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The Rite to Womanhood: An Interdisciplinary Study of Female Circumcision Among the Gikuyu of Kenya

by

Ashley Sahel Castro
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INTRODUCTION

On February 6, 2010, the 6th annual International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation was celebrated around the world, once again sparking discussion over the practice of female genital cutting (FGC)[1]. This United Nations-sponsored day of awareness has not been the only action aimed at abolition of the practice in recent years. Through numerous print and web-based articles, rallies, conferences, seminars, and legislative efforts, several international and local agencies have led the efforts to eliminate the practice citing its violation of human rights and negative effects on women's health as moral imperatives to its abolition. Perhaps most notably, nine UN agencies along with the World Health Organization released an interagency statement on eliminating "female genital mutilation" in 2008 as a reaffirmation of the commitment that the UN and WHO made in 1997 to reduce the prevalence of FGC. While international and local organizations have in recent years reinvigorated their efforts to eliminate the practice, it has been controversial since the beginnings of prolonged contact between European colonizers and populations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

The WHO estimates that there are roughly 100 to 140 million women and girls who have undergone FGC today, and about 92 million of those are African girls

[1] As Walley notes, "there is an extensive terminology in English that includes female circumcision, clitoridectomy, excision, infibulations, genital mutilation, and, in the perspective of some Anglo-American observers, torture" (1997:407). I have chosen to use female genital cutting in my thesis as a less judgment umbrella term for many procedures. Where appropriate I use the terms employed by indigenous women themselves.

above the age of ten. About three million African girls are expected to undergo FGC every year (World Health Organization 2008:14). While FGC is practiced in parts of the Middle East and Asia (and to a much lesser extent among certain ethnic groups in Central and South America), it is most widely practiced in Africa, where it has been documented in 28 countries. Immigration has fueled the controversy, by creating cases where FGC is performed in Western countries or where women seek refuge in those countries to avoid undergoing it (Walley 1997: 405). The cutting is usually done by specialized traditional practitioners, though there has been an increase in operations done in hospital settings. The girls who undergo the procedure are most often between the ages of four and twelve, though this has also been changing with girls generally being circumcised at earlier ages (Skaine 2005:14).

Statistics describing how many women have undergone some form of FGC are especially striking when one considers the numerous legal measures around the world promising heavy sanctions against practitioners. In Africa, the Maputo Protocol to guarantee rights to women, including an article for the "prohibition… of all forms of female genital mutilation," has been ratified by 27 countries (Union Africaine 2003). Many individual countries have passed their own laws against FGC with prison terms and large fines facing anybody who is known to have participated in performing the operations. For women and girls who undergo FGC, potential consequences, according to its critics, include a plethora of health risks including "chronic pain, infections, decreased sexual enjoyment, and psychological

consequences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder" (World Health Organization 2008:11). FGC has also been correlated to increased infant mortality (World Health Organization 2005:6). However, the potential ramifications of not being circumcised often seem to carry more weight than potential health risks. Rosemarie Skaine proposes four categories into which the motivation for being circumcised or having your child circumcised fall: 1) socio-cultural, 2) hygienic and aesthetic, 3) spiritual and religious, 4) psychosexual (Skaine 2005:17). Categories one and two seem to carry the most negative social consequences for choosing to not be circumcised because of the greater possibility of being ostracized, not being eligible for marriage, and being subject to abuse by others. The most fervent proponents of FGC are often women, although men sometimes also hold strong opinions on the issue that may support or disagree with women's views. Support for FGC varies most strongly among ethnic groups-- even within the same country-- as well as along lines of religious affiliation and socioeconomic status.

One of the things often lost in discussion about FGC is the variety of procedures that can fall under that umbrella term. There are four generally agreed-upon types of FGC, based on what kind of cutting is involved

> **Type I**- Clitoridectomy: Removal of the prepuce with or without excision of all or part of the clitoris.
> **Type II**- Excision: Removal of the prepuce and clitoris as well as partial or total excision of the labia minora.
> **Type III**- Infibulation: Removal of part or all of the external genitalia, often only leaving a small hole through which fluids may pass.
> **Type IV**- Unclassified: Includes scarification, cauterization, and other modifications of the genital area that do not fall into any of the above categories. [Skaine 2005:8]

There is also deinfibulation to allow infibulated women to have intercourse or to give birth as well as reinfibulation after childbirth or sometimes when a husband is away to prevent infidelity. Infibulation is by far the most dangerous type of FGC because it involves the removal of the most tissue and is the most drastic transformation of a woman or girl's external genitalia. More of the most severe health risks involved with FGC are associated with Type III than with any other type. Clitoridectomy presents the least drastic change for the woman or girl and has the fewest health risks. Often conversations about FGC do not differentiate between the different types, leading to a lot of misinformation and gross generalization.

The discourse surrounding FGC has, from the very beginning, reflected misunderstanding, assumption, and bias. Only recently have indigenous women been able to voice their opinions either for or against the practice. For much of the controversy's history, the debate has been dominated primarily by Euro-American Christian men. As a result, the conversation has largely been about the foreign, oppressed Other. Interestingly, female circumcision has never been restricted to the non-Western world. Hanny Lightfoot-Klein (1989) documents some of the history of FGC in Euro-American societies. During the 19th century in England, clitoridectomy was used as a tool to cure "the vexing mental disorders of women" by eliminating the possibility of masturbation. Clitoridectomy was also practiced in the United States through the early half of the 20th century as a cure for "lesbian practices, suspected lesbian inclinations, and an aversion to men" as well as for what they termed mental disorders including "hypersexuality, hysteria, and nervousness"

(Lightfoot-Klein 1989:180). Infibulation was used to prevent masturbation in the United States until 1905. The use of FGC to treat imagined pathologies seems to have been easily discarded in Euro-American countries. Despite this history, FGC continues to be portrayed as a peculiarly Third World problem. Surely, many who are aware of this history find it encouraging that "science and reason" prevailed in Euro-American societies to eliminate FGC and consider it evidence that all enlightened societies will eventually do the same.

