

Determining Value of Commodities Among The Mbeere community In Pre-Colonial Kenya

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Abstract

For trade to flourish there should be acceptable measures of value. How the value of commodities is fixed depended on rules governing trade within the community and their neighbours. This article explores how value of commodities was determined in pre-colonial Mbeere community. It is argued that societal norms and desire for fair play was very crucial in sustaining not only local trade, but also within the region. Trade agreements through ritual of rebirth which brought the traders closer for mutual benefits. There was no exploitation of man by man, but trade acted as a medium through which communities interacted. The rules governing exchange rates were based societal norms and there penalties for those who attempted to have advantages over their partners.

Introduction

Trade may be defined as the buying and selling of commodities. For trade to take place there should be availability of goods and demand for those goods by a willing buyer and willing seller. Trade started between individuals, communities and nations because of the lack of commodities in one place which were found in other areas. There is no community endowed with all the necessary natural resources and human skills to make it economically self-sufficient. The Mbeere are no exception and they expressed it by saying “Kaigania aturirwe ni kagio ka Mbariki”, which literally means “self-sufficient was unable to get a piece of broken pot to extract oil from castor seed.” This tries to show that even the rich, with all the valuable things, can miss a minor article which they can find in plenty in a poor man’s homestead.

Trade, since ancient times, has been carried out between members of one ethnic group and sometimes with other ethnic groups living in close geographical regions, but producing different commodities. This occupational diversity, according to Van Zwannenberg, led to symbiotic interdependence and increased production diversity among the peoples of Kenya.

For the purpose of this work, trade will be divided into two subsections: trade in the period between 1600 and 1800 and trade in the period between 1800 and 1900. However, the division is purely for operationalization for both types of trade continued to operate at the same time.

Trade (1600 – 1800)

The period around AD 1600 is taken as the time when the Mbeere community became fully differentiated from their cousins: the Embu, the Kikuyu, the Chuka, the Mwimbi and the Meru. The year 1800 is taken as a time of departure from local trade to international trade, although local items continued to be traded. The Mbeere by 1600 had reached as far as the Ithanga plains in the present Murang’a District of Kenya where they had contact with the pastoral Maasai community.

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1. Oral interview Mbuya Mugoi Kirie sub-location
 2. Van Zwannenberg, R.M.A. and King, A. (1975). *An Economic History Of Kenya And Uganda 1800- 1970* (Dar-es-Salaam) pp 145-149.

The Mbeere practised agriculture and were able to exchange their produce such as millet, sorghum, gourds and pots in exchange for the livestock and their products. The same lucrative business also took place between the Maasai and the Kikuyu community. As a result of this trade the Mbeere began to accumulate wealth in form of livestock, leading to the raids and counter-raids. Nevertheless, trade between the two communities continued to flourish especially when the Maasai stock got depleted as a result of drought or when they needed grains and greens to supplement their staple food products. The relation between the two communities was restored through a ritual of blood brotherhood performed between Maasai leaders and Mbeere leaders under Kaviu wa Nthiga the patriarch of Mwea plains. The unity of purpose was cemented through intermarriages between the Maasai and the Mbeere which according to Professor Mwaniki led to Maasai names like Nyamwea or a person from Mwea to evolve. In Mbeere there were common names like Ciokavi (from Kwavi Maasai) to depict girls named after Maasai women. Apart from trading with the Maasai, the Mbeere initially traded with the Thigagi group which was a hunter-gatherer community. The Thigagi were skilled blacksmiths from whom the Mbeere learnt the art of iron work. The Mbeere must have initially bought iron implements from Thigagi to hunt and to clear bushes to prepare farms. There was also trade among the Mbeere themselves which might be called local trade.

Trade Organization and the Measure of Value among the Mbeere

The Mbeere occupied three ecological zones which enabled them to produce a variety of commodities. The purpose of this section is to show the interdependence of each of these ecological zones. The local trade was handled by family-based organizations and was normally small in volume since it involved locally produced items such as pottery, axes, knives, foodstuffs, animal products and the like. There was no fixed time for it but a person in need of a product inquired from the neighbours if there was any person willing to dispose of his products in exchange for what the seller had. If a willing buyer and a willing seller were found, the day was fixed for exchanging the products. The arrangement was that the person selling a goat or a pot would take his or her product to the homestead of the person with grains, honey or axes. The purpose of such arrangements was because more grains or honey was required for exchange which sometimes required about two people to carry as will be shown below. When trade took place between the Mbeere themselves, there were established rules to be applied to minimize the exploitation of one member by another. Trade, it would seem, was meant for supplementing household shortfalls rather than geared towards profits. People entered trade for the welfare of one another and if the products exchanged became productive it brought the parties involved into friendship.

