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## Chapter 4

### **A Puppet on a String: The Manipulation and Nationalization of the Female Body in the “Female Circumcision Crisis” of Colonial Kenya**

*Sara Boulanger*<sup>1</sup>

The 1920s were years of growing resistance to colonial rule in Kenya. Kenyans were reacting to the oppressive nature of British rule, and especially to the confining boundaries that British officials had drawn for them in the political, economic, and social spheres. At the forefront of this oppression were missionaries who used Christianity in an attempt to mold Kenyans into the kinds of societies that fit into the “civilizing mission” of colonialism. The missionaries’ outlook mixed turn-of-the-century ideas of white supremacy with ideas from the Victorian era, which placed women in subservient roles, stripping them of authority and status. The burgeoning power of colonial rulers and the heightened status of missionaries were bringing about a total restructuring of society’s gendered norms. Resistance groups began forming in reaction, the earliest and strongest of which were among the Kikuyu speakers.

In the 1920s, Christianity created divisions among the Kikuyu by polarizing several issues. This study will focus on one of those issues: the circumcision of girls and young women. Prior to colonial rule, female circumcision was an important rite of passage that nearly all members of Kikuyu society accepted.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent resistance group, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), used its acceptance of female circumcision to gain support for the retention of all aspects of Kikuyu culture, particularly ideas about land tenure. In opposition was the Kikuyu Progressive Party (KPP), which took up the outsiders’ banner and advocated for complete abolition of the excision practice. In addition to dividing political loyalties, the “female circumcision controversy” split families and destroyed friendships. It also affected their individual identities and the way Kenyans perceived each other.

The advocates for change in Kikuyu society in the 1920s and the major instigators of the controversy over female circumcision were missionary schools and their students. The Church of Scotland Missions (CSM), the African Inland Mission (AIM), the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and the Gospel Missionary Society (GMS) were the leading Protestant missions teaching against this central event in a Kenyan woman’s rite of passage. Dr. John Arthur, head of the CSM at the time, was perhaps the most outspoken opponent of female circumcision through the 1920s and 1930s. He saw to it that his teachers instructed against female circumcision, which missionaries almost unanimously labeled “barbarous.” As such, the teaching against circumcision became one of

the most controversial issues of an increasing conflict over cultural norms.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the circumcision of a young woman would hamper her chance to enroll in particular schools. This resulted in many Kenyan women seeking out schools run by different religious groups, or, more importantly, supporting newly forming independent churches and schools in which missionaries and government officials had no role.

This struggle placed Kikuyu women at a crossroads regarding their identity and place in society. By participating or not participating in the practice of female circumcision, attending a certain school, or merely desiring to attend school, many young women were severing ties with their families and clans, and through these with Kikuyu culture. Often, when these ties to family and culture were lost, young women turned to Christian religions and related practices to fill the void. As I will show, "choosing" whether or not to be circumcised could not be an act of self-determination given the historical context of these times. Instead, the Kenyan woman faced double-binds in that no matter what she did, she alienated herself from one side or the other. This dilemma marked her oppressed status and represented the nationalization of the female body.

In all appearances, missionaries, the colonial government, and newly forming political parties were taking what they perceived as just positions in the controversy. However, time would reveal that each of these groups had ulterior motives, including the permanent reshaping of the lives of Kenyan women. The female circumcision controversy of the 1920s represented the beginnings of resistance to this reshaping and to colonial rule in Kenya. Ultimately, it would lead to the redefinition of what it was to be a woman in colonial Kenya.