Another curious thing about the circumcision debate has been its focus on women and girls. Male circumcision has been practiced around the world for thousands of years. It continues to be widely practiced today in the United States for both religious and health reasons. There are a number of possible explanations for the gendered bias. Christine Walley discusses the influence of Second Wave feminism in the 1970s on the circumcision discourse. With a revived focus on women's rights, many feminists understood FGC in terms of oppression, patriarchy, and most importantly, sexism. Walley makes the case that the debate is no longer framed or approached as an issue of women's rights but rather as an issue of more general and cultural rights. She argues that the new focus raises issues that relate to "the meaning and viability of 'multicultural' societies" (Walley 1997:406). However, I agree with Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (2001:114) that 70s-era feminism "closely associated with liberal/individualist ethics and as such exemplified in the democracies of the western world, has undeniable implications for molding and texturing modern debates of female circumcision in the West." Western feminism,

moreover, is still predominant in the discourse. While efforts to combat FGC are normally presented as part of a large human rights agenda, women continue to receive special attention as “victims” of male-dominated societies. The prevailing moral impetus to stop the circumcision of girls has always relied on the perceived helplessness of “native women” and the foreigner’s unique ability to save them. Perhaps the emphasis has changed from needing to protect women from the native men to needing to protect them from human rights violations of ignorant or apathetic governments(incidentally, post-Independence, under the jurisdiction of native men), but international agencies are still intervening to protect women with a lot of the same biases of the Second Wave discourse. Walley describes the tensions that arose between First and Third world feminists and women during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) conferences: “[Third World feminists] objected to the way the issue was being handled by First World feminists and called attention to the troubling power dynamics that exist between the First and Third Worlds, as well as between First and Third World women” (Walley 1997:419). To be sure, women are disproportionately affected by inadequacies in governmental policies and their well-being often directly contributes to the well-being of their communities. However, the discourse that focuses on female circumcision and not male circumcision has always operated on benevolent sexism. Western feminist discourse seems to have simply added a layer of ethnocentric bias.

Walley does bring in ethnocentrism in her discussion of the tension within feminist anthropology between feminism’s advocacy for women’s rights and

anthropology's "trademark emphasis on cultural understanding" (1997:406). She sees this tension as a useful opportunity to examine its source and how it is manifest in conversations about FGC. She finds a common thread in both sides of the conversation in what she calls "a hardened view of 'culture' based on a rigid essentialist notion of difference that can be historically linked to the colonial era" (1997:407). She elaborates on how this presents itself in studies of FGC:

> "Anthropological accounts that focus on how such practices either function or provide meaning, without attendant focus on how practices are transformed and given new meaning, discourage activism by implying that if such practices ceased, a social "need," symbolic or material, would be left unfulfilled." [Walley 1997:417]

The ways in which FGC is transformed and given new meaning will be one of the themes running throughout this thesis, and one of the reasons why a historical study of diverse experiences over time with FGC is most appropriate. Exploring FGC this way dispels some of the tension in feminist anthropology, by providing a picture of women as active participants in creating their own history. To avoid the same traps many anti-FGC activists have fallen into, it is necessary to look at the major argument points of movements led by outsiders to eradicate FGC. Most arguments against FGC fall into three categories, those that see the practice 1) as oppressive and sexist because it is designed to control women's sexuality; 2) as imposed by men on women who do not have the resources to resist; 3) as equivalent to other forms of physical violence like torture and results in the same kind of emotional, physical, and social consequences.

One of the most pervasive misconceptions about FGC is that it makes sexual intercourse painful or otherwise unpleasurable and is thus a way of controlling women's sexuality. While in some contexts women's sexuality is indeed subject to societal (and male) control, the variety of procedures and of contexts in which procedures are performed should indicate that such a simple relationship between sexuality and FGC should not be assumed. One of Abusharaf's interview subjects who had been infibulated described her experience with sex:

> "These people need to know that if a woman has a good husband, sex can be good even if she is circumcised, and can be very bad if she is uncircumcised and has a selfish husband…. Now I have sex almost five times a week…I have *tharwa jinsia* [orgasm], that indescribable sense of pleasure that gives one the feeling of touching the sky." [Abusharaf 2001:128]

She complicates the idea of sexual pleasure as being simply a physical encounter in which the relationship between partners is not an essential component of the experience. Janice Boddy (1982), in her study of infibulation in Sudan, also argues that the relationship between FGC and sexuality has been overstated. Instead, as she demonstrates, "circumcision as a symbolic act brings sharply into focus the fertility potential of women by dramatically de-emphasizing their inherent sexuality" (687). In the Sudanese society that she studies, women "achieve social recognition…by becoming less like men physically, sexually, and socially" (687). Her analysis further exemplifies the error, common to popular discourse of FGC, of a focus on sexuality that does not consider social and cultural contexts and gender ideologies.

The issue of the effects of FGC on women's sexuality is one where it is especially important to distinguish between different types of FGC. While infibulation often does make intercourse painful for the woman because of the inelasticity of the small opening created, Types I and II do not carry the same potential for pain in that way. The other common preconception is that excision of all or parts of the clitoris decreases sensation and with it the pleasure that a woman has available to her, thus limiting her sexuality. Aside from cultural variations in pleasure and sexuality, Nahid Toubia (1994), who is herself against FGC, concedes that "little scientific research is available on the sexual and psychological effects of the practice." Although the common presupposition is that removal of the sensitive area of the external genitalia would greatly reduce or eliminate the possibility of sexual pleasure, Toubia notes that "the assumption that all circumcised women have sexual problems or are unable to achieve orgasm is not substantiated by research or anecdotal evidence" (1994). Walley (1997) raises the possibility that women may receive similar pleasure from other erogenous zones whose sensitivity could be heightened to compensate for the removal of the clitoris. Furthermore, the clitoris is actually a much larger organ that extends internally and includes the labia minora as well. This means that sexual stimulation for women extends beyond the prepuce, and clitoridectomy that removes all or part of the external parts of the clitoris may reduce sensitivity but does not eliminate it (Chalker 2000). In addition, research done on sensitivity of the penis has found that the part of the penis normally removed during circumcision (the glans) is the most sensitive area of the penis,

resulting in a marked decrease in the physical potential for sexual pleasure in circumcised boys and men (Sorrels et. al 2006). Ignorance or obscuring of such information has allowed the persistent overemphasis on a woman's ability to receive pleasurable stimulation and FGC's role in reducing it. As a result, FGC continues to be construed as a matter of sexuality measured in purely physical dimensions.

Most critics also seem to understand FGC as being an old, "traditional" custom that is imposed on women by oppressive men. Walley noted that "while in Kikhome male and female initiations were performed side by side (albeit with very different consequences), in the Western-oriented literature opposing such practices there was an exclusive focus on the tormenting of girls, if not solely by men, then by a monolithic patriarchy" (Walley 1997:418). Somehow genital cutting performed on females is privileged over that performed on males as more deserving of attention and intervention. I have already suggested that typical arguments concerning sexual sensitivity are misinformed, and that is surely a source of some of the bias. However, it is difficult to imagine that this privileging of one "issue" over another does not at least in part derive from and reinforce conceptualizations of women as needing protection. As discussed earlier, Second Wave feminism has to some extent encouraged this way of thinking in advocating for universal women's rights that should be globally respected, whether or not women themselves are uniformly in support of such formulations. Implicit in this is a simplistic "emphasis on the global uniformity of women's oppression irrespective of culture, class, or ethnic

differences" (Abusharaf 2001:116). In particular, women who undergo FGC are seen as needing protection from indigenous men who have historically oppressed them, lending a somewhat ethnocentric tone to the conversation.

