative feedback on the system by maintaining reciprocal norms and behavior. However, all actions which preserve qiteo may also generate some positive feedback, as noted above. Practicing intergenerational reciprocity in the contemporary context appears to introduce additional change agents into rural socio-natural systems through the strengthening of rural-to-urban ties.

#### Summary

The fore-going analysis reveals only minimal causal linkages at the individual level between the contributions of old people and the helping behavior they receive from their children. Given this lack of correlation, support for the hypothesis that contributions increase helping behavior remains inconclusive. However, analysis of overall community behavior patterns shows that elderly make extensive long-term and on-going contributions to their families. Furthermore, data also reveal that elderly in general are quite successful in achieving self-reliance and obtaining assistance from their children when needed. Thus, some support exists for the hypothesis at the

community level. Cross-community and/or cross-cultural comparisons are needed to confirm or disprove these findings.

Regarding systemic feedback, some evidence exists for positive feedback from elders' support of formal education upon demography and economy. Evidence for negative feedback is less conclusive. Continuing belief in the blessing and the curse does help to preserve the basic qiteo ideology. However, preservation of that ideology in some cases only serves to introduce more extensive social and economic change into the community. Overall, the conceptual usefulness of the model to explain the process of adaptation has been demonstrated.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION: THEORETICAL AND APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation examines old age in southern Meru, Kenya, from the perspective of an ecological systems model. An ecological approach offers a systemic way to incorporate both individual and structural influences on old age. Furthermore, it highlights the contributions of old people as a means of ensuring their care and social integration, and it emphasizes their potential to assist the on-going process of development. This potential is especially critical outside the western industrialized world where the needs for economic and social development are greatest.

#### Theoretical Considerations

The ecological systems model provided a useful conceptualization of the dynamics of old age in Meru. It generated interesting questions about the adaptive importance of old age and about the interrelationships between individual behavior and systemic change. Given its focus on the contributions of old people, it also has useful applied implications.

#### Understanding the Dynamics of Old Age

First, the ecological model facilitated an analysis of internal systemic influences on behavior in old age. In southern Meru, for example, area ecology had a recognizable

impact on culture. The rapidly rising mountain slopes shaped agricultural subsistence patterns and social organization. Life on the ridges centered around patrilineal clans, an ideal social unit by which to oversee the distribution of land at different elevations in several ecological zones. The rugged terrain further molded Meru society by encouraging a complex, fragmented social order composed of warring "ridgetop" communities loosely tied to other communities by real and fictive kinship.

Moreover, the socio-natural system which evolved on the slopes of Mt. Kenya influenced the nature of old age. Within this fluid, fragmented social context, elders' memory of inter-community bonds was essential. A gerontocratic social system favoring elderly men and strong reciprocal norms for behavior, called giteo, developed.

Secondly, the model also takes note of extra-systemic influences. In the case of Meru, the most important external catalysts for change arrived with British colonial administration in the early twentieth century. Contact with European society and economy brought wide-spread change to the localized socio-natural systems occupying the ridges of southern Meru. The immediate enforced cessation of warfare, the gradual incorporation of communities into a colonial and a world economy by the introduction of cash crops such as coffee and tea, and the diffusion of new ways of thinking

and organizing the world through formal education and missions--all brought far-reaching changes.

This culture contact altered the experience of old age. Formal organs of government subsumed the elders' function as political administrators and adjudicators. The need for memory of inter-community and inter-clan ties declined with the cessation of warfare and the eroding of traditional beliefs. Diminished role clarity and meaning in old age accompanied the loss of socially defined age grades in the life course. The importance of old people came to depend primarily on their productive potential throughout the entire life course, including old age.

In addition to analyzing these structural influences on well-being in old age, the model also examines the consequence of personal factors. In Meru, the single most critical individual factor is whether a person has conformed to reciprocal norms of behavior by marrying, having children, and providing well for them. While a few elders have enhanced their position in old age by getting an education and an off-farm job, the import of these considerations pales in comparison to living in accord with giteo values.