### ***Irua: Lost in Translation***

For a young Kikuyu woman or girl the process of initiation was a series of events which culminated in her passage into womanhood and participation in her age-group. Not only was this rite of passage entrenched in the culture of the Kikuyu, but also the Embu, Meru, Elgeyo, Nandi, Kipsigi, and Ogiek cultures. Traditionally, circumcision defined one's rights and responsibilities in Kikuyu society and could therefore ruin a woman's standing if not performed. An uncircumcised woman would have been thought unworthy of marriage and unable to have children, which would affect her bride wealth. This would prove to have a lasting affect on her relationship with her family, particularly her father. Missionary groups and the colonial government understood the word *irua* to mean its direct translation: circumcision. However, they did not recognize the social implications, and symbolic meanings behind the practice.<sup>4</sup>

In *Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, Jomo Kenyatta gives an explicit account of the initiation process from a male Kikuyu perspective. Young Kikuyu boys and girls went through rigorous, often joyous, preparation for at least two weeks prior to the actual surgery. This preparation included ceremonial dancing, *mambura*, singing, special dieting to prevent blood loss during the operation and promote efficient healing afterward, the appointment of

a sponsor for each initiate, the teaching of sexual knowledge, the “breaking of the sacred tree,” and the brewing and drinking of a certain beer to “keep the gods awake.” There was also celebrating and feasting that often included the extended family and village.<sup>5</sup> Also of importance was the passing of knowledge to the initiates. This knowledge included traditions, laws, manners, behavior, conduct during sexual intercourse, future responsibilities, and ideas about child rearing. In other words, everything it took to live a proper, Kikuyu, adult life was deliberated.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately for the continuity of Kikuyu customary practice, missionaries and the colonial government did not view *irua* as a celebrated rite of passage, but as a “heathen act...accompanied by feasting and beer-drinking, [which] in the mass emotion of the whole occasion, tend[s] to become orgiastic.” The steadily increasing conversion of Africans to Christianity and their acceptance of influences from Western culture would soon cause cultural changes not only in the rituals, but also in clothing style, social norms, and belief systems. Such was the case presented in *The River Between*, the novel by Ngugi wa Thiongo. In the book, Joshua, a newly converted Christian man, was in constant contention with his daughter Muthoni because of her desire to become circumcized. Many girls did want to be circumcized, and they had to do so in secrecy or in defiance of their families. The character Muthoni represented many young women like her who were struggling in a society where they were torn between wanting to be good Christians and wanting to be seen as proper women in the eyes of the Kikuyu people. This inner battle, a battle of beliefs, would prove to have devastating effects in the future.<sup>7</sup>

Derek Peterson provided a detailed description of the discrepancies between traditional Kikuyu beliefs and the beliefs of converted African Christians in his work, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*. The author describes a significant generational split, with converts mostly consisting of the younger generation. The Christian missions favored the converts for obvious reasons and gave them control of incoming commodities, such as tea. This caused further generational disruption as converts began to demand the respect of their elders – something which was unquestionably taboo in the Kikuyu culture. Beer drinking became a topic of debate since Kikuyu Christian converts rejected it, despite the fact that this beer drinking was a fundamental part of Kikuyu initiation and marriage processes. According to tradition, neither of these rites should have been completed without a beer offering. Western Christian beliefs affected the lives of the Kikuyu-speaking people, breaking down tradition, and also breaking apart families.<sup>8</sup>

In 1906, the Church of Scotland Mission began “systematic teaching” against the customary female circumcision. Although the mission schools had been established since 1895, they had never directly condemned the practice. Dr. John W. Arthur, the leading Protestant opponent of the practice, announced his rejection of female circumcision when he took over the Kikuyu hospital in 1906. The basis of his condemnation came from the fact that uncircumcised Kikuyu

women were successfully having children.<sup>9</sup> Jomo Kenyatta comments that this is largely the circuitous reasoning behind the missionaries' subjectivity and inadequate knowledge of the ritual. The missionaries only knew what their converts told them and their converts told them only what they wanted to hear.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the missionaries viewed female circumcision as simply a "barbarous" act, and they ignored the social implications that ending the practice would have for women. Erroneously, missionaries believed that female circumcision had no value and that it only caused physical pain and psychological trauma.<sup>11</sup>