Unfortunately, what often accompanies and compounds the ethnocentric bias is what Walley identifies as the "tendency to characterize African women as thoroughly oppressed victims of patriarchy, ignorance, or both, not as social actors in their own right" (1997:419). Many anti-FGC activists and members of the public interested in its eradication are stunned by how much resistance they get from women who undergo it. Their assumption is that the women of these "traditional" societies desperately need to be transformed, with their help, from "downtrodden, forlorn, helpless casualties of male dominance" (Abusharaf 2001:112) to the "empowered" women that they would naturally want to be. Of course, there are numerous anti-FGC groups founded and led by native women, but they are often in the minority compared to FGC's indigenous supporters. Appeals to women's feelings of oppression by the men in their lives often do not bring the responses that anti-FGC activists expect. The ineffectiveness of such appeals is largely because FGC is often not about procedures imposed on women by men. If anything, the biggest proponents of keeping FGC traditions as they have been are usually women encouraging it for their daughters or granddaughters. As Abusharaf argues in her article on infibulated Sudanese women, "through ritual performance, these women ensure the transmission of cultural ethos within their lifetimes" (2001:113). The mistaken assumption that men are the biggest supporters of FGC likely comes from

disparities in access to education and positions within colonial and post-colonial governments. Because men often received more Western-style education and were often involved in local governance during the colonial period, they had the tools to express their opinions in a way that was more far-reaching, and they emerged as the sole defenders of the practices in the discourse, perhaps giving the impression that they were the ones most interested in their preservation. The reality is that FGC is seen as an important custom by many women who have undergone the procedures for a variety of reasons. Once again, however, the discourse portrays women as lacking agency and FGC as being a context-independent violation of their bodies.

Quoting Henry Louis Gates, Walley raises the important issue of why Western reformers focus on FGC over any of the other numerous difficulties women face: "Is it, after all, unreasonable to be suspicious of Westerners who are exercised over female circumcision, but whose eyes glaze over when the same women are merely facing starvation?" (1997:422). She makes the astute observation that in some ways the fascination with FGC comes from "a long history in which sub-Saharan and North African women's bodies have been simultaneously exoticized and eroticized." While this is true, I would argue that the fascination with FGC and the strong reactions to it, in addition to the obsession with saving native women, come chiefly from a visceral response to the idea of cutting into one of the most sensitive parts of the human body. The strong, emotional response elicited in outsiders at the mention of FGC has led to several misunderstandings. Perhaps the biggest assumption is that pain is an objective concept and that responses to

physically painful experiences vary little across human populations. Walley addresses this misconception and notes that “while all humans presumably have the same range of physiological responses to pain, barring individual differences and learned techniques for controlling pain, the meanings associated with pain and ideas about how one should respond to it vary situationally as well as cross-culturally” (1997:422). Bodily modifications common in our societies like piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic surgery all involve tolerating varying degrees of pain for effects that are not mandated by health needs. Somehow, these self-inflicted and socially encouraged experiences of pain (some of which can be enduring) are not seen as comparable to FGC, which has acquired the status of “mutilation” or “torture.” Related to the language of “mutilation” are assumptions about the psychological experiences of women who undergo FGC. People opposed to FGC express concern about the trauma and damage that is inflicted on girls and women in the process. In this thesis, as explained more fully in the following chapter, I will employ psychological stress models to attempt an answer to the ubiquitous question: is circumcision psychologically harmful to the girls who undergo it?

In talking about FGC it is easy to fall into the trap of generalities which contribute to many of the misconceptions and misunderstandings described earlier. For that reason I have chosen to do an in-depth analysis of the history of FGC in one society: the Gikuyu of Kenya. Gikuyu have traditionally practiced both male circumcision and female circumcision (clitoridectomy) as part of rituals of initiation into adulthood. Throughout their colonial history, female circumcision has been

placed at the center of many battles between Gikuyu traditionalists, who wanted to preserve the old way of life, and Europeans (along with Christian Gikuyu converts), who objected on moral grounds to what they understood to be the abuse of Gikuyu women. Today, female circumcision continues to decrease following the trend that began in the 1960s, and roughly thirty percent of Gikuyu women and girls are reported to be circumcised. Creating a timeline of changes in Gikuyu society and the practice of female circumcision will demonstrate how the meaning of circumcision has changed with it. Where possible I have included the perspectives of Gikuyu women themselves, as recorded in interviews conducted by ethnographers. My inclusion of these narratives is meant to alleviate some of the problems inherent in my own positioning as a Western-educated woman attempting to understand the experiences of women whom I have never met in a country I have never visited. Of course, these perspectives themselves have inevitably gone through several levels of translation. Notwithstanding their inevitable distortions, these narratives still demonstrate the heterogeneity of Gikuyu women's experiences with and attitudes towards female circumcision and they complicate the "hardened view of culture" that Walley refers to as a common pitfall in feminist and anthropological studies of circumcision.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE STUDY OF CIRCUMCISION

In this chapter I lay out the theoretical framework for my analysis of the Gikuyu circumcision ritual. Because I will be drawing from both anthropology and psychology, I have divided this chapter into two large sections to introduce the relevant concepts from each discipline. I will begin with an overview of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's foundational concepts in the anthropology of ritual, which have been taken up in a psycho-anthropological analysis by Alan Morinis. Following that, I introduce and explain the two stress models that I will be using for the psychological perspective.

Anthropological Foundations for the Study of Ritual

In his seminal work, *The Rites of Passage,* published in 1909, Arnold van Gennep identified a class of rituals that dealt with transitions from one status or condition to another and gave them the name *rites de passage.* Arguably, van Gennep's most enduring contribution was his thesis that rites of passage share a common tripartite structure based on three sequential stages: separation from the old status, a period of liminality or transition, and incorporation into the new status. Although van Gennep held that all rites of passage everywhere include all three stages, he also suggested that one or another stage may be more or less developed

in particular rituals, as befits their purposes; for example wedding rites tend to have a protracted reincorporation stage. In designating the class of rituals as “passages,” Van Gennep intentionally uses a spatial metaphor; he sees territorial passage as the model for temporal transitions, and he devotes an entire chapter to rites that incorporate strangers into new territory or reincorporate returning travelers. For many rites, however, the ritual passage does not involve physical movement between territories but rather between statuses. It is primarily this transition between statuses with which the bulk of his text is concerned. Passage is initiated with the separation of the individual from one status (often physically manifest as a particular group of people) and is completed with his or her incorporation into another status (and another group). While the desired transformation is usually symbolically enacted in the transition stage of the rites, it is in the performance of the entire ritual that the social passage occurs. For this reason, to understand the transformative act of circumcision, it is necessary to also study the separation and incorporation stages.

