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**BAR 613: WRITTEN THESIS**

# **THARAKA TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE**

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**DECLARATION:**

This thesis is my original work and to the best of my knowledge has not been presented in any other university or institution for the purpose of awarding a degree.

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the examination requirements for the award of the Bachelor of Architecture Degree, in the Department of Architecture and Building Science at the University of Nairobi.

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DEDICATED TO GOD .

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## **Abstract**

‘Architecture arises out of our need to shelter the human animal in a spatial environment and to enclose the social animal in a group space .In this sense architecture serves our institutions and expresses the values of our culture’. Robert Geddes, FAIA

From the above statement, it is clear that architectural identity is as a result of integrating people, their activities and the environment they live in. This also indicates that change of environmental setting or human practices result to a different architecture.

This understanding motivated the author to undergo an investigation to find out the characteristic of the architecture practiced by Tharaka people a subgroup of Meru, (a Bantu community living in Eastern Kenya).

Tharaka is located in a differing geographical setting compared to most of the other Meru subgroups. They also have a number of cultural practices differing slightly from those of other Meru subgroups. This therefore would logically mean that their architectural practices would differ much or slightly due to those variations.

The author also had an assumption that the Tharaka architecture is therefore not as the generalized Meru Architecture.

To determine the reality, the author undertook a study through various tools, namely: literature review, observations and measurements as well as engaging key opinion holders from selected sub locations of Tharaka through interviews and focused group discussions. The data collected was analyzed and recommendations made.

This research therefore brings to light the findings of the built form as well as the underlying principles that cause it to be so.

**CHAPTER1:**

**INTRODUCTION**



**Fig.1. 1: A Tharaka elder's hut.at Maranatha Kaguuna primary, Ciakariga. (Built for exhibition)**

Source: Author (2015)



**Fig.1. 2: Meru man's hut**

Source: Meru Museum (2015)

## **1.0 Background of Study**

The Kenyan society is comprised of many tribes. These tribes have got different ways of life. These differences are also evident not only in the larger group but also in the subgroups. The differences are multifaceted: They touch on the details regards the socio-economic, political as well as cultural.

“But I absolutely believe that architecture is a social activity that has to do with some sort of communication or places of interaction and that to change the environment, is to change behaviour.” (Thom Mayne, year unknown). In accordance to this statement, it is clear that every place has got some architecture of its kind which varies either wholly or in part as the environment changes. This also analytically means that there cannot be similar architectural practices for two different places.

This study has tried to document the traditional architecture as practised by the Tharaka people a sub tribe of Meru. Meru are Bantu ethnic group that inhabit the Meru region of Kenya on the fertile lands of northern and eastern slopes of Mount Kenya in the eastern province.

Due to population pressure or the activities that the Meru carried, for example pastoralism, they spread to other parts of Eastern Province of Kenya.

The Greater Meru was divided into three administrative units: namely Meru Central, Meru North (Nyambene) and Meru south (Tharaka-Nithi)

The Ameru people comprises of nine sections: The Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Imenti, Miutini, Igembe, Tigania, Chuka, and Tharaka.



**Fig.1. 3: Meru girl's hut**

Source: Meru Museum (2015)



**Fig.1. 4: Tharaka woman's hut. The daughters lived here.**

Source: Author (2015)

## **1.1 Problem statement**

Kabui (2015), notes that there are a very few publications with information relating to the Tharaka people.

This statement is true not only in the anthropological field but also in the architectural realms. This is also evident for example; Kathiari in his thesis on the vernacular architecture of Meru studied on Tigania and used it to summarize the whole Meru architecture. This generalization was not adequate since there are lots of variations in terms of climate, specific practices, available materials of construction, as well as the interactions of the various Meru sub groups.

The Tharaka people have a kind of differentiated character in terms of their geographical location. Their practices and rituals also differ to some extent with those of the other Meru subgroups and this has been evidenced in many ways; more in the way they constructed their structures in the olden times. It is also carried on to this age through the passing on of the practices from one generation to the other.

The Tharaka community is highly treasured with rivers, different soil types from those of the other Meru subgroups, the rich socio-cultural systems, the varied economic activities, the art and craft as well as the varied climatic conditions. Besides this endowment, the characteristic Tharaka architecture has not been documented. This study is therefore meant to document the traditional architectural practices of this subgroup for future references by both scholars and practitioners.

This kind of documentation therefore will act as a way to salvage an already endangered architecture of the Tharaka.



## **1.2 Research Questions**

1. What are the traditions, beliefs and practices of the Tharaka people?
2. How did the Tharaka traditional way of construction respond to the functional, cultural and environmental issues?
3. Are there any Tharaka traditional design principles that can be applied to the contemporary architecture?

## **1.3 Aims and objectives**

1. Establish the tradition, beliefs and practices of the Tharaka people.
2. Find out how the traditional built forms of the Tharaka responded to their functional, cultural and the environmental settings.
3. Establish the design principles and attributes of Tharaka traditional architecture that can be applied in the the contemporary Tharaka architecture.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The study is aimed at identification, documentation and analysis of the traditional Tharaka architecture. The findings will act as a source of helpful information to future architects, academicians and other participants in the architectural fields within the Tharaka and entire Meru region and other regions in Kenya. This information will also act as a source of reference for the identity of traditional built forms of Tharaka.

