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BECOMING MINISTER FOR LANDS: JACKSON ANGAINE AND MERU POLITICS

(1961-1963)¹

Anaïs Angelo

In 1978 British Officials profiled the most prominent Kenyan politicians and produced a document entitled “Leading Personalities in Kenya, 1978”. Their information was certainly inspired by regular talks they had with influential civil servants, and bore the marks of the insidious tensions between ministers and provincial administrators that pertained Kenyan politics since independence. The document provided an intriguing account of Jackson Harvester Angaine, Minister for Lands and Settlements throughout President Jomo Kenyatta’s regime:

“One of the least effective Ministers, but an able politician at the grass roots level where he uses his ministerial position and Presidential support to maintain his influence among the Meru and to further his personal ends. He is a leading farmer in Meru district. He seldom attends Parliament but the President relies on him in land dealings.”²

The emphasis on Angaine’s presidential favours and his local influence invites for further research. Who was Jackson Angaine, and why was this Meru leader chosen by Mzee Jomo Kenyatta to occupy the powerful land docket after independence?

Biographical background

Jackson H. Angaine was born in 1903 under the name of Jackson Harvester M’Nchebere. “Angaine” was his father’s name, Chief M’Angaine MBE, a colonial paramount chief and prominent leader of the Njuri Ncheke, council of elders and so-called traditional government in Meru.³ Jackson’s grand-father was believed to have been a traditional Meru

prophet, a Mugwe, who had foreseen the insidious conflicts in Meru brought about by the struggle of independence.⁴ Growing up in the colony, Jackson Angaine was educated at the Alliance High School, like many of his fellow politicians (Kipkorir, 1969; Charton, 2002).

After working as an accountant for some years, Angaine started being politically active: he was secretary for the Meru Local Native Council (1935-1948), then became chairman of the KAU local branch (1948-1952), where he also worked with Jomo Kenyatta. His involvement in the Mau Mau movement that rose at that time was always ambiguous. In 1954, when the Emergency was declared, Angaine was arrested and shortly detained by the colonial government. It remains unclear, however, whether this was primarily because he was suspected of being a Mau Mau, or because he was accused of, and prosecuted for the murder of his wife. His judgement proved inconclusive, and he was acquitted for lack of any proof⁵. Nevertheless, his detention contributed to establish him as a follower of the movement. His links to both Njuri Ncheke and the Mau Mau would prove very useful to boost his political career upon independence. In 1960, Angaine joined KANU (Maxon and Ofcansky, 2014).

From tactful subversion to “pro-government of late’: Angaine’s strategic politicking in Meru (1960-1962)

The political situation in Meru was particularly worrisome at that time, mostly because of Mau Mau resilience: the district was the last bastion of influential Mau Mau leaders who

¹. This research would not have been possible without the support of Freda Nkirote (BIEA) and Njuguna Gichere (National Museums of Kenya) who helped me organize my trips to Meru. I also thank John Kirujia (National Museums of Kenya), who assisted me in Meru.

². (BNA) FCO31/2314, “Leading Personalities in Kenya”, 1978.

³. Interview “Reverend Mugambi (spiritual advisor to the Njuri Ncheke)”, 12 October 2015, Nairobi.

⁴. Ibid.

⁵. (BNA) FCO31/2314, “Leading Personalities in Kenya, 1978”.

refused to surrender to the government, and took over the command of the Kenya Land Freedom Army (Kamunchuluh, 1975: 208; Kanogo, 1987; Kinyatti, 2008). Their resistance risked, in the government's view, encouraging the remaining freedom fighters and released detainees to form a separated community and challenge the government's authority.⁶ Local politics were further complicated by the KANU-KADU competition in the district. Colonial administrators, fearing a revival of Mau Mau activities, suspected them all of "double talk" politics, publicly denouncing terrorist *oathing*, yet spreading oaths to "ensure support for their party."⁷ Jackson Angaine, then KANU chairman for Meru, was held responsible for such practices by the colonial authorities: "he is the source of all subversion, and indeed started the oathing campaign in the 1960 in order to defeat [KADU leader Bernard] Mate's influence."⁸ He was suspected of having a close contact with radical KANU leaders as well as with so-called ex-terrorists.