In his analysis of various rites of initiation into adulthood across the world, van Gennep posits that rites of separation remove the individual “from the asexual world, and they are followed by rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality” (1960:67). In the case of the Gikuyu, there was some truth in this claim as circumcised females moved from the children group into the adult group of sexually active women. But gaining admission into the adult group was not only a matter of sexual maturity among the Gikuyu. It was also very significantly a passage from

immature and selfish child to mature and cooperative adult. This distinction with regards to the central change that occurs in a circumcised girl's status is important to the main argument of this thesis. van Gennep's assertion above perhaps serves to distinguish rites of initiation into adulthood from other kinds of initiation rites (such as membership in secret societies), but it does not capture the complexities of this transition for Gikuyu girls. The overemphasis on sexuality has played a dominant role in discourse on circumcision and obscures the more important change in status from an individual to a fully realized member of the community.

Victor Turner advanced the study of ritual by elaborating on the concept of liminality and developing his model of communitas. Both of these concepts deepen our understanding of what happens during the transition stages of passage rites. According to Turner, a person who is in the liminal (transitional) period of the rite of passage "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (1969:94). Further, "their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner 1967:97). The initiate in this phase is in a powerful and dangerous condition that must be controlled to avoid contamination of the rest of society. Liminality is marked by ambiguity and defies classification using everyday language. By emphasizing the fluid quality of the liminal period, Turner attributes a certain rigidity, fixity, or structured character to what he calls the "secular" or mundane social life that constitutes the before and after of the transformative experience.

Communitas is a feature of the liminal phase in many rites of passage. He introduces communitas as one of the two "models of interrelatedness" (1969:96) that clash and are "mutually determinative" of each other (1969:127). Communitas is "a society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated… community of equal individuals" (1969:96), with the opposing model being a structured and hierarchical organization of a society's members that separates people as it organizes them. The liminal experience brings out communitas and functions to "[give] recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society" (Turner 1969:97). This implies that the necessary end result of the rite of passage is to instill a cognizance of the communitas that allows society to exist. And also that to some extent its positioning against the structured society makes the liminal experience the ambiguous and unstable period that it is for the initiate. Thus, central to the transition experience in a rite of passage is the struggle between these forms of social life, one egalitarian, the other based on hierarchical differentiation.

Although van Gennep did not explicitly make any hypothesis about the internal processes of the person undergoing transition, a psychological passage is implied in his presentation of the properties of the rites of passage. Turner did not use psychological theories either, but he did use words that suggested a concern with the individual's "state." While van Gennep described the varied possibilities for what was changing in the passage ("place, state, social position, and age"), Turner collapsed all of those possibilities into the idea of "state" as "any type of stable or

recurrent condition that is culturally recognized" (1969:94). The old "state" is what is left behind in the transition, and with this abandonment the initiate moves out of mundane society and becomes a part of the spiritual world and becomes enveloped by communitas. Of course, any social process that allows for a person to be "reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (Turner 1969:95) would have great transformative power that extends beyond the ritual change in status. It is during the transition rites that the "additional powers" are given to individuals through their participation in certain acts. Because initiation rites often emphasize the gaining of wisdom or maturation from child to adult, it follows that the change in status is accompanied by a psychological transformation. Further, his use of the word "cope" is suggestive of psychological mechanisms that are needed for a response to change.

Turner describes the rites of separation as made up of "symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group" (1969:94) from their previous station in society. After the instability of the liminal period the initiate is reincorporated into the structure and, as Turner puts it, the "passage is consummated" (1969:95).The initiate's old status and the group's expectations of him or her change irreversibly with successful completion of the rites of passage. The irreversibility of what occurs during the transition rites is addressed by van Gennep when he discusses circumcision. He makes explicit the power of such modification to the body "since the operation leaves ineradicable traces, the

incorporation is permanent" (1960:72). This permanence extends to the psychosocial and it can be deduced that the permanence of one contributes directly to the other. More specifically, physical marking of the body must have some role in making effective the permanence of the transitions. A central feature of these markings is that the process of creating them tends to be incredibly painful. As demonstrated in the Introduction, the issue of pain is integral to the arguments of anti-circumcision activists and deserves greater analysis as key to the transformative power of rites of passage into adulthood.

Working from the observation that painful and otherwise physically and emotionally taxing events are ubiquitous in rites of initiation around the world, Alan Morinis (1985) developed a theory about how pain functions in ritual. His objective in the article, "The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness," is to explore the "possibility that the pain itself has a central role in the accomplishment of the explicit purposes of the initiations" (1985:151). He proposes an approach to the study of ritual that combines anthropology and psychology. To this end he wants to examine "how pain itself complements symbolic and functional aspects of the rites" using a range of contributions made by anthropologists who have written on ritual. van Gennep's rites of passage, and in particular the three phases, are especially important to his proposition about the significance of pain. He also draws heavily from Turner's ideas about liminality and his theory of the struggle between two models of social life. He pursues a "theoretical perspective which focuses on the interplay of individual (psycho-

physical) and ritual (social-cultural)" (1985:152) and explores pain in a novel way, with compelling results.

Morinis reviews some the major theories proposed by psychologists concerning ritual, some of which have been discredited and others which he thinks have not gone far enough to explain the high frequency of painful initiations. His motivation in writing his paper is to bring attention to the oft-neglected exploitation of the "human capacity to experience pain…in order to accomplish the sociocultural goals of the rites" (1985:152). He argues that proposed explanations like the ones that contend that the ritual ordeal produces a bond among initiates or that stress the importance of the individual are not satisfying because these ends could be achieved by other means other than inflicting pain on the initiates. He then moves into a discussion of the social situation of the ritual, with the suggestion that the adults who supervise and impose these rites on children are acting on an "intuitive recognition that the psycho-physiological, symbolic, and functional effects of pain are appropriate to the goals they are trying to reach" (1985:160). Here he begins to develop his theory about the "meta-message" of the rites of transition. In his view the positive image of the group stands in stark contrast to the pain and suffering that the initiate must endure to become a part of this group. An inherent contradiction develops in that the individual wants to join this group. Morinis rejects the notion that communitas is a "necessary affective component" (1985:159) of rites and deemphasizes its importance, shifting the focus instead to the notion that some affective component is essential to the transformation occurring in rites of passage.