By 1915, the number of Kikuyu converts to Christianity was increasing, and Kikuyu girls in the mission schools were beginning to reject the practice of female circumcision, even escaping from their homes to avoid it. In contrast, many other Kikuyu girls, who had been forcefully baptized as Christians but who wanted to continue Kikuyu customary practices, would escape from the mission schools to be circumcised. In these cases, the procedure was often rushed and performed without proper preparation. Attempting to appease their conflicted converts, the Protestant missionaries tried to allow the circumcision of boys and girls at the missions themselves. Boys were operated on by a hospital doctor, while girls were operated on by a traditional female circumciser, the *muruiithi*.

In 1915, the Church of Scotland at Tumutumu allowed the procedure to be done for the first time, but the proper preparation rituals did not take place. The *muruiithi* circumcised a group of girls while Dr. H.R.A. Philip, a medical missionary, observed the operation. The memorandum distributed by the Church of Scotland Mission quoted Philip in stating he "found it to be so brutal and revolting that this attempted compromise was abandoned forthwith." In 1916, the Church of Scotland Mission began to forbid the practice in the church, and the African Inland Mission, the Gospel Missionary Society, and the Church Missionary Society followed in subsequent years.<sup>12</sup>

The Protestant missionaries emphasized health risks involved in the procedure, and the pain Kenyan girls had to endure. A medical statement released at the time gave what was thought to be a definitive outline of the surgery and its possible complications: sterility resulting from the inability to have sexual intercourse, bladder infections, possible death of the child during childbirth, unnecessary tearing and/or incisions of tissue during childbirth, and damage to bowel passage. In 1925, the Assistant District Commissioner in the Fort Hall District gave a personal account of the operation *he* witnessed. (Keep in mind that no man should have been present during this operation, let alone witnessing it. This issue will be revisited later). He explained the unhygienic nature of the process, citing the use of banana leaves to control bleeding. He also described the apparent pain the girls were experiencing.<sup>13</sup>

Kikuyu-speaking women viewed the pain endured as necessary for their passage into womanhood. In, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya*, Lynn Thomas discusses an interview done in 1984 with a woman who was circumcised in the 1920s. "Initiation was a process of 'buying maturity with pain,'" Thomas states. If a woman could tolerate the pain of the

operation, she could endure future challenges and painful experiences, especially childbirth.<sup>14</sup> Muthoni, the character in *The River Between*, expresses the same perspective on female circumcision. The initiation process and what it meant to become a woman in Kikuyu society were engrained into her mind from birth; it was what she believed in. Muthoni's rationale, then, was that circumcision was only taken away when "the white man" came to their homeland, altered her father's beliefs, and forced their faith upon him. Initiation through circumcision was the only way she could become a woman in Kikuyu society, and neither the Christian missionaries nor her father were going to stop her.<sup>15</sup>

During the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European missions caused further divisions among traditional practitioners of female circumcision by highlighting the differences between what they labeled as the "Major Operation" and the "Minor Operation." The "Major" form consisted of the removal of the clitoris, labia minora and a partial removal of the labia majora. The "Major" form had not always been practiced and was seldom practiced in most districts. The "Minor" form was less severe and involved the partial excision of the clitoris. The severity of the operation varied from region to region and group to group. For instance, the Fort Hall district was known for practicing the "Major" form. Although missionaries acknowledged this variation, they would not yield. Regardless of the form practiced, missionaries retained their steadfast dedication to abolishing the practice.<sup>16</sup>

African and European representatives from each Protestant missionary group in Kenya met to work out a united action against the practice of *irua* on July 5 and 6, 1916. An Alliance of Protestant Churches (APC) was formed and met periodically in the coming years but the circumcision issue was put on hold during World War I. Through the war, there remained a mass consensus among Christian leaders to ban female circumcision, and in September 1922, the APC passed a resolution "emphasizing the necessity for missionaries using all their influence to get the practice abolished."<sup>17</sup> This unified movement would come to have significant influence on the colonial government in regard to the circumcision issue.