Angaine systematically denied any subversive activity, or any populist use of oathing campaigns.⁹ This did not end the suspicions. In May 1962, the Central Province Commissioner felt bound to ask Jomo Kenyatta to "do everything he could to convince Angaine" to stop his "tactics".¹⁰ The situation did not improve, and finally reached the Governor's office. The Governor himself requested Kenyatta, then president of KANU, to take urgent action to discipline the politician, quoting Kenyatta's earlier "special plea (...) to overlook Mr. Angaine's actions" and recalling that "it was yourself who said to me (...) that it was necessary to have discipline in the Government".¹¹ Kenyatta must have felt politically cornered in Angaine's case. He did not seem to have much esteem for the latter, as colonial administrators claimed that he was "more prepared to sack him" than anyone else. He nonetheless avoided any personal interference with Angaine, leaving the sensitive task to ensure his resignation from his KANU seat in the Legislative Council to the Governor.¹² Angaine did not resign, but finally "showed signs of being

strongly pro-government", a change colonial officers perceived to be of personal interest.¹³

Taming Njuri Ncheke to tame Meru land (1962)

Then a strong defender of the KANU party-line, Angaine found himself in opposition not only to KADU leaders in Meru, such as the educated Bernard Mate, but also with the Njuri Ncheke, the traditional government. At the heart of the competition between Angaine and Njuri Ncheke was the control of the Meru vote, as well as the control over land transactions in the district. Njuri Ncheke was a powerful institution as, in 1955, the colonial government strengthened it to ensure the Mau Mau movement would not gain ground in Meru district. Njuri Ncheke was "recognised officially by combining it with the Local Government system of the District."¹⁴ The traditional council nominated all civil servants.¹⁵

Reinforcing the authority of Njuri Ncheke over administrative business enhanced their control over land ownership in Meru. As colonial officers noted, Njuri Ncheke held records of land transactions and "any decision which affected the laws and customs of the tribe had to be discussed by them before any adjustment could be made."¹⁶ This was a useful device to counter emerging Mau Mau claims. Already in 1950, the Njuri Ncheke elders decided that "any Meru who took an illegal oath would be dispossessed of all tribal rights and land". Njuri Ncheke would continue to oppose the Mau Mau throughout the decade, either by organizing ceremonies to curse the movement or, later, by organizing the rehabilitation of Mau Mau detainees in camps.¹⁷

Counter insurgency politics formalized Njuri Ncheke's powerful influence over the Meru people. Njuri Ncheke was one of the main defenders of the integrity of the Meru land unit, which they saw as a necessary condition to maintain the cohesion of the Meru tribe against foreign intrusions, in particular that of the Kikuyu. Land shortage in Central

⁶. (KNA) BB/1/149, "Notes of a Meeting Held in the Office the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Home affairs on 15th April 1964 to Consider Methods of Dealing with Meru Freedom Fighters".

⁷. (KNA) BB/1/149, "Security – Meru", Regional Government Agent, 2 July 1963, and Secret. An Appreciation of the present situation in Meru, 16 Jun. 1961; "Oathing in Meru District", District Commissioner Meru, 5 Jun. 1961, and Secret. The Director of Intelligence to the Permanent Secretary for Defence, "Oathing – Meru District," 2 Jun.

⁸. Ibid.

⁹. (KNA) BB/1/149, Provincial Commissioner Central Region, "Meru Affairs," 17 Jun. 1961 and District Commissioner Meru to Provincial Commissioner Nyeri, "Illegal Meetings," 23 Feb. 1962.

¹⁰. (KNA) BB/1/149, Provincial Commissioner to District Commissioner Meru, 9 May 1962.

¹¹. (KNA) BB/1/149, Governor Renison to Jomo Kenyatta, 18 Jul. 1962.

¹². (KNA) BB/1/149, District Commissioner Meru to Provincial Commissioner Nyeri, 2 Aug. 1962 and The Governor Sir Patrick Muir Renison to Jackson Angaine, 20 Aug. 1962.

¹³. (KNA) BB/1/149, Regional Government Agent, "The Meru Security Situation", 17 Jun. 1963.

¹⁴. (KNA) VQ/16/95, Central Province Annual Report 1955, "Meru District".

¹⁵. (KNA) DC/MRU/1/4/5, Office of the District Commission to All Heads of Government Department, Meru 11 May 1955.

