

A PRECOLONIAL HISTORY OF THE
CHUKA OF MOUNT KENYA
c.1400-1908

by

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ABSTRACT

The major theme of this thesis is the growth and development of the ethnic group and the ethnic awareness of the Chuka people of Mt. Kenya region. The thesis begins with the earliest recorded traditions which have been dated c. 1400. It traces the origins and migrations of the three cultural and linguistic groups - Cushites, Paraniotes and Bantu - which interacted and went into the Chuka amalgam. It demonstrates that Chuka ethnicity which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not tribal or an expansion of kinship loyalties.

Despite the "youthfulness" of Central Kenyan historiography or perhaps because of it, a number of half-truths and historical myths have become a part of the literature of the area. The thesis seeks to demolish or clarify a number of these including the pure tribe theory, the ancient Bantu myth, assumptions of eastern origins, the Thagicu hypothesis and the primitive aboriginal Chuka image.

Ethnicity arose out of interaction between the Chuka and the ring of hostile peoples which surrounded them. Their neighbours were driven to covet their well-watered land, their abundant almost self-sufficient economy. The Chuka withdrew into a mountain fortress, perfected a military barracks system which embraced the entire adult male population and focussed their unity on the Mugwe spiritual authority. This occurred over a remarkably short period in the nineteenth century. The Chuka came under colonialism as a proud, unique and peculiar people, something of a mystery to their neighbours, the colonial authorities and modern writers.