It became common for young women who wanted to have the procedure done to turn to Methodist, and, particularly, Catholic churches. These churches were not opposed to female circumcision and would often arrange for the procedure to be done. The Catholic Church did not think that the initiation process had any effect on one's ability to be a good Catholic. Other than the Methodists, Protestants were not as accepting. Tabitha Kanogo discusses the case of one young woman, Agnes, who was suspended from her Protestant school for undergoing circumcision. This caused significant tension within her family and her isolation from fellow Protestants. One of Agnes's brothers was Catholic and therefore accepted her decision. Her parents and her other brother were Protestant and part of the *kiore*<sup>18</sup> community, which was so opposed to the practice of female circumcision that they threatened to behead those who

supported it.<sup>19</sup> As her family was already divided on the issue of female circumcision, Agnes's suspension caused further division.

The divisions in Kikuyu society between supporters and non-supporters of the custom were deep and caused a great deal of strife in every facet of society. Kanogo eloquently described these divisions as:

Self-identity and womanhood in their various forms, including acceptance in one's natal family, peer group, becoming a wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, grandparent, or member of women's councils, were all at stake, whichever choice a woman made.<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, young Kikuyu women were faced with difficult decisions in regard to initiation and education during this transitional period. *Irua* was not simply a cosmetic surgery with no deep cultural implications, as many colonial administrators believed it to be.<sup>21</sup> This ignorance and lack of respect for the initiation process on the part of missionaries and the colonial government would considerably affect their opposition argument in the future.

### ***Colonial Resistance to Female Circumcision***

Throughout the 1920s missionary opposition to initiation rites gained momentum. This opposition, in turn, fostered greater movement from the most active and prominent resistance group, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). However, the missionaries and the colonial government were confident that the Kikuyu would not show strong opposition if a resolution was passed forbidding the practice. The 1920s were years of increasing power and influence in the expanding British colonial world, which intensified their general feeling of absolute superiority.<sup>22</sup> As a result, future resistance to banning female circumcision would come as a shock to many colonial settlers and administrators.

By 1925 there was an increasing demand for female education. Though this demand was not directly the result of the circumcision dilemma, the two do relate. Girls and women were continually being denied access to church schools if they refused to denounce the practice of *irua*. This caused many women to seek other avenues for educational advancement. 1925 was also a noteworthy year because the Local Native Councils (LNCs) were established in the more progressive districts, such as Fort Hall.<sup>23</sup> The LNCs began to collect taxes, particularly for the establishment of non-mission schools, yet the funding remained limited. In the Fort Hall district, among others, the colonial government recognized the African desire for secondary schools and girls' schools, but claimed that the government and the missions could not fund them. This claim helped to strengthen the growing opposition movement.<sup>24</sup>

The LNCs were under government pressure to take a stand against female circumcision. In 1926, the LNCs in every district, except Nyeri, passed a resolution banning the "Major" form of the operation. It was believed that this

would relieve some of the negative health consequences associated with the practice. Parents or guardians found guilty of performing this procedure, or multiple procedures, would be charged under the Native Authority Amendment Ordinance of 1924 and face fines or jail time. However, the resolution was not strictly enforced anywhere, except the Embu District. (The Embu-speaking people and the Meru-speaking people are closely related to the Kikuyu-speaking people.) LNCs faced constant pressure from the government to manipulate their constituents into rejecting the practice of *irua*. The government itself was too fearful of rebellion to take a direct stand on the issue. Surprisingly, perhaps as part of its larger policy of respecting “traditional Native Authority,” the colonial government was also beginning to tolerate the hard-lined traditionalists that would not denounce the practice. Therefore, the colonial government had to rely on education as a means of persuasion. It was commonly thought that the LNCs were pro-European, since they were under British control, as in Fort Hall where the District Commissioner described the “extremely enlightened and progressive cooperation of the Local Native Council.”<sup>25</sup> In 1927 the LNCs in the Fort Hall district discussed the establishment of governmentally funded schools, free of mission control. As such, although it was to the benefit of the colonial government, there existed an obvious reason for the separation of the education system from the missions.