In order to illustrate the exchange rate rules, we shall draw our examples from an exchange of a goat for grains and a goat for honey. In every village there were standard measures for buying goats in form of gourds or string bags. For a she-goat, which was more productive in form of milk and reproducing others through giving birth, was more valued than a he-goat. A standard gourd or a string bag was filled two times while placed on big string bag. The grains were put until they overflowed and the goat seller was asked to verify if it had and then he put the grains in his bag. A big calabash was placed on the string bag and filled with grains for removing the rope which the goat was tied with. A smaller calabash was filled to get the stick used to lead the goat to the buyers homestead and finally another calabash for the blessing ritual was given out. The seller of the goat and the buyer then took the goat to a place with grass or green leaves. The seller would bless the goat saying "tutu (emitting the chewed grains), let this goat be productive to you" after which the buyer would also say "let these grains help your children to live long".

After concluding the buying ritual, the two gave each an equal amount grains to be ground so that the witnesses could eat to formalize the transaction. The grains given to witnesses were called "ngenethe", and, if it was not given out and a dispute arose, the goat was returned to the owner. This ceremonial buying did not take place when the Mbeere traded with the Kamba, the Embu and the Tharaka or when goats were sold at a market place.

3. Muriuki, G. (1974). A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900 (Nairobi) pp 90-100
4. Mwaniki, H.S.K. (1985). The Living History Of Embu And Mbeere To 1906. (Nairobi) pp 24
5. Mwaniki op cit. pp 24
6. Oral interview Mbuya Mugoio op cit.
7. Oral, interview Mugoioyio Kathunju Evurori Sub-location.
8. This information was given by Joshua Kavyanyu and Cumuni Mukau Thambu Sub-location.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*

For a he-goat, one gourd was filled with grains plus the calabashes. This ritual buying of a goat was not only operational among the Mbeere, but also among the Meru. According to P. Mbae, the following procedure was followed:

To begin with, the measure of exchange was agreed upon. This was usually a string basket (Kitheti). After that, wet banana leaves were spread on the ground, and the Kitheti placed on the spread. Millet was put into the Kitheti to its overflowing capacity. That amount, plus whatever fell on the banana leaves was exchanged for a goat. To conclude the sale, B was supposed to add a mat-tray (Gitararu) full of millet, by which act A surrendered to B the right to rear the goat. Then A and B each contributed a calabash of millet for the witnesses.

According to Odhiambo, this type of arrangement was between equals and a state of exploitation did not arise. Market principle had not taken root and the two exchanged their products for self-sustenance and not for profit. While this arrangement was easy to apply at the time of plenty or when famine was less severe, one doubt if it could operate when there was great scarcity because the amount of grains carried was equivalent to four modern twenty litre tins.

The exchange of a goat for honey was accepted as one honey barrel but, due to ritual honey, the goat seller ended up carrying away two honey barrels. The person selling a goat carried with him two empty honey barrels in which honey was to be put. The standard honey barrel was filled with honey to the satisfaction of the goat seller. Then he was asked to dip his hands two times and all the honey he scooped out of the barrel became his. The barrel lid (ndari) was then filled with honey for blessing the goat. Apart from buying honey and grains, goats were used to buy cows where ten goats were equivalent to one cow while five goats were exchanged for an ox. Five axes for either clearing bush or for hollowing beehives were exchanged for a goat. This later changed to ten axes when they were exchanged with the Kamba in the 19th century.

The iron chain worn by old women was also exchanged for a goat, especially from the Kamba. A skin of Zebra or wild beast was exchanged for a goat from which beddings, straps, sandals or honey barrel covers were made. A sword for the warriors was bought with a goat by the young men who did not participate in iron smelting. A spear or a shield was equally bought with a goat by the warriors. Goats, before and during the 19th century acted as the medium of exchange for many products. Apart from exchanging products for goats, pots were also filled with grains for exchange. The Mbeere land had several places with clay soils for pottery such as Micegethiu, Ngurii, Ngura and parts of Evurori location. The potters took their products to places like Kirie, Iriaitune to exchange for grains. During the period of plenty the person in need of a pot mostly brew beer and then took it to a potter who would then make a pot for her.

Trade between the Embu and Mbeere to 1850

The trade relationship between the Embu and the Mbeere was very friendly due to their close ethnic affinity. The Mbeere referred to the Embu as a hut for getting grains (Ngucu ya Thuguri). Trade between the two communities fell under the following categories: offering commodities in exchange for other commodities; offering labour in exchange for foodstuffs and trading in organized markets.