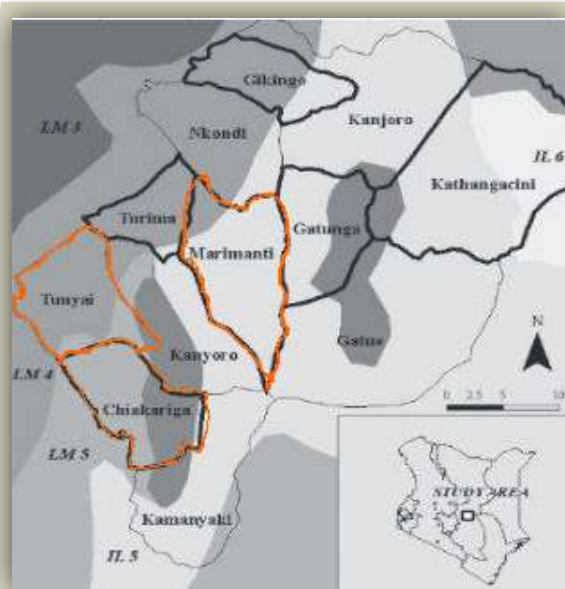


Fig.1. 5: Study areas

Source: <http://softkenya.com> (2015) Author reconstruction (2015)

### 1.5 Scope of the study

Kathiari (2013) in his thesis titled “The Meru Vernacular Architecture”, University of Nairobi, did a study of the Meru architecture basically looking at the Tigania sub tribe, which formed his basic sample for summarizing the Meru vernacular Architecture. He did a study on the layout and the various units within the Meru homestead.

In this study the author will be documenting the built form of the traditional Tharaka homestead and its various units. The author will explore: the way the built forms responded to the environmental conditions, culture as well as socio-economic practices.

The author will do the studies by sampling from the Tharaka community some of the areas (locations) deemed to have some remnants of their traditional architecture. The studies will be done in Tunyai, Chiakariga and Marimanti areas.

### 1.6 Assumptions

This research makes an assumption those socio- cultural practices, traditional beliefs and the environmental conditions influence the built form of the people of Tharaka sub-group differently from the general Meru community.

### 1.7 Limitations of the study

The study was majorly faced with a challenge of little information recorded regarding the Tharaka architecture. There is actually no significant information published to address the Tharaka dwellings. Much of the information found is anthropological.

Another challenge is lack of adequate actual samples of the dwellings. This means that most of the information is reconstructed from the various narrations.

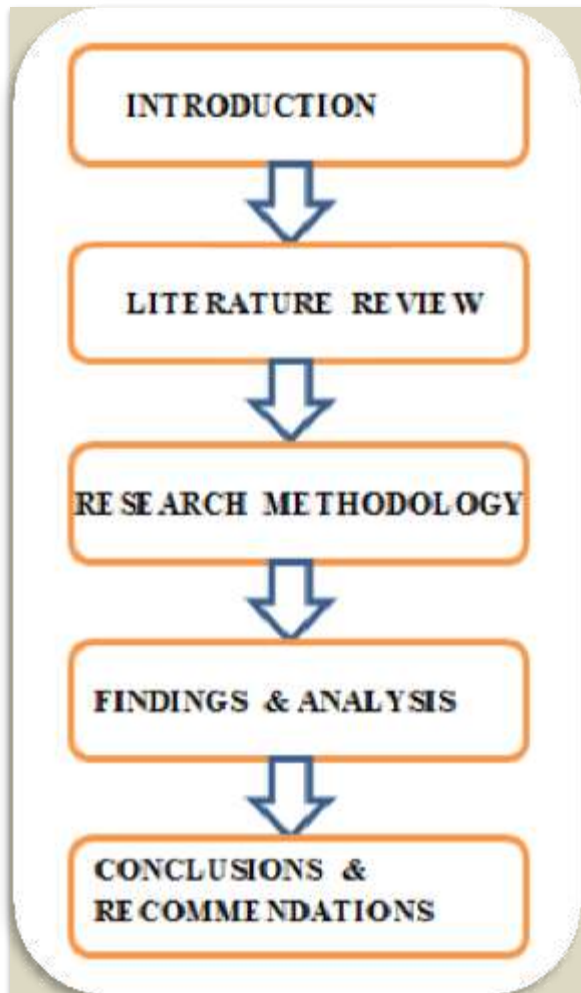


Fig.1. 6: Organisation of the study

Source: Author (2015)

## 1.8 Structure of the Thesis Study

**Chapter one:** This chapter introduces the research subject and sets the stage for the study by giving: problem statement, research questions and objectives, significance of the study, scope of the study, assumptions of the study, limitations and finally the research structure.

**Chapter two:** Documents the information that is known about the Tharaka sub group of Meru community and their location.

**Chapter three:** This describes the process undertaken to accomplish the study.

**Chapter four:** In this chapter the data is recorded and analysed.

**Chapter five:** The conclusions and recommendations meant to solve the problem statements are made.