The KCA continued to be active in the effort to retain the practice of female circumcision and increased their efforts throughout these years. In the last years of the 1920s, the future president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, an official of the KCA, resided in England where he lobbied for KCA support from British authority.<sup>26</sup> Kenyatta also spread the professed beliefs of the KCA by contributing to the publication of the first independent Kenyan newspaper, the KCA-sponsored *Muigwithania*.<sup>27</sup> In this journal, Kenyatta encouraged readers to put pressure on the LNCs “for the Kikuyu need *men* like these. 1.The Kikuyu lawyer 2.The Kikuyu Teacher 3. The Kikuyu doctor.”<sup>28</sup> KCA agitation would soon increase in every district in response to subsequent opposition to female circumcision.

### **Muthirigu and “The Crisis”**

The most heated period of the controversy in colonial Kenya began with the LNC elections of 1928. Because the KCA wished to secure votes, they ran candidates on the platform of preserving Kikuyu culture. The Kikuyu Progressive Party (KPP) assumed the role of the liberal opposition, calling for the abolition of female circumcision. These groups took the circumcision issue from a moral dilemma to a political controversy, and by 1928, most LNCs had banned the major form of the practice completely.

The situation worsened in March 1929 with a conference held by every church in the Kikuyu province, at Tumutumu, in which several resolutions were passed. The Protestant church deemed the “custom [as] evil” and called on all African Christians to sign the *kirore* pledge, repudiating the practice of female



circumcision. Also, the conference determined that if a Christian were caught participating in female circumcision in any way, the church would suspend the individual for an indefinite period.<sup>29</sup> This infuriated African Christians and began splitting congregations in all of the Kikuyu districts. The *kirore* pledge caused upheaval in the KCA. As a result, members of the KCA began coming together and singing the *Muthirigu* dance song, "the song of the big uncut girl," as a sign of Kikuyu disobedience of government authority. The song's lyrics called for the expulsion of missionaries and chiefs as well. The spread of the song provoked greater opposition to the *kirore* pledge, which failed to get many signatures. The failure of the *kirore* pledge would prove to have devastating effects on the church's membership, power, and influence.<sup>30</sup>

On August 10, 1929, Dr. John Arthur published an article in the *East African Standard* in response to previously published articles about a circumcision court case in Kiambu. Arthur called for the absolute abolition of the major form of female circumcision. That same day the *East African Standard* published a lead article which read:

...it was a very great step forward for the Native Councils to interfere with this custom...a native woman should have full liberty and freedom, under the protection of the State, to refuse to undergo an operation of this nature, if her conscience and conviction is opposed to it.<sup>31</sup>

Without hesitation, the KCA retaliated and sent a letter to all the Kikuyu chiefs in response to Arthur's article. The letter clearly informed the chiefs of the new LNC by-law and called for a mass meeting to formulate a plan of action, claiming only a desire to carry out the customs of the tribe. It also stated their belief that the charges facing the Kiambu circumciser in the Supreme Court case should be dropped and requested "that native civil cases be removed from the Supreme Court." (It is interesting to note that the whole letter is focused on the circumcision issue until the end, where there is a short blurb requesting the colonial government partition of a specific piece of land.<sup>32</sup>) It is not surprising, then, that the KPP soon came out with its own article totally disassociating itself from the KCA. The KPP secretary referred to female circumcision when writing to the editor of the *East African Standard* as "an old barbarous, evil custom." The KPP were the "progressives of the time," aligning themselves with the colonial government in order to gain respect and power within the government and the colony.