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11. Odhiambo, A. (1973). "The Origins Of Peasantization Process In Kenya" International Congress of Africanists (Addis Ababa,) P6
 12. *ibid.* p9
 13. Oral interview Mbuya Mugoï tried to compare how goats were bought in his youth and the present measures.
 14. Oral interview Daudi Cierunde Kirie Sub-location
 15. *ibid.*
 16. Oral interview Joshua Kavyanyu *op cit.*
 17. *ibid.*
 18. Oral interview Ciambere Mwathi Kirie Sub-location
 19. Oral interview - Joshua Kavyanyu *op cit*

Barter Trade and exchange rates

The Embu occupy the slopes of Mount Kenya and the area is endowed with fertile soils and adequate rain-fall. Despite the abundance in food crops such as bananas, beans, sugarcane, arrowroots and even maize, the area lacked a variety of commodities that the harsh environment of the Mbeere could offer. When there was food shortage in Mbeere, they took their products while at, the time of plenty, the Embu usually went to Mbeere to get the goods they desired. The Mbeere mostly sold string bags, pots and gourds which the Embu filled with grains as a measure of value. Salt was in high demand in Embu where the high precipitation hindered formation of salt. The Mbeere got salt from salt licks found in various places, which they carried to Embu in bags. The salt was in high demand for both livestock and for cooking. Salt was usually exchanged for grains the seller was able to carry. This was so because the salt was normally a very heavy load and its value could only be determined the seller was able to safely carry home. The Mbeere also carried saline water in gourds which was exchanged for grains, bananas or cassava. The Embu bought salt for cooking and for their livestock.

Another commodity in high demand in Embu land was grinding stones (ithiga ria gukia). These were bought for grinding millet, finger millet and sorghum which they grew. According to one informant born in the 1880s, grains exchanged for one grinding stone was carried mostly by two women.

The Mbeere sold hides from both domestic and wild animals which the Embu needed for beddings and clothing. The Embu, before the mid 19th century, mostly covered themselves with banana leaves (mwagau). Their environment was not endowed with trees whose barks could produce fibres to make fibre skirts. They bought, from the Mbeere, large string bags with which they covered their circumcised girls with. The grains exchanged for a big skin was enough load for a woman.

Mwaniki had shown that the Mbeere bought arrow heads and spears from the Embu but it is doubtful if the Embu region had iron ore, bearing in mind that their rivers do not even have the normal sand due to the deep valleys and elevation of the area. To the contrary, most respondents argued that the Mbeere provided the Embu with axes, knives, arrowheads and bangles a tradition that continued to present period. This is confirmed by oral information and written records prior to his work. The Embu smiths used scrap metal to make the implements they required. The Mbeere also sold files (tunoro) to sharpen knives, pangas, arrowheads and spears. They also sold wooden products like walking sticks, clubs and bows.

Labour in Exchange for Grains between Mbeere and the Embu Peoples

This process of exchanging labour for grains was common in times of famine. One might wonder whether labour can qualify as a trade. However, most respondents were of the view that only those who did not have goods to sell provided labour for exchange with grains. The Mbeere organized themselves into groups and then moved to Embu seeking casual employment. The caravan was comprised of about ten or more people to ensure the security of one another on the route and in Embu land. A day was fixed for such a journey for all interested groups and the day they would return (usually after four days' labour). This system of exchanging labour for grains was called 'kurimia' as opposed to 'kwendia' when one went to sell commodities.

In Embu, they would be shown a big calabash in which grains were to be measured for a day's work. The rich Embu soils and rainfall mostly throughout the year caused labour constraint throughout the year. It is claimed that they were happy to employ the Mbeere in their farms. After four days' labour one would have enough loads to take home. If one worked well, he/she was asked to take more labourers to the same homestead after the grains were finished. This type of relationship was later cemented through the ritual of blood brotherhood (Giciaro) and after-wards the two homesteads would continue to visit each other at the time of plenty and time of scarcity. If such relationships existed, the members were given what they required without labouring.

20. Oral interview Ngugi Kiberio Kirie Sub-location.

21. Oral interview Ciambeere Mwathi op cit

22. The Embu even today depend on sand from Mbeere-land to construct their houses.

23. Ambler, C. (1988). Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism (New Haven) pp 87 – 88; oral interview Mugoioyio Kathunju op cit.