The model subsequently traces how systemic and individual components combine to shape personal behavioral choices in old age. Individual preparation over the life course directly affects the quality of life in old age.

Systemic influences such as current ecological relationships, behavioral norms, social organization, and political economy set the boundaries within which individual behavior in old age occurs.

The model organizes the analysis of these influences by focusing on the individual characteristics generated by personal and systemic factors. These characteristics-- health, property, productive contributions, memory and cultural knowledge, authority and control, and reciprocal bonds--all determine the behavioral alternatives available to an old person.

In contemporary Meru, the most attractive behavioral alternatives for elders are retaining control of the means of production and/or personal labor and maintaining reciprocal interaction with their immediate families. The vast majority of old people prepare for old age by staying productive as long as possible. Old men often accomplish this goal by retaining control of land and the labor of others, such as younger wives and dependent children. Old women depend more on their own personal ability to contribute to the family by cultivating and performing various domestic tasks.

Maintaining strong reciprocal bonds with children is important as a secondary social security net. Giteo ideals require a good parent to provide the means of livelihood to their sons. In the present environment, such provision

often includes an education as well as land. The dominant belief is that educated children will have better incomes and be able to support their parents in old age more easily.

Finally, the model facilitates the analysis of the behavior of old people with regard to its effectiveness in attaining individual needs and for its impacts on the socio-natural system. In the case of Meru, elderly appear to successfully achieve their goal of self-reliance. Many also manage to educate their children. The effects of that education upon the support elderly receive in old age is less positive, however. Children who do well academically and get good jobs tend to move away to larger urban centers. Although these children send money and gifts, poorer and less well-educated children usually live near elderly parents and provide them with essential daily care and companionship. Furthermore, the current state of the national political economy often leaves job-seekers wanting and frustrates the long-range plans of many parents.

From the standpoint of systemic outcomes, the model suggests that the behavior of old people impacts ecology, social organization, economics, norms and other aspects of the local socio-natural system through feedback loops. If the customary behavioral choices of old people meet their needs successfully, then existing behavior patterns are reinforced, contributing to overall systemic equilibrium. If, however, behavioral choices fail to satisfy needs, old

people must choose alternative behaviors in order to survive. These innovative choices alter overall behavior patterns, contributing to change in the socio-natural system. Evidences for these processes of change in Meru are presented below.

Thus, in summary, the ecological approach chosen facilitated an in-depth description of the dynamics of old age in the rural agricultural communities under study. The model provided a useful conceptual framework within which to examine the interaction between the behavior of individual old people and the overall processes of the socio-natural system.

#### Adaptive Contributions and Care

This study addressed two key hypotheses arising from the ecological systems model. First, the model implies that the value of the contributions made by old people directly impacts the quality of care they receive from younger members of society. In other words, if physiologically weak old people enhance the adaptability of their society, more vigorous younger people will try to prolong their lives.

Individual level data from the study do not confirm this hypothesis. No conclusive positive correlations were found between measures of elder contributions and care-giving behavior. Possibly, a failure to obtain data which adequately discriminates between these variables

contributed to this lack of significant statistical relationships.

However, the hypothesis should not be rejected without further examination. The elderly in Meru make extensive contributions to their society and younger members of Meru society give their elderly a significant amount of care. Thus, additional research is needed to test this hypothesis—either in the form of more rigorously designed research in similar communities or cross-cultural comparison studies.

#### Systemic Feedback

A second pivotal hypothesis arising from the model is that both positive (system-changing) and negative (system-maintaining) feedback occurs between the behavior of individual old people and overall systemic processes. Evidences for positive feedback were found. By vigorously supporting the formal education of their children, the present generation of elders generated an increase in out-migration and an influx of money and goods into the community from the national economy.

On the other hand, evidence for negative feedback are less conclusive. On the surface, continuing belief in the blessing and the curse appears to have a system-maintaining influence. That belief helps to preserve traditional giteo ideology and reciprocal behavior patterns. However, maintaining that ideology in current social and economic circumstances may actually increase the influence of other

change-producing factors. By ensuring that children with off-farms jobs stay in close contact with their parents, giteo exposes the community to individuals with strong desires for rural development. Thus, no definitive conclusions can be drawn from this analysis regarding negative feedback within a social system.