### ***The Rise of Independent Schools and Churches***

The female circumcision controversy caused a great wave of momentum for the Independent School Movement, which began in the 1920s in opposition to mission and colonial settlement. Each church suffered, but none more than the CSM. Initially the loss of church members was great for each church, with the CSM eventually losing nine-tenths of its members. In some locations there was

almost a complete boycott of the church. In the mission schools the only teachers permitted to teach were those who signed the convention petition seeking legislation against female circumcision. This resulted in further reductions of church membership. The missionaries sought intervention from the Director of Education, but the government refused to send government officials to teach in the mission schools. However, the government did require its teachers to refrain from teaching against female circumcision until after school hours, and then only to those who specifically wanted the teaching. The GMS and the AIM were facing challenging times as well, but the church elders did remain loyal, causing further generational divide.<sup>33</sup>

These controversies are reflected in the novel *The River Between* when the eventual death of Muthoni resulting from being circumcised, caused a young man, Waiyaki, to rebel against tradition. Waiyaki was a product of a mission education, he and wanted a similar education for the rest of the Kikuyu-speaking people so that they could resist the imposing European government. In the novel, Waiyaki goes on to begin the education movement that spreads throughout the Kikuyu districts. If not for Muthoni's inspiration, Waiyaki's ambitions would never have existed.<sup>34</sup>

After simmering for months, there was a reduction in tensions around the circumcision controversy. Between 1930 and 1931 numbers began to rise again in mission school attendance. However, the demand for government-funded education was growing as well. Wealthier Kenyans also desired the option of private schools. In 1932 the Fort Hall District alone had three African private schools and at least four others were in the process of being built. The government recognized more had to be done and began building schools with native council funds. The use of these funds meant a major change in the political milieu, causing uproar among the missionaries.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, Kikuyu landowners were starting to oppose the mission schools. Initially, landowners agreed to allow missions to use parcels of their land for schools, but the female circumcision controversy stirred resistance in several different venues. These situations often ended in violence or destruction of mission schools as landowners were showing up during school hours, demanding that teachers leave. Many landowners also threatened to take away the land of the parents of mission-educated children if they continued to send them to mission schools. In one instance, a landowner showed up at a school during regular hours, intoxicated, stripped down naked, and laid in the middle of the floor singing the *Muthirigu* song which by then had been forbidden because it was considered "seditious."<sup>36</sup> Although the numbers of students at the mission out-schools showed a gradual increase in the beginning of the 1930s, attendance would never bounce back to previous levels.

At the same time, independent schools and churches were beginning to spring up all over Central Province. The Kikuyu Independent School Association (KISA) and the Kikuyu Karing'a Educational Association (KKEA) were formed to create independent schools and churches that brought together Christianity and traditional Kikuyu practices and beliefs. The two groups also

resisted white missionary interference. The best known of the new institutions was the Githunguri Independent School, which was established by Kenyan nationalists after the division of church and state (a consequence of the female circumcision controversy). The school officially opened in 1939 and later became known as the Kenyan African Teachers College. This college was open to *all* Africans, to form African solidarity across perceived ethnic boundaries.<sup>37</sup> This resistance to white missionaries and the push for African solidarity reflect the larger nationalist, anti-European sentiments of the time.

### ***Colonial Government Contradictions and Suppression of the Female Voice***

On May 26, 1930 the colonial government passed a new ordinance which stated:

...all brutal forms of circumcision such as the so-called "major" operations amount to a felony whether performed with or without consent, and are punishable by imprisonment not exceeding seven years.<sup>38</sup>

The ordinance was issued in response to a forced circumcision performed by the father of a fourteen-year-old girl who was taken out of boarding school for this purpose. This was the first time the colonial government took legal action in such a case. However, the colonial government's responses varied from district to district, with the age of the girl involved being a controversial factor. One could argue, however, that throughout the controversy many girls and women did not have adequate influence on the issue of circumcision, an issue that concerned their own bodies. The government ordinance could have been seen as a victory for the missions, yet there is an important irony in the situation. The declaration the church distributed to ensure loyalty of its members and students would eventually cause the abandonment of mission schools and churches.