¹⁶. (KNA) DC/MRU/1/4/5, Reconstitution Committee memorandum no. 1

¹⁷. (KNA) VQ/16/81, Meru District", 2 Apr. 1952, and (KNA) VQ/16/94, Central Province Annual Report 1954.

province (the White highlands) forced many landless Kikuyu to settle in Meru, while colonial authorities were at pains to relocate them. Meru district appeared to become an ideal place, not only because land was available, but also because of the alleged similarities of Meru and Kikuyu tribal practices (Parsons, 2012). In the late 1940s, tribal integrity was a prominent concern among Meru chiefs and elders, who felt threatened by the migrations and the subsequent institutional disruptions these might cause in the district.¹⁸ Angaine's father defended "the importance of tribal unity" and the "strengthening of the tribal institution".¹⁹ The tribal tensions climaxed with the dramatic expulsions of Kikuyu from the Meru district.²⁰

The beginning of the Emergency further fuelled anti-Kikuyu feelings in the district (Branch, 2009: 102-103). A few years after, in 1956, Meru people gained a decisive battle with the creation of the Meru Land Unit, which officially separated Meru people from the former Kikuyu native land unit.²¹ The question of Meru land, its administration and its relationship with the Kikuyu nonetheless remained very sensitive, and far from being definitively settled. Upon independence, the revision of provincial boundaries would revive the debates surrounding the specificities of the Meru tribe and its history, as well as the looming tensions with the Kikuyu tribe.

With the prospect of an end to the Emergency, however, tribal and political mathematics turned out to be even more complex. The 1959 report for the Meru district noted that "Njuri Ncheke was gradually losing its influence" invoking the rapidly widening gap between the traditional institution and the educated, loyalist elite. At a time when the colonial government was advocating the individualisation of land titles (with the Swynnerton Plan), Njuri Ncheke found itself at odds with the vast majority of the population.²² The rise of the two nationalist parties, KANU and KADU, shed light to a new type of competition that was increasingly dominated by prominent politicians, among them Jackson Angaine.

Angaine's relationship with the Njuri Ncheke has remained unclear until today. He certainly inherited the respect his own father commanded over the council, but the exact nature of his relationship with the council is unclear: was Angaine a member of Njuri Ncheke? Reverend Mugambi believes that the young Angaine was assisting his father in keeping

records of Njuri Ncheke's decisions, and could not have done so had he not been initiated into the council.²³ For many, the council was too influential politically for Angaine to avoid it.²⁴ On the political front, however, Angaine differed with the council and at times even opposed it.

With independence approaching, Njuri Ncheke feared that a pro-KANU, centralized government would undermine their leadership. Early 1962, the elders requested several meetings with colonial authorities so as to "seek advice on how to ensure the usual safeguards so that they would not become Kikuyu vassals after Independence".²⁵ As they confessed to the then Provincial Commissioner of Eastern Province F. R. Wilson, they feared their claims to authority and control over Meru land would be overlooked. According to Wilson, they specifically incriminated Angaine's politics: At the back of all this is their horror at recent trends in Meru resulting from Jackson Angaine's activities. A recent meeting of the Njuri was in fact broken up as a result of Jackson packing the meeting with K.A.N.U. adherents, including many Kikuyu, none of whom were members of the Njuri. (...) The Njuri are adamant, therefore, that the time has now come for them to press of the full their claims to live in a separate province or region to the Kikuyu.²⁶

Njuri Ncheke eventually sent a delegation to the second independence conference in London in 1962 with a memorandum stating their claims. The document carefully avoided to side with any particular political party, and pre-emptively disassociated its claims from the KADU concept of regional government (also known as the "majimboism", see Anderson, 2005).²⁷ Behind the formalities, however, Njuri Ncheke was clearly supported by KADU leaders, in particular Bernard Mate who helped drafting the memorandum. Nevertheless, the elders only got a non-committal answer to their requests. As the conference stumbled over the irreconcilable KANU-KADU views on regionalism and as KANU would lead the new government coalition (Kyle, 1999; Anderson, 2005), Njuri Ncheke's requests were promptly forgotten.

The establishment of a pro-KANU government in 1963 did not dissolve local competition in Meru. Angaine strove to make sure that Njuri Ncheke would not contest his leadership in particular and KANU policy in general. One of Angaine's first move against Njuri Ncheke was to invalidate the

¹⁸. (KNA) DC/MRU/1/4/5, Notice of a Meeting of Chiefs Held at Meru on 8/12/1939.

¹⁹. Notice of a Meeting of Chiefs Held at Meru on 8/12/1939, KNA, DC/MRU/1/4/5.

²⁰. (KNA) DC/MRU/1/4/5, Meru District Annual Report, 1940.

²². (KNA) DC/MRU/1/15/1, Meru District Annual Report 1959.

²³. Rev. Stephen Mugambi, interview, 23 October 2015, Nairobi.

²⁴. K. M. Thimangu-Kaunyangi, interview, 21 October 2015, Kenjai, Meru.

²⁵. (KNA) BB/11/36, R. E. Wainwright to the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, 5 Jan. 1962.

²⁶. (KNA) BB/11/36, F. R. Wilson to the Chief Commissioner, Office of the Leader of the House, 1 Feb. 1962.