#### Overall Evaluation

On the whole, then, an ecological systems perspective proved to be a very useful framework from which to analyze old age in southern Meru. The model needs further refinement and more research to test its central hypotheses. But, an ecological approach to the study of aging holds a great deal of promise.

#### Applied Humanitarian Concerns

As noted initially, pragmatic humanitarian and developmental concerns heavily motivated this research. Several of these applied issues will now be addressed.

#### Usefulness of Elderly in Transitional Societies

When slowly evolved cultures enter the modern international political economy, satisfying and purposeful old age can be lost. The findings of this study show, however, that old people can retain a meaningful role in societies in transition. In the case of southern Meru, current strategies to maintain importance in old age involve undertaking economic contributions to replace declining social roles. An overall drop in status and prestige

appears inevitable as elderly cease to be valued as unique storehouses of essential knowledge. However, in communities like Meru where the social fabric is merely reshaped and not completely rent, old people can remain integrated into communal life and maintain a meaningful place in society despite changes and inevitable losses.

#### Elderly at Risk

In no way can it be said, however, that all elderly in southern Meru remain well-integrated in society. Nor do all old people achieve an adequate level of need satisfaction, especially during dependent years. The indigenous ideology of giteo continues to delineate guidelines for care-giving to elders. Still, individuals who do not fit into the giteo-defined reciprocal network miss out on extensive daily care and social interaction.

#### Women at Risk

It comes as no surprise that women are more at risk than men. Old men require more daily care than women, since they customarily do not cook or perform many other essential domestic tasks for themselves. But, local custom gives men distinctly advantageous access to labor and productive resources. For example, men bequeath and inherit the land. According to the most common pattern, an elderly man parcels out land use rights to his sons as they marry, retaining the youngest son's portion for his own use. Rarely does an elderly man deed all his land over to his sons before his

death. Contrarily, few women own land. Widows are customarily allocated a small portion for their own subsistence, but even that land usually remains in the son's name. These customs give women much less power over their sons than that accessible to old men.

Secondly, men marry later than women and generally have younger wives, sometimes much younger. An old man is usually assured of the labor of a relatively vigorous and active spouse throughout his life. His younger wife cares for his domestic needs and cultivates his cash and food crops. Women tend to marry older men and face several years of widowhood. Fortunately, older women have greater productive value to the household, in terms of domestic work and child care, something which perhaps partially offsets their lack of power resources.

#### Widows Without Sons

A woman with sons usually can rely on assistance from a son, his wife and his children. Women with only daughters face a more difficult time. They often live on a small portion of the husband's land and have only occasional contact with their daughters' families. Women with no children at all are in an even worse predicament. The problem facing childless women is not lack of access to essential means of production, but lack of access to labor and daily care should they become ill or disabled.

### Divorced Women

An even more precarious existence faces a divorced woman. She must rely on the kindness of an often unenthusiastic and sometimes hostile male sibling to obtain sufficient land for a dwelling and subsistence. Such a woman often arrives at a state of poverty long before old age. Her poverty places her children at such a disadvantage that they may be unable to assist her even if they are willing. Childless divorced women have no guaranteed access to either land or labor.

### Men at Risk

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Old men without wives and children in southern Meru usually receive care from one of their brother's families. Since one of the main avenues to status achievement is through rearing a respectable family, childless old men may receive little respect. But, the burden of caring for a childless brother, if he is relatively well-liked, will customarily be shouldered by his male siblings. He is of their blood and he is their responsibility, even if he has basically wasted his life. Of course, if that brother accumulated a little property along the way, even a few goats or a small plot of land somewhere, the probability of willing assistance becomes much greater.

If, on the other hand, a man left home when young and failed to maintain periodic contact with his family through the years, or if dissension over past land disputes and

interpersonal conflicts cloud relationships with bitterness, an old man may find himself truly alone. Such old men can end up in old-age homes. According to the personal accounts of several male old-age home residents, a life-long struggle with poverty was often another dominant factor leading to their abandonment.