For reasons that will be elaborated in the following chapter, communitas is especially important for the circumcision rites of the Gikuyu and seems to me to complement Morinis' other assertions rather well. According to Morinis, for successful incorporation into the group, the individual must be sacrificed and the "unlimited freedom of an individual unconstrained by social responsibility" (1985:162) must be given up. The pain experienced by initiates can be thought of as a psychic release of the tension between the two "models of interrelatedness," and the resulting scars are its resolution. This goes back to the irreversibility of the procedure; the individual as child, once successfully sacrificed, cannot reappear as before having already experienced the power of communitas. And by bringing in the idea of "peak experience" as an extreme psychological experience that "dishabituates" and brings about self-awareness as the initiand "perceives anew" (1985:166), it is clear that pain is both symbolic and facilitating. This new self-awareness is thematically similar to the "additional powers" with which initiates are endowed in Turner's description. Thus, the painful initiation ritual is the necessary resolution of the conflict inherent in letting the individual into the social group and provides the conditions necessary for psychological transformation. The sacrifice of the individual for the group is the "meta-message" of the ritual (1985:164) and pain is a tool and result of its achievement.

Having established that pain must be understood contextually and that the pain of circumcision, in particular, must be a critical component of the transformation, I want to move towards an understanding of how the ordeal is

actually experienced. A core principle that emerges from Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas and Morinis' proposal about the sacrificing of the individual is that rites of passage, especially those of initiation into adulthood, are fundamentally about the reconciliation of individuals with the larger society. This can be further expanded upon through a psychological perspective that incorporates work on individualism and collectivism, specifically in the study of stressful encounters. Being that the "barbaric" aspects of female circumcision on which many feminists and human rights activists have been fixated are so integral to many rites of passage, it follows that an analysis of female circumcision can benefit from a focus on precisely its experience as an ordeal. The focus on the ordeal does not imply that other aspects of rites of passage are less important to the process of transformation or less meaningful to initiates and society alike, but it is a necessary focus in confronting the pervasive language of anti-FGC movements that focus on circumcision as psychologically harmful and nothing more.

The Psychology of Stress

In *Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective*, Carolyn M. Aldwin recounts the story of trying to publish a paper titled "Culture as a Determinant of Coping Behavior" in an interdisciplinary journal:

> The editor sent me two reviews. The review by the anthropologist was essentially, "This is so obvious. Why bother to publish it." By contrast, the gist of the review by the psychologist held that this was the most outrageous thing he had heard, and he considered it too ridiculous to publish." [Aldwin 1994:192]

Although, in the decades since that incident, there has been much research on the role that culture plays in stress, reconciling anthropological and psychological perspectives on stress continues to be a difficult task. As Aldwin notes, the study of individual stressful experiences in psychology would seem to be at odds with anthropology's focus on people as fundamentally cultural beings. When studying how culture mediates and moderates stressful experiences it seems sufficient to approach the question from an anthropological perspective. However, psychology's unit of study being the individual adds an important dimension to this study if we want to understand the stressful *experience* as a multi-step process. In fact, both perspectives are necessary to tease out how culturally-bound experiences and meanings interact with internal psychic processes to create culture-dependent responses to stress. The difficulties inherent in doing an analysis of stress using psychology and anthropology should not undermine the strengths of both in elucidating important components of the stressful experience.

Even within psychology, the study of stress has been approached in quite a few different ways and researchers have worked with disparate definitions of many of the basic concepts of stress theory, resulting in a vast literature that can be as confusing as it is helpful. To disentangle the inconsistencies of the stress literature, Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) developed a model that reexamined the assumptions and failings of prior terminology and models. Their book offers a thorough and informative study of stress research up to that point. They begin by clarifying fundamental concepts. The concept of "stress" has been used in a variety

of ways and in various fields of study to refer to almost every part of the basic stimulus-response paradigm. Without going into detail about formerly popular psychological approaches, it is important to note that there has been a shift in emphasis from traits and styles, especially in coping, to a more variable, process-oriented understanding. In this and many other ways, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional stress model presents a departure from previous ways of thinking about stress to one that accepts and incorporates the possibility for a wide range of stress experiences.

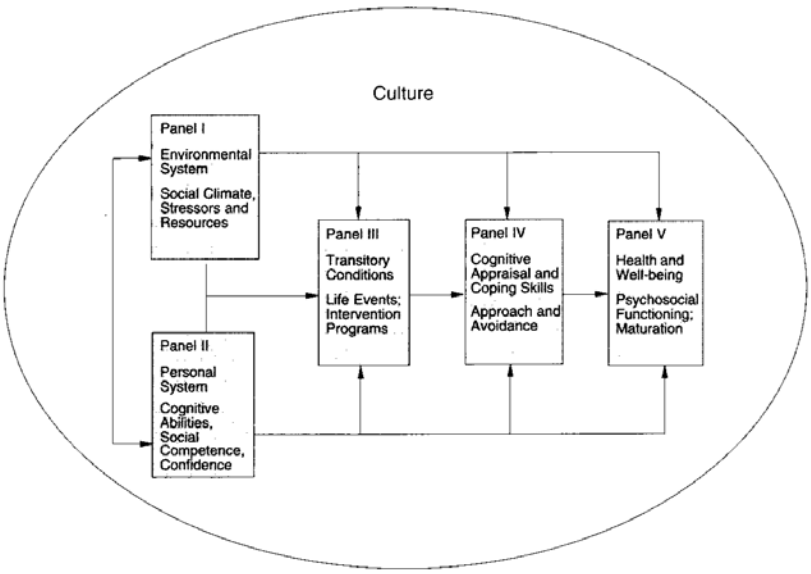
In psychology, the original understanding of stress as provoking straightforward responses, as in the physical sciences, gradually gave way to a more dynamic understanding of what was occurring in the individual both physiologically and cognitively. Among the key conceptual changes were the presentation of the person as active rather than passive and a new interest in the interplay between the person and his or her environment. Stress gained prominence in psychology research following World War II and the Korean War. As psychologists attempted to understand the effects of war on returning soldiers they employed neat cause and effect models. However, further research revealed that this approach was seriously limited in explaining the great differences in how different people respond to the same stressful situation. To understand these differences, the focus shifted from discovering a universal stress response to researching how individual differences in stress experiences resulted from multi-part psychological processes.

All of these developments had, as an unintended consequence, produced several different understandings of stress as stimulus, reaction, and property. As Cofer and Appley put it, the term "stress" had come to be used "in place of anxiety, conflict, frustration, emotional disturbance, trauma, alienation, and anomie" (1964:1). Lazarus and Folkman eliminated much of the confusion by defining stress as "any event in which the person feels his or her adaptive resources to be taxed or exceeded" (1984:27). Parsing this definition clarifies how it is a departure from the way the term was previously used. Firstly, stress,[2] in their definition, refers to an event, specifically one that is taxing. This stands in contrast to previous usage of the term as referring to an outcome. One of the chief difficulties with previous definitions of stress that focused on the outcome was that they did not allow for an event to be described as stressful prospectively, thus relying on retroactive assessments. Another important element of Lazarus and Folkman's definition of stress is the inclusion of how the "person feels" about the event, implying a cognitive and subjective component that was missing in many physiological models of stress. It also makes reference to resources, which are an important aspect of the stress process and become very relevant in the discussion of coping. Briefly put, their definition of stress incorporates the interrelated processes of appraisal and coping that accompany any taxing event.