24. Oral interview Mrs. Muthure

The main hindrance to trade between Embu and Mbeere was the transportation system. Human portage was the main method of carrying goods. Some groups living at the banks of Tana River travelled over eighty kilometres to get to the Embu country. Before the Mbeere left their homes for Embu, they fixed the day they hoped to return so that their relatives could meet them to assist in carrying the load. This organization to go and meet those who had gone to look for food in Embu was referred to as Kuthugura among the Mbeere. The Mbeere from Kirie and Iriaitune met their counterparts at Yareru ford, in Ina River, while those from Evurori met their relatives at Kanyueri. Those from Nthawa met their counterparts at Kathanje ford near Riandu. When the two parties met, it was a period of rejoicing, especially if the counterpart was carrying a big load (Thuguri). It should be noted that although people moved in a caravan they did not pool resources nor did they share the profits but moved together for convenience, companionship and for safety.

Established Markets

Markets operated occasionally when there were crises, especially when a certain community needed the products of the other in great quantity. These markets were mostly organized to exchange goats for grains when the Embu required goats for circumcision ceremonies. The custom required that the initiate should be shaven his hair in which ceremony a goat was slaughtered.

The market place was agreed upon by the war leaders from both sides. They fixed the market day and suggested some of the products required by their people. These market places were known as Tugu by the Mbeere while the Embu called them Tigu. The most popular market before the mid 19th century was Mwombo-Mbweri in Riandu sub-location between the Mbeere of Nthawa and Embu of Kagaari. The Embu of Kathanjuri, Kwa Runyenje met with Mbeere of Evurori, Kiang'ombe and Mutitu at Ithuriri Ria Gatatha near Kanyuambora.

In such market places, the warrior groups escorted traders fully armed in case their opponents became dishonest. It would seem that these Tugu were seasonal and later declined as a result of dishonesty of the Embu warriors who started capturing the Mbeere girls. The Mwombombweri market declined in about 1850 due to such an incidence.

In these market places, bargaining was common and the prices depended on the law of supply and demand but in normal circumstances grains of a different type could be exchanged for another of equal measure.

In Evurori location in the 1870s, a war leader called Kinani Murumbi, who later became a Chief of Evurori location from 1906 to 1914, was famous for organizing market places with the Chuka and the Embu. After fixing market days with other war leaders from the Embu or the Chuka, a message was passed to all villages in Evurori, Kiang'ombe and in parts of Muminji location for people to take their products to the arranged market place. His caravan was called a vehicle of Kinani Murumbi (Ngaari ya Kinani Murumbi). All the participants met at Mwarange we Tiku near present day Ishiara market where Kinani would give them advice on how they were to go to Chuka or to Embu and the time to return. The warriors would follow them and camp at a reasonable distance from the market place. The warriors were rewarded with bananas, sugar cane, and cassava from every participant from the Mbeere side as protection fees. Kinani did not always accompany the traders but would send one of his assistants such as Mugweta whose son later became a chief from the 1920s or Gakunga wa Mwanika.

25. Oral interview Ngugi Kiberio, op cit; Mugoioyio Kathunju op cit and Muthakie Ngariama Riandu Sub-location.

26. Oral interview Ngugi Kiberio op cit and Ambler, op cit pp 74-82

27. *ibid.* pp 63-67; H.S.K. Mwanika op cit p 97

28. Mwanika op cit pp 150-153

29. *ibid.* pp 150-153

30. Oral interview Muthakie Ngariama op cit and H.S.K. Mwanika op cit pp 150-153

31. Muceceri Mukunga and Mugoioyio Kathunju Evurori Sub-location.

32. It was not clear why his caravan was called a vehicle (Ngaari) and modern vehicles had not reached the place by that date.

33. Oral interview Mugoioyio Kathunju op cit.

Kinani became very famous because of his organization skills such that young boys used to sing a 'Mbomboi' dance in his praise which went like this:

Kinani atwaraga ngaari na wara
 Kinani leads his caravan well
 Akinya kithama kigwa kumiariria
 When he gets to Kathama he advises them
 Nyaga murobua wa kwariria ngaari
 Nyaga you are good for your leadership.

The Mbeere had market places with Tharaka at Kamarandi, with Kikuyu at Kwa andu a Nyaga (Ruriiri kwa Andua Nyaga), with the Kamba at Riangombe, Kamukoma and Riagina fords.

Observation of Local and Regional Trade to 1800

Local trade arose as a result of the complementary needs of communities which were in close proximity to each other and therefore was a form of production strategy to have access to the required goods. Each household produced food not only for subsistence but also surplus to sustain it in case of disasters and, if there was no crisis, the surplus was disposed of through exchange to acquire other products. Traders involved in local trade were mostly women who did it on a part-time basis to secure the goods their households lacked. The trade was small in volume and numerous people participated especially at the time of crisis. The products exchanged were locally produced and diversity arose as a result of ecological differences and endowment of skills to exploit the available resources.

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34. Oral interview Muceceri Mukunga op cit.

35. Oral interview, Joshua Kavyanyu op cit. and Mwaniki op cit pp 150-153