#### Comparison of Marginal Elderly

In summary, divorced women are the most likely to experience a difficult life in old age, followed by childless widows and widows without sons. Men without wives and children who are on poor terms with their brothers' families constitute another group in jeopardy. Finally, the pall of poverty weighs heavy on all these categories. One common saying in Meru is: "No one with property dies alone." If that is true, then the converse may also be true: "One without property may be deserted even by his own sons."

#### Elderly Support Needs in Southern Meru

The overall picture of aging in Meru is not one of idyllic old age in the bosom of family and community for all. A wide range of individual variation exists. Some dependent old people do very well indeed, a few are quite badly off, and most lie somewhere in between. Sons commonly care for their elderly parents, but the quality of that care ultimately depends on the son's ability and willingness. The divorced and childless few, especially women, live very

poorly in every observed instance. The extra-familial community support net is extremely weak and provides only bare subsistence.

In terms of policy recommendations, first, maximize the tendency of elders to stay self-reliant. Encourage and expand income generation projects for elderly such as Helpage Kenya's "Goats for the Elderly." In agricultural communities like southern Meru, safeguard elders' access to small subsistence shambas, particularly as population pressure exacerbates land scarcity. Giving old people occasional assistance with heavy farm tasks such as tilling the land and transporting their produce to market prolongs their self-reliance.

Secondly, strengthen existing informal support networks. With the lack of governmental resources for national social security, altering the kin-based care network would be counter-productive. Those with sons and willing brothers--by far the majority of elderly--should continue to live with them. Providing a small amount of monetary assistance, such as tax relief, to primary caregivers could enhance care for dependent elderly with immediate family.

Third, expand community assistance for marginal elderly, especially for childless and divorced women. Old-age homes offer one possibility, but many elderly do not wish to leave their lifelong residences. Moreover,

institutionalization is expensive. Developing community-based assistance programs through the Ministry of Social Development, NGOs, churches, women's groups and other community organizations presents a more attractive alternative.

Most dependent elderly in rural communities require only minimal assistance. Old people basically need someone to cook for them and provide a little labor around their house and small shamba. Some need one-time assistance to construct more adequate shelter and occasional help with major home upkeep. Enabling elderly to begin small income generating projects, such as selling bananas sold at the market or providing them with a very small monthly grant for purchasable necessities, would meet a secondary level of need.

From an economic and organizational standpoint, with the large number of children and unemployed youths in these communities, it should be possible to find individuals willing to assist old people in return for a very minimal salary or just for "room and board." Perhaps a variation of the "Adopt a Grandparent" program now in existence in some industrialized countries could work. These community-based approaches would possibly require monitoring by a local nurse or welfare worker. However, a very small amount of money combined with creative organization could yield adequate care for needy elderly in rural agricultural

communities. More expensive, and less culturally acceptable, institutional care in old-age homes could be reserved for those with severe disability and very serious chronic health problems.

However, given the weak cultural precedents for non-familial assistance to elderly, the success of such a policy would depend on sensitive information dissemination to educate people about the importance of caring for elderly without family and/or without adequate care. Extensive consultation would be needed with local political and informal leaders and grass roots organizations to heighten recognition of the needs of over-looked dependent elderly and to create interest in the issue. Local leaders and organizations should then take the initiative in community-centered assistance.

Finally, in terms of infrastructural needs, the increasing numbers of old people require better rural services for elderly residents. Rural doctors and other health care professionals should be trained in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases associated with old age. Local institutions--village dispensaries, clinics, and regional hospitals at Chogoria and Chuka--provide basic medical facilities. However, personnel with training in geriatric medicine will become more and more essential.

### Applied Developmental Concerns

An ecological perspective coincides closely with recent attempts to look at the developmental potential of old people. The ecological viewpoint identifies the root cause of declining status and treatment as the loss of adaptive roles. The most effective solutions to the problems of old age, therefore, do not lie in trying to control social transformations, but in finding adaptive roles for elderly within new socio-natural contexts. Several possibilities exist.