[2] It is important to note here that Lazarus and Folkman's model poses all events that are taxing as stressful in that they require the mobilization of resources. Because popular usage of the word stressful connotes a negative affective and situational component, I avoid using this word in my thesis. Instead, I use taxing as an adjective for a generally stressful event.

Despite the improvements made to the psychological understanding of stress, the one important consideration that was left mostly unexplored by Lazarus and Folkman was the role of culture. One of the most problematic aspects of the psychological approach to the study of stress is that it has assumed that certain concepts and findings are universally applicable. Without studying experiences with stress in many different societies it is essentially impossible to determine the cross-cultural applicability of stress models. The majority of stress research, including Lazarus and Folkman's work, has been done in North America or Western Europe with Euro-American research participants. Fortunately, since the emergence of cultural psychology as a prominent subfield of psychology, its practitioners have begun the difficult work of challenging the ethnocentricity that has typically gone unchallenged in the study of stress. Cultural psychologists work towards avoiding common Western biases in their research practices and try to avoid framing their theories, methods, and conclusions in ways that privilege one culture over another. Cross-cultural studies have already found that many assumptions about the universality of empirical research findings have resulted from a lack of consideration of the role of culture in shaping thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. While there is no one stress model that can make research-supported claims to universability, a number of new models have been proposed that may be more useful ways of looking at the relationship between the culture, environment, the individual, and stress appraisal and coping.

Moos and his colleagues began their study of the environment-person relationship with an interest in the effects of the environmental context on the efficacy of different institutional settings such as mental hospitals and schools. From this their research moved towards a focus on individuals' responses to particular life crises and events, attempting to explain why "most persons shape acceptable resolutions to difficult circumstances while some manage not only to survive but also to mature in the face of overwhelming hardships" (Moos 1984:7). In particular, their work emphasizes the "social network and coping resources that help individuals prevent and adapt to stressful life circumstances" (Moos 1984:7). This emphasis is significant in that it acknowledges the importance of social environment and culture in how individuals are affected by and respond to life stressors. Their five panel conceptual model includes multiple contextual and person-specific variables that all contribute to well-being and health outcomes.



Source: Chun et. al 2006

The environmental system (Panel I) includes “the social climate and ongoing stressors and resources” (Moos 1984). This is most related to the social context and aspects of a person’s situation that are relatively stable or enduring over time. In the Gikuyu context the warm Kenyan climate, an agrarian lifestyle, and strong associations with peers of the same gender could all be parts of the environmental system. The role that religion plays in someone’s life could also be part of the environmental system. Significantly, it could be equally as important in the personal system (Panel II), which is comprised of person-specific factors such as “such personal resources as self-esteem, cognitive ability, and general problem-solving skills” as well as “prior crisis and coping experiences” and “commitments and aspirations” (Moos 1984:7). Religion, as it influences a person’s personal moral ideals and character traits, just as any aspect of the environmental system does, is a useful example of the multidirectional relationship between the two panels. Panel III, transitory conditions, consists of “discrete events of short-term duration…as well as sequential combinations of such events” (Moos 1984:7) In my thesis, the transitory condition I will examine is the transition between childhood and adulthood for Gikuyu girls, specifically circumcision. Panel IV is coping responses, which I will address in more detail when I discuss coping and appraisal in stress responses. The last panel (V), health and well-being, describes how the combination of circumstances and personal factors contribute to good mental health in light of taxing events. It is important to note that each panel can affect each other panel, as in the following illustrative example:

> Factors in the environmental system (a high neighborhood crime rate) and the personal system (a vigilant perceptual style) can lead to cognitive appraisal (the perception of danger to personal safety) and coping responses (placing safety locks on windows and doors) that change the environmental system and reduce the probability of experiencing a stressful event (being robbed or burglarized). [Moos 1984:7]

This nonrecursive ability of the model opens the stress-response change to individual agency and the possibility of a person actively engaging with their environment in pursuit of their well-being. The latter half of the 20th century in Kenya demonstrated how powerful the interaction was between Gikuyu women's understanding of circumcision and the probability of girls going through it. The feedback loops make clear that social network and coping resources both prevent stressors from occurring and "forestall a continuing sequence of strain that is ultimately debilitating" (Moos 1984:13) when the stressor does occur.

The social climate component of the environmental system (Panel I) is further subdivided into three categories of dimensions: the relationship dimensions, personal growth dimensions, and system maintenance and change dimensions. The relationship dimensions describe how much cohesion and support there is among people, as well as how openly people express feelings. Personal growth dimensions assess in which directions people are encouraged to grow or what they are expected to achieve. They "channel the direction of change," such as towards greater maturity in girls as measured through greater familial responsibility. System maintenance and change dimensions look at how much structure there is in the setting, the clarity of the structure, and how open it is to change. All together these dimensions work to

promote a particular type of individual and “maintain or accentuate individual characteristics that are congruent with their dominant aspects” (Moos 1984).

As this conceptual model was being developed, its main source of data and research was from North American and European contexts. Because the model sought to address questions pertaining to mental institutions and other institutions in Western contexts, this focus was difficult to avoid. Today, Moos’ five panel model has been used for broader application of the principles of multidirectional relationships between multiple variables in a person’s life, especially when it comes to stress. Although the cross-cultural validity of the model remains uncertain, researchers have taken important steps towards understanding how these principles may or may not apply to other individuals in other cultures. One important consideration is the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The different social motivations of people in other societies can fundamentally challenge and discredit the validity of the model if is not generalizable to other cultural contexts. Before discussing how culture can influence Moos’ panels for primarily individualistic and collectivistic societies it is necessary to define these terms and identify where Gikuyu society fits in. When a society is described as individualistic or collectivistic this is referring to orientations and tendencies. No society is exclusively individualistic or collectivistic and, similarly, some individuals within a society may be described as collectivistic even though their society can be described as individualistic and vice versa. Societies identified as individualistic are primarily Euro-American. Most Asian, Latin American, and African societies are put

in the collectivistic category. Collectivistic cultures emphasize group cohesion, and people within those cultures are generally driven by motivations to serve the group and avoid disrupting the group's harmony. By contrast, individualistic cultures are more individual-oriented, with people generally being driven by the pursuit of personal goals with much less consideration for the groups to which they belong. Pre-colonization Gikuyu society was heavily oriented towards group cohesion and deemphasized the individual, fitting the classification of collectivist. Today, it is a bit more difficult to make such a classification because the influence of Euro-American values (largely individualistic) is much stronger on some people compared to others depending on factors like residence, level of education, etc. Overall, Gikuyu society today tends toward collectivism with important individualistic aspects.