²⁷. (KNA) BB/11/36, Memorandum of Elders of the Njuri Ncheke of Meru to Be Submitted to the Kenya Constitutional Conference To Be Held in London in February 1962".

²⁸. K. M. Thimangu-Kaunyangi, interview.

opening of the Njuri Ncheke headquarters in Nchîrû (Meru), also referred to as “the parliament” or “the shrine”. Angaine is believed to have been responsible for bringing “six lorries of uncircumcised male adults” from Turkana to the opening (Mûgambi Mwithimbû, 2014: 81). As circumcision determines age and seniority, defines the ruling generation, and legitimates its authority, the presence of uncircumcised men was not only contrary to Njuri Ncheke’s constitution, they were meant to “desecrate” the meeting.

A few months later, before the cleansing rituals were completed, the death of the Njuri Ncheke chairman, ex-Chief M’Mûraa wa Kairangi, raised the issue of his succession. Although there was no visible tension with Angaine, M’Mûraa might have been closer to KADU leaders and Bernard Mate, his own son in law. He was eventually replaced by a prominent Meru teacher, Norman Murechia, who hailed from the “same village” as Angaine, i.e. the same division in the district.²⁸ According to Mûgambi, Murechia was “a loyalist” chosen by Angaine, who “paid lip service to the institution for almost 40 years”. (Mûgambi Mwithimbû, *ibid.*) As both men originated from the same location and were also age-mates, Murechia had fewer chances to raise support within Angaine’s political bastion, and was a minor political threat. Angaine was not so much trying to annihilate the traditional government as a whole, but to make sure that its leaders would not overshadow his political control of the district.

Towards the land ministry

Angaine’s best assets were, after all, his name and reputation. His public association to Njuri Ncheke, due to his father’s name, overshadowed his more insidious opposition to the council of elders. A strong defender of the KANU line, Angaine would finally be favoured by Kenyatta himself, who, as previously mentioned, overcame his ill-felling to back his politics and finally made him one of the most powerful ministers of his cabinet. By September 1963, Angaine was *de facto* the leading politician in Meru. The most disturbing KANU leaders and the elected Members for Meru were simply evicted so as to ease the path towards political unity.²⁹ Colonial administrators then hoped that Angaine would remain the “recognized head” of “political figures” in the district. Kenyatta himself left him in charge of political order in Meru, when he went to London for the negotiations of independence.³⁰ Upon independence, Angaine was appointed Minister for Lands and Settlement.

Why would Kenyatta appoint a Meru politician as minister for lands? One element of the answer points to the dramatic history of tribal relations between Meru and Kikuyu people dating back to the 1930s as previously mentioned (Parsons, 2012). Kikuyu politicians were strongly involved in this debate, as the Kikuyu Central Association’s most radical voices such as Senior Chief Koinange (later-to-be Kenyatta’s father in law) spoke against tribal mingling and assimilation, and against those who defended a more flexible understanding of tribal identity (Parsons, *ibid.*). A KCA representative himself, writing a history of the Kikuyu tribal identity, Kenyatta must have been aware of these virulent debates surrounding the Kikuyu migrations and rights over land in other districts. In his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, he specifically spoke about the importance of maintaining the unity and cohesion of the Kikuyu tribe. It could be that he had learned about the Njuri Ncheke elders, who were supported by the colonial authority to put an end to Kikuyu migrations.

Upon independence the land issue in Meru stood in clear continuity with the past Kikuyu-Meru tribal disputes. There was a need to decide whether Kikuyu migrants’ land claims would be recognized. The Njuri Ncheke’s memorandum for the protection of Meru tribal land upon independence shows that the tensions did not cease. The re-negotiations of provincial boundaries in 1962 gave a vivid illustration of the persisting inter-tribal mistrust (Hornsby, 2012: 73-4).

Kenyatta might have wanted to secure a grand Kikuyu land unit stretching all over the Mount Kenya tribes. Appointing Angaine as Minister for Lands, he ensured that neither the Njuri Ncheke, nor the resilient Mau Mau fighters in the district would challenge his leadership. Angaine was a convenient political pawn. His ability to control Njuri Ncheke or to maintain his Mau Mau aura was dependent on his political achievement, and hence, on his direct access to presidential favours. The establishment of a centralized government stifled both Njuri Ncheke’s and Mau Mau’s claims to land. The latter had no choice but to rely on Angaine, KANU chairman in Meru and Minister for Lands and Settlement, to request and even to buy land.

²⁹. (KNA) BB/1/149, RGA Embu to the Civil Secretary Embu, 2 Sept. 1963.

³⁰. *Ibid.*

³¹. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 164.

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Jackson H. Angaine

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