Elders' memory and knowledge of cultural heritage continue to hold promise. It is true that the value placed on traditions and oral history has dropped precipitously. However, the experiences of many other peoples throughout the world suggest that someday the Meru will again become very interested in their unique cultural heritage. The current emphasis on exploring indigenous traditions in social studies classes should continue and be enhanced. Mass media--newspapers and radio--could more actively combat the idea that ethnic traditions and oral history are unimportant in the "new Kenya."

Furthermore, elderly continue to act as relationship counselors, a valuable service--especially in times of social change. Increasingly the values of older people may conflict with existing behavioral norms. However, the

wisdom of elders can in many cases still help to preserve family harmony and community solidarity.

As a by-product, enhancing the social contributions of elderly reduces ageism, improves informal care-giving to elderly, and places less drain on governmental resources. Of course, a more meaningful and satisfying old age follows as well.

Last, and perhaps most important from the standpoint of development, is the exploitation of elders' productive potential. Elderly are essential participants in overall agricultural production in Meru. Doubtless, they will become even more important as greater numbers of young adults migrate to the cities. In a region such as Meru which grows large amounts of coffee and tea, the activities of older producers directly affect national foreign exchange earnings. Good economic sense, therefore, suggests facilitating their productivity. During the course of the research, many elderly informants expressed a need and a wish for capital to intensify their agricultural production or to start small businesses. Since elderly are stable, responsible community members, establishing a loan program for old people should have a positive benefit for everyone, including the national economy.

#### Recommendations to Elderly Meru

Finally, after addressing humanitarian and developmental concerns from the standpoint of general

policy, the viewpoint of the elderly themselves should be considered. What behavioral choices make the most sense from the perspective of an old person in Meru? Quite simply, acquire and retain control over enough land and labor to supply personal needs in dependent older years.

The most logical path to that goal for both men and women at the present time is adhering to giteo--in other words, marrying and having a family. Given present behavioral realities, children--particularly sons--are still the primary source of social security. Thus, despite the very real problems associated with population increase in Kenya, it is logical for a person in Meru to produce enough offspring to assist them in their final years.

For a man, the surest avenue to security consists of marrying a younger wife who will care for his domestic needs and till his land. Children provide an important security reserve. Women should anticipate relying on their own strength and vigor and on the good graces of their sons in their old age. In both cases, the reciprocal parent-child bond holds great significance, but that bond is doubly important for women.

Meeting reciprocal obligations and establishing social debt can be accomplished in different ways. A parent can educate their child and get them an off-farm job or bequeath land to them. Educating a child reduces their demands on a parent, especially if land is limited. However, in terms of

social security value in old age, it is better to give children land nearby so they can provide daily care if needed. The better educated children tend to leave home and only send money and gifts.

#### Gerontological Importance of Research Findings

This dissertation has important implications for cross-cultural gerontology. First of all, it demonstrates the power of a truly contextualized study of old age. Social gerontology has been plagued conceptual and methodological perspectives which produce shallow, unidimensional analyses of the process of growing old.

For example, Cowgill and Holmes's "modernization theory" continues to generate studies which center on the relationship between socio-cultural change and the status and treatment of elderly.<sup>1</sup> Although much of this research has become more sophisticated in recent years, its narrow focus still overlooks many of the rich nuances of human culture and seriously oversimplifies the ambiguities of human behavior.

As this dissertation shows, moving from a slowly evolved behavioral adaptation to a more "modern" way of life is a highly complex transformation. Deeply rooted cultural meanings, such as the principles of giteo in Meru, often resist change and survive to influence current thinking and

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of these studies were cited in Chapter 2.

actions. Behavior which seems anomalous in contemporary society, such as the blessing and the curse in Meru, coexists alongside "modern" philosophies and ideas. Old and new are synthesized, blended, and combined in any number of ways. The resulting behavior patterns, including those which involve the status and treatment of elderly, defy simple categorization and unidimensional analysis. Shallow methodologies and simplified explanations gloss over the real meaning of old age.