These cultural traits impact each panel of Moos' model in different ways. Perhaps the clearest connection is with the environmental system. This system reflects larger pressures placed on individuals and the social resources that they have to deal with these pressures. Pressures for persons in more individualistic society would likely relate to personal achievement and achieving and maintaining independence. Especially during adolescence there would be a lot more effort to individuate and develop a strong sense of self while still having to live under parents' rules. Social resources also differ in collectivistic and individualistic societies. Where there is greater emphasis on belongingness and on group cooperation, support resources are easier to find than where there are large social networks that are very loosely defined. Collectivistic cultures also tend to have a larger number of people in

the household and a greater frequency of contact with relatives and neighbors, so social support is more readily accessible. The smaller, more isolated households that are common in individualistic societies usually means fewer social support resources (at least in terms of relationships) and greater roles for spouses, siblings, and parents. It is significant that urban living situations in collectivistic cultures often move to the individualistic type of household. Such has been the case with the Gikuyu as polygyny falls out of favor and fertility rates decrease. There have also been important changes in the way Gikuyu women organize themselves socially that I discuss in later chapters.

Most research that has looked at the influence of collectivistic and individualistic cultures on people has focused on the personal system. One finding has been that people in individualistic societies have a tendency towards self-construal that is defined by more "personal trait descriptors" while those in collectivistic societies tend to use more social role descriptors. In other words, people in collectivistic societies tend to think of themselves more in terms of their social relationships and not traits unique to them. According to some research studies, those with self-construals related to social relationships "reported a greater need for affiliation, nurturance, and sensitivity to social rejection," in contrast to people with independent self-construals. In a related area of study looking at motivation, researchers have proposed that people with independent self-construals are more motivated when they have freedom of choice. People with more interdependent self-construals are more motivated when choices have been made

by “trusted authority figures (e.g., mother)” (Chun et. al 2006:37). In terms of circumcision, this research would suggest that a Gikuyu girl would be more motivated by her mother’s insistence that she be circumcised rather than by her own feelings of not wanting to go through the pain involved.

The ways in which culture affects transitory conditions are much more complex: “Cultural attitudes and values shape the type of events and conditions that are typical or common in a society and those that are regarded as stressful or challenging” (Chun et. al 2006:37). As an example, in a society where every girl goes through circumcision the possibility of not going through circumcision would be taxing, whereas in a society where nobody is circumcised a girl who is facing circumcision would find that possibility extremely threatening. Stressful events can be categorized into two dimensions: “(1) independent vs. interdependent stressors; and (2) change vs. constancy” (Chun et. al 2006:37). In individualistic societies stressors that challenge a person’s sense of independence would likely have a more powerful effect and thus be more stressful than stressors that challenge interdependence. The opposite would be expected in collectivistic cultures. Change that disrupts stability would also probably be seen more positively in individualistic societies than collectivistic societies.

When it comes to cognitive appraisal and coping skills, culture affects how one perceives an event or situation, the coping strategies one chooses to employ, and what the goal of coping is. Cognitive appraisal is defined by Lazarus and Folkman as “the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facets, with respect to

its significance for well-being" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:31). Central to this process is the person as actively evaluating the event with all the attendant subjectivity explored more fully in Moos' model. The five-panel model incorporates Lazarus and Folkman's distinction between two kinds of appraisals—primary and secondary. Primary appraisal refers to the initial evaluation of the event's significance and impact, while secondary appraisal refers to what the individual believes can be done "with available personal and social resources' (Chun et. al 2006:38). A primary appraisal of an event can be either irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. My thesis is concerned solely with the "stressful" appraisal because my argument centers on the circumcision event never being appraised as irrelevant or benign-positive (not an insinuation that circumcision cannot have positive *outcomes*). The stressful appraisal can take three forms: harm/loss, challenge, and threat. In harm/loss, some damage to the person has already been sustained, as in illness, thus making the coping process about mitigating the effects of something difficult that has already occurred. Threat, on the other hand, is the anticipation of harm or loss, and as such relates to the experience of knowing that something difficult is coming. Challenge also anticipates an event, but differs from threat in that it offers the potential for gain or growth rather than harm or loss. Another difference related to that distinction is that challenge appraisal is perceived more positively and associated with such emotions as excitement and exhilaration, whereas threat is associated with more distressing emotions such as fear. Interestingly, both threat and challenge are often present in the same appraisal of

an event. Lazarus and Folkman note that in situations where an event is appraised as both challenging and threatening, cognitive coping to reduce the anxiety can influence perception of the event to be more challenging rather than threatening. Also, this challenge appraisal is more likely in situations where the individual has a greater sense of control. Because of the positive emotions associated with challenge appraisal, a challenge appraisal is more desirable than a threat one for many events. Circumcision, as a stressor, would affect the female initiate very differently depending on the initial appraisal and this appraisal would depend on the larger social narrative of which it is a part.

Research on motivation suggests that people with interdependent self-construals tend to be prevention-focused while people with independent self-construals tend to be promotion focused. This is building off of Higgins' theory about regulatory focus. Promotion-focused people have "strong ideals as desired end-states and [work] towards achieving these ideals" (Chun et. al 2006:36). This regulatory focus leads to greater sensitivity to positive outcomes and motivation is driven by a desire to increase them. Prevention-focused people, on the other hand, "are guided by obligations to oneself or significant others, and working towards meeting these obligations" (Chun et. al 2006:36). They are generally more sensitive to negative outcomes and are motivated more strongly by a desire to avoid them. Chun et al. (2006) hypothesize that people who have a promotion-focus would be more likely to appraise events as challenges to overcome, whereas prevention-focused people would be more likely to appraise events as potential threats to

stability. This would suggest that Gikuyu girls are more likely to appraise circumcision as a threat rather than challenge. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, circumcision has to be contextualized as relating to many aspects of Gikuyu society and culture, and when this is done circumcision does emerge as one of a series of *challenges* for Gikuyu girls. It is in the changing of the Gikuyu social context that the potential for threat appraisal arises as a possibility.