Also ironic is the notion that traditionally circumcision signaled a rise in status for women and men, yet the missions' intent to "civilize" African society was *also* meant to enhance the status of women. This paradox created a keenly felt double-bind for Kenyan women, causing alienation no matter what route they took. For many, if not all, Kikuyu women, the process of circumcision brought respect, power, and even land ownership as the initiation symbolized their passage into adulthood. Claire Robertson discusses what she terms the "gerontocratic organization" of women and the disparaging social ramifications caused by abolition of practices that Christians and government officials found offensive. As just mentioned, initiation, specifically circumcision, meant passage into adulthood and gave initiates authority over junior women. It also gave women power in their own age-set, separating them from men. The age-sets, or age-grades, especially senior age-grades, were highly respected by all in the community. Membership in the highest of these age-grades—the councils of women's elders—could be achieved by only a select few. These councils were

involved in decision-making, punishing indecent behavior, and certain areas of ceremonial rituals.<sup>39</sup> In essence, the circumcision situation was a double-edged sword. By fighting for the abolition of the practice, missions threatened to take away much of the power, status, and solidarity women had in their communities. However, in giving women greater access to education, the mission schools ended up saving girls and women from a painful and unwanted surgery.

The justification for British colonial rule and the arguments of the growing Kenyan political parties were also “double-edged swords.” The heart of the controversy for both sides should have been the concern for the well-being of women, yet hypocrisy abounded. Many believed that the British were hypocritical for claiming to bring morality to Kenyan women and society while ignoring immoral acts occurring in the capital, such as prostitution (with a large European client base), segregation, and forced labor. The British believed Africans to be “savage” and the practice of clitoridectomy to be “barbarous.” Furthermore, the British thought the Kikuyu reasons for practicing female circumcision (in relation to child bearing, gender roles, and marriage) were reflective of their “savage mind.” One Senior Commissioner of the Kerio Province stated:

We must take as our justification only the patent fact that in this regard we have greater knowledge than is possessed by the people and that we cannot allow stupidity, prejudice, cruelty, or superstition to sway us in our desire to prevent untold suffering upon the women both during the performance of the rites and the subsequent and consequent birth pangs.<sup>40</sup>

This comment demonstrates the propaganda used by colonial authorities to justify not only their stand on the circumcision controversy but also their imperial intervention. Missions may have seemingly fought for the protection of women, but the colonial government responded infrequently and unpredictably from district to district. Further, it is interesting to note that, while the noblest intentions were listed by the colonial government for intervening in the practice of female circumcision, the first concern administrators expressed was of the harm caused to their labor source as initiates were often out of work for months. Only later did the government address female circumcision as a political and moral issue.<sup>41</sup>

In years to follow, the colonial government stopped supporting the anti-circumcision campaign altogether as their efforts were strengthening KCA support. More importantly, in the 1930s the colonial government was being pressured to combat the low birth rate issue in colonial Kenya. Administrators were quick to blame this problem on the number of abortions taking place. The government began *enforcing* pre-pubescent circumcision, thereby going against their initial arguments. The rationale behind this action was that if a young girl or woman was to become pregnant before circumcision she would be looked upon with disgrace in Kikuyu society, as if “a child were having a child.”<sup>42</sup> If a young woman were to get pregnant at this stage of her life it would ultimately result in abortion or infanticide. Therefore, the colonial government believed

that if circumcision were legally enforced at a younger age, a young woman would be more likely to keep her baby. Faced with potential political humiliation and pressure to produce population growth, the government began executing *Kiwagrie*, "the one for which we were unprepared." *Kiwagrie* were mass excisions performed by *men*! Lynn Thomas discusses this issue in her article, "Imperial Concerns and 'Women's Affairs': State's Efforts to Regulate Clitoridectomy and Eradicate Abortion in Meru, Kenya, c. 1910-1950." She states:

After gathering the young girls in a field, the policemen would place them in a ... line and select for excision those whose breasts had begun to develop.... They would circumcise the girls and leave.<sup>43</sup>

The policemen would perform these mass excisions while the elder women were not present. This resulted in a rise in "second excisions" by women elders, which were a form of resistance and an attempt to take back the power that had been exclusively theirs.