To arrive at a valid understanding of aging, specific populations of old people must first be thoroughly studied within their cultural and social contexts. Having done so, researchers can then reasonably make comparisons to old age in other contexts and generalize about the nature of status, care-giving, and other components of human aging.

Secondly, the research provides an interesting point of comparison with studies on care-giving patterns done in the United States and other industrialized countries.

Gerontological investigations clearly document that most actual day-to-day care-giving in the United States is provided by females. Care-givers are usually adult daughters, daughters-in-law or spouses (Brody 1981; Horowitz 1985; Sherman et al. 1988; Kaye and Applegate 1990).

Interestingly, the gender care-giving pattern in southern Meru is quite similar to that in the United States. Giteo ideology clearly specifies that sons are responsible

for providing care to dependent parents. Despite this fact, however, females--usually son's wives--provide most daily care for elderly. In practice, the son simply must ensure that his parents are cared for; his wife actually delivers the daily domestic assistance. My findings, therefore, underscore that female care-giving is not specific to industrialized societies.

Going further, western-oriented gerontologists suggest that traditional sex-role stereotyping generates gender differences in care-giving behavior. In the West, traditional masculinity is instrumental and traditional femininity is expressive; males are socialized to master specific tasks and women, to focus on interpersonal relationships (Parsons and Bales 1955; Bakan 1966; Block 1984). Women, therefore, are more caring and thus more suited to perform direct care-giving tasks (Gilligan 1982; Kaye and Applegate 1990).

My research failed to uncover any evidence for similar constellations of male/instrumental and female/expressive traits in Meru. Yet, the pattern of female care-giving persists. In Meru, the reason for the dominance of females in elder care-giving lies, quite simply, in a very distinct male/female division of labor. Women perform nearly all domestic tasks; they cook, wash, and carry water for everyone, including any dependent old person who may happen to live in the household. Though this division of labor

does involve gender role stereotyping and socialization, the content of socialization in Meru differs greatly from the West. Meru men demonstrate a great deal of sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, and, for that matter, Meru women appear to have just as much task orientation as males. These findings suggest that using the male-instrumental/female-expressive stereotype to explain female care-giving patterns in this country deserves more critical examination.

Finally, the same non-contextualized, variable-analysis approach that constrains modernization studies also limits much of the existing literature on care-giving. The prevalence of this methodology can be seen in a recent review of care-giving literature by Biegel, Sales, and Shulz (1991). Though that work cites several authors who address the impact of "contextual variables" on care-giving, the only variables specified are very generalized factors--gender, age, race, ethnicity, marital status, employment, economic status, health, and living arrangements. These important, but over-simplified, concepts cannot account for the rich texture and variation of human aging.

#### Generalizability of Findings

This study has emphasized the intergenerational reciprocity, symbolized in giteo ideology, that undergirds the social context for aging in Meru. Numerous African ethnographies describe similar patterns of behavior (Raum 1940; Fortes 1949; Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950; Evans-

Pritchard 1951; Douglas 1963; Middleton 1965). Meru is, therefore, by no means unique in this regard. The importance of reciprocal bonds and intergenerational exchange has been widely recognized in studies of aging as well. For example, Cattell (1990) noted the implications of reciprocal networks for elderly in western Kenya; Moore (1978) refers to social exchanges which transpire throughout the lifetime in Tanzania; and Togunu-Bickerseith (1989), Peil (1985, 1988) and others discuss similar phenomena in West Africa. Furthermore, intergenerational wealth flows have been the focus of considerable analysis and discussion among demographers (Caldwell 1976, 1982; Dow and Werner 1983).

The findings of this study, therefore, have broad relevance and importance outside of Meru. In all societies where intergenerational reciprocity is an established current or former cultural phenomenon, many of the conclusions drawn regarding aging in Meru will be instructive to policymakers and others.

