



Time Travel at Meru museum

Land disputes and justice system, and the role of Njurincheke in Meru

Goals

- Understand the issue of land use and land grabbing today and how it is evolved from the past
- Shows the value of dialogue, the relevance of the Njurincheke and justice system
- The historical importance of the museum building and the Njuri Ncheke Shrine
- Introduce the Time Travel method as a way of reflection on a contemporary issue using a local heritage site

Facts

The Meru or Ameru people are a Bantu ethnic group that has lived on the fertile lands on the slopes of Mount Kenya as farmers and pastoralist.

The British made this the Eastern province of Kenya and appointed a District Commissioner to rule the province.

The primary British interest in Kenya was land, which according to the British East Africa Commission constituted "some of the richest agricultural soils in the world, mostly in districts where the elevation and climate make it possible for Europeans to reside permanently".

The British encouraged Europeans to settle in Kenya and they could obtain a disproportionate share in land ownership, especially in the fertile hilly regions. The first settlers arrived in 1902. Over the next three decades, the colonial government and settlers confiscated the land and consolidated their control over Kenyan land. The native Kenyans became wage labourers on the white farms. The British established a property registration system that individualized and commercialized land - contradictory to the local traditions of sharing and valuing land. There was plenty of conflict from the beginning and British troops carried out atrocities against the native population. The land expropriation became an increasingly bitter point of contention. In 1952 the conflict turned into open warfare, the Mau Mau uprising, and the British proclaimed State of Emergency. Boycotts and clashes followed and independence was finally achieved in 1963.

After independence, the government introduced a land reform and land adjudication started in Meru in 1963. The land was consolidated under a local land committee. For most people and most farmers land ownership was not an issue as land was communal. Those who were more active and new the law system managed to get hold of a lot of land. The largest chunks of land in Kenya went to rich Africans and the new political elite, who had the resources and power to buy it. From this

setting a part of land, consolidation of poor land justice system was sown and have continued to sprout, hence land issue and border disputes in Meru today. The way land was mapped has led to so many border disputes today. Many families feel they were cheated in the land reform and want justice. Also land grabbing, that is irregular privatization of public land, is an issue in today's society.

In the land committee, the role of Njuri Ncheke in land allotment was not captured, yet among the Ameru this council is the community's custodian of lands and involved in general administration. The Ameru have since the 17th Century been governed by elected and hierarchical councils of elders from the clan level right up to the supreme Njuri Ncheke Council. To become a member of the Njuri Ncheke is the highest social rank to which a Meru man can aspire. Their work requires wisdom, discipline, and knowledge of the traditions. The functions of the Njuri Ncheke are to make and execute community laws, to listen to and settle disputes, and to pass on community knowledge and norms across the generations in their role as the custodians of traditional culture. Local disputes will invariably first be dealt with by lower ranks of the elders (Kiama), then the middle rank (Njuri) and finally the Njuri Ncheke.

Sub-county border disputes are escalating today and leading to social suffering. The land question has attracted and rekindled the role of Ameru Council of Elders into land justice system, as providing alternative process of land border justice system. This role of the council of elders, Njuri Ncheke, is today seen as the most peaceful alternative justice system to land border issues in Meru region, and its fruits are itemized by few cross-border land issues and should be emulated.

The building housing the Meru museum dates to 1916. In the colonial era it served as an administrative node in the Mount Kenya region and housed the colonial District Commissioners office and the Magistrate Court. Also after independence it was the office of the District Commissioner. Meru museum opened its gates for public in 1st May 1978.

Scenario, Complaints on land grabbing of the school ground 1964

At the school, the school children, their parents and the teachers are upset. Yesterday the students and teachers noticed some new sticks and pegs on the school grounds. After a while they understood that it marked the boundaries of a person's land. The large-scale farmer next to the school, a local politician, was altering the borders and extending his land. He was trying to grab land from the school!

What to do? The head teacher immediately called the parents together. Nobody was prepared to accept, so this required actions. And already today, students, parents and teachers are on their way to complain and stop the land grabbing. They want to raise their grievances to the District Commissioner. So, they have walked to the DC's office and want to express their complaints. Will he allow them to do that? But actually they have more respect for the Njuri Ncheke and the traditional way of solving disputes.

The land reform has recently started in the Meru region under the lead of the District Commissioner. But is it a fair and just system? It seems that some people are able to get hold of most of the land.

When they reach the District Commissioner's office they are prepared to sit and wait. They will have time to prepare their complaints, to make protest placards and illustrations, maybe even a protest song. And they have also time to reflect. This is not the only border dispute in the area. How to solve all these disagreements? Is it possible to distribute land in a fair and just way? What is our solution? These conflicts over land need to have an end. Maybe we can present some ideas to the DC and the Njuri Ncheke today. And will the local farmer and politician be here to argue for his case? The situation is tense. What will happen?

Roles

The students are students from the affected school

Headteacher, teachers, parents

District Commissioner

Njuri Ncheke elder

Officials at the office

Farmer/politician

Everybody keep their age and gender

Key Questions

Land use, justice

- How do we distribute the land in a fair way?
- How do we solve border disputes, so people accept? How to bring justice? Can I influence the decision making?
- Visions of fair and just land use? Corruption?

Activities

Prepare the complaints, find solutions

- Write placard
- Prepare a speech or a poem
- Make posters, illustrations
- Prepare some simple food
- Songs and dances

Time Plan

08.00 Preparing the site

09.00 Students arrive, scenario, roles, rules

09.30 Initiation, District Commissioner

09.40 Activities, discussions.

10.20 Presenting the complaints for the DC and elder. Also the farmer

10.40 Deliberation, DC and Njurincheke. Short meal for students/ adults

10.50 Verdict is announced, singing

11.00 Ending ceremony of the Time Travel

Reflection

11.30 End

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Cornelius Njeru, Meru museum

Lydia Kitungulu, NMK

Ebbe Westergren, Johanna Ejderstedt, Kalmar läns museum/ Bridging Ages