As we can see, the circumcision issue pitted the two Kikuyu-speaking associations (the KCA and KPP), the missions, and the colonial government against each other. The KPP hoped to gain power and respect through support of the colonial government. The KCA was a political machine aiming to secure land and power by using the issue of female circumcision to gain political support and promote Kikuyu nationalism. The KCA was concerned with having marriageable women (i.e. circumcised women) to keep the Kikuyu ethnic group alive and thriving. In the end, this aspect of traditional female circumcision was the colonial government's concern as well. In order to maintain the labor pool, the population had to continue to grow no matter who was hurt in the process.

### *Conclusion*

The onset of British colonial rule began a long and arduous transformational period in Kenyan history. A critical time in this period were the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, which were marked by a growing awareness of race consciousness, an increasing divide along generational and ethnic lines, and strengthening opposition to the colonial government and missionary groups. Women faced new challenges in this period as they witnessed their authority and rights put into question, not only by Europeans, but by fellow Kenyans and members of their ethnic groups. Kikuyu-speaking women had to contend with missionaries, government officials, hard-lined traditionalists, KCA members, KPP members, peers, close friends, and family, each having their own ideas about what a woman should do, especially in regard to initiation. It was virtually impossible for a woman to make a decision regarding religion, circumcision, or education without offending someone or severing social ties.

Especially disheartening is that women were often fighting and suffering in these struggles under false pretenses. In many ways the "female circumcision

controversy” was an artificial conflict, seemingly fought either to protect women or to preserve a cultural practice. However, this controversy can be seen as a ruse that nationalized the female body. Women’s bodies became a site of political struggle and reflected the desire for land and population growth on the part of both the colonial government and the KCA. Moreover, the conflict affected countless women in a myriad of negative and positive ways. Many were saved from the painful surgery and had the opportunity to receive an education, while even more women were attacked and forcibly circumcised. Furthermore, the decision to be circumcised or not often affected a woman’s ability to receive an education. Thus, throughout this conflict the Kikuyu-speaking woman was, in a sense, a “puppet on a string.” The puppeteers were mostly men acting as colonial officials, missionaries, family elders, and recently educated young Kikuyu males. The autonomous voices of the women were seldom heard.

However, this tale does not end on an entirely dismal note. For women, a lack of satisfactory education compared to men, unfair labor practices, taxation, and exclusion from politics accompanied the “female circumcision controversy” throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, it was a transformational period in Kenyan history that motivated a new generation of nationalistic Kenyan women. In receiving an education (albeit from colonial schools), and, in some cases, fighting *not* to be circumcised, a woman could break away from social and cultural norms in new and innovative ways. The women of this struggle took their oppression and molded it into a determination that would drive them to be the movers of the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s and the Women’s Revolt in years to follow.

The involvement of women in these later resistance movements led to the formation of a grassroots organization called Maendeleo ya Wanawake, the “Advancement of Women,” which in 1952, devoted itself to the improvement of the economic, political, and social status of women in Kenya. Over the past fifty-plus years, Maendeleo ya Wanawake has increased its membership to over two million women, all of whom are working actively for the betterment of women throughout Kenya. The struggle over female circumcision culminated in 2001 legislation outlawing the practice of female genital cutting. Furthermore, the social climate is beginning to change in Kenya, as well as across the continent, in terms of women’s rights and gender relations. Women hold more positions in public office in Kenya and elsewhere on the continent (e.g. the current President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf). Ultimately, Kenyan women are making important strides in their own advancement, and their once silenced voices are starting to be heard.

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