Finally, this study emphasizes the need to accentuate the important role played by elderly in rural development in developing countries. Old people already make significant contributions; their labor and management skills significantly enhance the productivity of rural African communities. The need for their input will doubtless increase as AIDS takes its course through younger populations (see Torrey et al. 1988; McGrath 1990).

APPENDIX A  
EVENTS CALENDAR FOR MWONGE

Age Group	Date	Event
Kibae	1890	Kibae A.G. circumcised
Kang'nori	1893	Kang'nori A. G. circumcised Mururungo famine Plagues of smallpox, jiggers, rats Many Kamba refugees came to Chuka
Kiremu	1895 1896	Kiremu A. G. circumcised Mbogoni invasion of Chuka
Murango	1900	Murango A.G. circumcised
Irangu	1905 1908	Irangu A.G. circumcised British soldiers camped at Chuka
Miriti/Kaburu	1913 1914 1917	Miriti A.G. circumcised D.O. first came to Chuka "Nchangiri" Embu-Meru Road constructed WWI ("German War") began Young men abducted for war
Kimuti	1918 1920	WWI ended Kimuti A.G. circumcised Kiaramu/Kithioro Famine "Kithioro" Embu-Meru road constructed Kenya officially became British colony
Nkongge	1921 1922 1923	Dr. Evans, PCEA, came to Chogoria Identity cards were first issued Nkongge A.G. circumcised One shilling coin introduced PCEA splits; Salvation Army arrived
Kiruja	1926 1927 1928	Kiruja A.G. circumcised Eclipse of the sun PCEA built school at Ndiruni/Kierini Earth tremor Famine of locusts

Kiambutu	1931	Kiambutu A.G. circumcised
		First locusts campaign
	1932	Chuka transferred from Embu to Meru
	1933	Catholic mission came to Chuka
Kaburu II	1934	Kaburu A.G. circumcised Gov't lowers female circumcision age
Njaban	1939	Njaban A.G. circumcised WW2 ("Italian War") began
Guantai	1942	Guantai A.G. circumcised
		Locusts passed through the region
	1943	Famine of Cassava
	1944	Camels passed, taken to soldiers
	1945	WW2 ended
Kianjuri	1946	Kianjuri A.G. circumcised
Kiandindi	1950	Kiandindi A.G. circumcised
	1952	Beginning of the Emergency
Kiamatuma	1953	Kiamatuma A.G. circumcised
	1954	Fierce Mau Mau fighting began in Meru
Kiamuruthi	1958	Kiamuruthi A.G. circumcised
	1960	End of the Emergency
	1961	Mafriko torrents (Muntu wa Makembo)
	1963	Independence
	1964	Public election of chiefs
	1969	National population census
	1973	First OTC bus to Meru

APPENDIX B  
ELDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Sex:
2. Age (Note how determined):
3. Education:
4. Occupation:
5. Marital Status:
6. Relationship to Household Head:
7. Type of Household:
8. Number in Household:
9. House Construction Type:
10. Socio-Economic Status:

- 
1. How much land do you personally own? Have use of?
  2. Do you read and write:     Kimeru       Kiswahili     English
  3. Informant's activity at arrival (Record date, time, location):
  4. What is it like to grow old here?
  5. How do you personally feel about growing old? What is good/bad?
  6. Using the ladder as an aid, how would you compare your life with that of other people of your age group here? Explain.
  7. What do you think about the relationship between old people and young people these days?
  8. What about the relationship between elderly and middle-aged?
  9. Do elderly people today have a problem with loneliness? Why?
  10. What kinds of things do you usually do?

Economic:  
Domestic:  
Social:



28. Using the ladder, how do you rate your overall health in comparison to others your age?
29. Using the ladder, how do you rate your health in comparison to yourself when younger?
30. What illnesses did you have in the past month? How long did they last? How much did they limit your work and activity?
31. What kind of health care (e.g., dispensary, doctor) have you used during the past month? How often?
32. When did you last visit a traditional healer?
33. What medications are you taking now?
34. What chronic (long-standing) illnesses or disabilities do you have? How do these problems limit your work and activities?
35. How often have you been to hospital in the last year? For what reason?
36. How many days last month did sickness limit your activity?
37. What is the most important way you help your family and community?
38. Do you feel that you are useful to your family?
39. How does your life compare with your father/mother's life when they were your age? Why is it different today?
40. If you had the opportunity to live your life that way, would you?
41. Do you see yourself as important in preserving Kimeru traditions?
42. In what ways do you help preserve traditions?
43. When was the last time you did such things as tell stories or relate oral history?
44. Is advice-giving an important contribution?
45. How often do you give advice? When was the last time your gave advice?
46. What was your relationship to the person?

47. What problem caused the person to need your advice?
48. Do you ever give advice about such matters as family planning and sexual behavior?
49. Is solving disputes an important contribution for you?
50. How often do you solve disputes? When was the last time you helped to solve a dispute?
51. What was your relationship to the disputants?
52. What was the nature of the dispute?
53. In what ways could people of your age group help the community if they were given the opportunity? What prevents them?
54. What preparations did you make (or, are you making) for old age? Are you satisfied with the results?
55. Why do young people help the elderly? (I.e., what kinds of things motivates them to help?) What is the most important motivation?
56. Do some people help because of desire for blessings? For fear of the curse? Give me an example of how blessings/curses cause people to help.
57. How do you feel about the losses associated with old age? (E.g., menopause, libido, strength, health, age mates, status)

APPENDIX C  
AGING ATTITUDES SURVEY

- |                   |                           |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| A. Sex            | F. Relation to Hshe. Head |
| B. Age            | G. Migration History      |
| C. Education      | H. Household Type         |
| D. Occupation     | I. Number in Household    |
| E. Marital Status | J. Economic Well-Being    |

1. Do you help care for an elderly person? In what way? How often? What is your relationship to that person(s)? Where do they live?
2. What do you think about elderly people these days?
3. What makes an old person different from young or middle-aged?
4. Is there more than one category of elderly? (E.g., active/ inactive) What makes these groups distinctive?
5. How has the way people think about old age and old people changed from what it used to be?
6. What kinds of things should elderly people do?
7. Are those activities different for men and women?
8. What is the most important way that elderly help their families?
9. What kinds of things cause a person to be dependent in old age?
10. What kinds of assistance do old people usually need?
11. What are the customary expectations of society regarding family (and community) care and treatment of their elderly?
12. Ideally, who should take care of a dependent elderly person?
13. Are different family members responsible for providing different things? Who has the most responsibility, sons or daughters? What role do the sons' wives play?

14. How much of a burden is it for a family to provide care for an elderly parent or grand-parent these days? What kinds of problems does providing this care cause for those who are responsible?
15. What motivates people to care for an elderly person?
16. Who should care for an old person with no children?
17. In real life, what usually happens to an elderly person in that situation? Do you know anyone like that?
18. What do you think about old age homes for old people who aren't being cared for very well by their family or community?
19. Given your present financial circumstances, how would you feel about providing the primary support for:
  - a. your father/mother
  - b. your spouse's father/mother
  - c. an elderly relative (e.g., your father's brother)
  - d. an elderly neighbor
20. If you had only 1000/- and your father or mother needed the money for a new house and you needed it for a bicycle, radio, or some other item, what would you do?
21. If your son and your father or mother were both seriously ill and there was only one seat in the last vehicle of the day going to the hospital, who would you take? Why?
22. How have today's elderly prepared for their old age?
23. How is that different from the way people used to prepare?
24. How do people of your generation prepare for their old age?
25. What do you think about forced retirement?
26. What do you think about social security and pensions?
27. How important will these things be for you and most others of your age group here?
28. How could government assist elderly people of this village?
29. When was growing old better, now or in the past? Why?

30. How do you feel about growing old yourself?
31. What do you fear or dislike about growing old?
32. What will be good about getting older?
33. Where do you expect to live when you get old?
34. What are you doing to prepare for your old age?
35. Who will provide for your needs if you become dependent?
36. If you had to choose one elderly person to be similar to when you grow old, who would it be? Why?

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