Before Lazarus and Folkman's work on stress, the functional hypothesis in psychology was that particular coping styles resulted in specific outcomes and researchers attempted to map coping "successes" to certain kinds of individuals or certain kinds of traits or behaviors. Lazarus and Folkman's definition of coping is "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:141). The wording in this definition is very deliberate and clarifies certain important points about coping. The two points most relevant to this discussion are important because they address some of the most serious limitations and cultural biases of coping research. In their definition, the coping process is not determined by its outcome, so that behaviors and cognitive efforts are considered coping methods as long as they are an effort to manage demands, regardless of whether it is successful or not. Use of the word "manage" replaces the previous conceptualization of coping as "mastery," which is critical because coping may have goals other than mastery (e.g., avoidance, acceptance, etc.). Although usually unexamined, the implications of there being different goals in

coping is especially important in cross-cultural studies because “ignoring individual and cultural variations in coping goals has contributed to acontextualization of stress and coping research in the past” (Chun et. al 2006:39). Chun et. al propose four ways in which individualistic and collectivistic cultures may differ when it comes to coping goals:

> (a)Focus on the needs of self vs. the needs of others; (b) assert autonomy and independence vs. reinforce relatedness and interdependence; (c) control external environment vs. internal self; and (d) maximize gain vs. minimize loss. [Chun et. al 2006:40]

While coping has often been thought of as meeting the needs of the individual, this individualistic bias ignores that there may be multiple, competing goals in coping with a stressor. Especially in collectivistic societies where people tend to think of themselves in terms of their relationships with others, the needs of others can be equally or even more important as personal needs or perhaps strictly distinguished. Similarly, individuals with interdependent self-construals would be more likely to want to reinforce relatedness and interdependence through compromise and accommodation. Lazarus and Folkman distinguish between problem-focused coping, which is directed at managing a problem and more common in situations that cannot be changed, and emotion-focused coping, which is an attempt to manage the emotional response to a stressful event. Research on differences between individualistic and collectivistic people proposes that there is a cultural component to these different forms of coping. Collectivistic people have been found to be more likely to use secondary control coping mechanisms, which would modify how they react and feel about a situation, rather than primary control coping mechanisms,

which would try to change the situation. As asserted earlier, they are also more likely to want to minimize loss rather than maximize gain. I explore these differences in coping goals further in the final chapter, where I attempt to explain the persistence of circumcision in Gikuyu communities, despite national efforts to eradicate the practice.

The health and well-being panel of Moos' model deserves special attention in a consideration of how culture mediates this aspect of the stress experience because cultural bias creates a great potential for incorrectly concluding that someone has not succeeded in their efforts to alleviate stress or its negative effects. In particular, the individualistic orientation towards seeing effective coping in terms of only a person's happiness does not capture the complexity of interpersonal responsibility that collectivistic cultures emphasize. In collectivistic cultures an individual's happiness may be a lesser goal compared to appeasing important members of one's social group. It is also not the case that the same measures can be used to assess health and well-being across cultures. Psychological distress may present itself differently in different populations. Because of my own limitations in trying to assess someone else's health and well-being, especially across cultural boundaries, the extent of my diagnostic theorizing will be limited to comparisons. Where circumcision, as a stressor, would be appraised as a challenge (as opposed to threat) then comparing the pre- and post-circumcision lives of the girls should give a sense of whether there was any psychological distress that came out of it. I would expect these stages of her life to be different, but in ways that are socially desirable and

supported by the social context. Where circumcision would be appraised as a threat, a resulting change in her life that is markedly different from what it was before would likely indicate that it was somehow harmful and that the negative connotations of the threat appraisal had similarly negative consequences for her health and well-being.

Echoing some of Turner's ideas about structure and communitas, Lazarus and Folkman propose that it is the relationship between the individual and society that is the source of stress. The individual's wants and needs are always in juxtaposition with society's wants and needs, and the relationship of one to the other can create conflict. Another way of framing this conflict is as one between individualistic and collectivistic orientations in society, with the expectation that the conflict would be much greater in collectivistic societies that deemphasize the individual as a discrete entity. Following this expectation, it would make sense that rites of passage that tackle the problem of the individual would be especially important in societies that are highly collectivistic. To understand female circumcision among the Gikuyu, it is necessary then to look at how girls and women are socialized to maximize collectivity and diminish individuality. Even more importantly, this socialization has to be looked at in the context of the many changes that occurred during the colonial period and thereafter. The combination of the anthropological and psychological approaches will illuminate the role of circumcision in this socialization as well as how changes in individualist and collectivist orientations has transformed the circumcision experience for Gikuyu girls.

CHAPTER 2

CIRCUMCISION IN THE GIKUYU CONTEXT

The Gikuyu[3] are today Kenya's largest ethnic group, dominating the political and economic sectors of Kenyan society. They were at the forefront of the movement to liberate Kenya from British colonial rule in the 1950s and achieved international notoriety for the nationalist uprisings of that decade, most often referred to as Mau Mau. This violent struggle for independence was the culmination of slowly intensifying antagonism between traditionalist Gikuyu and the Europeans who sought to change Gikuyu culture. In many ways, female circumcision was at the center of the cultural battle. The early Christian missionaries who settled in Gikuyuland quickly identified female circumcision as a particularly horrific practice that had to be abolished for the well-being of all Gikuyu women and girls. Female circumcision soon became the most contested traditional Gikuyu practice. Outraged by what they took to be its "barbaric" character, the missionaries who encountered the practice paid little attention to what it meant for Gikuyu girls and thus remained unaware of the many ways that Gikuyu culture and the particulars of the circumcision experience contradicted many of their strongly held notions about women's oppression and the "torture" inflicted on them.

[3] I have chosen to use Kenyatta's spelling rather than the more popular "Kikuyu," which he considers to be "incorrect" (1938:xv).

As has generally been the case with much larger debates over FGC historically, the controversy over circumcision among the Gikuyu has mostly been dominated by male perspectives. When the Europeans first arrived in Gikuyuland there were roughly half a million Gikuyu in the area. The first European to make contact seems to have been a missionary by the name of Krapf. It was after Teleki and von Hohnel made their way from the north to the south of Kikuyland in 1887 that regular contact was established. The following year, the British East Africa Company got a royal charter, and British involvement became more formalized (Middleton and Kershaw 1985:15-16). The majority of the accounts written over the period of early contact through the first few decades of colonization were produced by European men. Eventually, Gikuyu men began to write about their experiences as well. These sources have comprised the majority of material covering female circumcision among the Gikuyu, leaving us with a conspicuous lack of Gikuyu female perspectives. Fortunately, recent studies of the Gikuyu have incorporated first person accounts from Gikuyu women and their thoughts about circumcision.

Throughout my thesis, I primarily use three sources of Gikuyu first-person accounts. The first two sources are from Gikuyu men, who wrote at different times and from significantly different perspectives. These are Jomo Kenyatta's ethnography of the Gikuyu, published in 1938, and Mugo Gatheru's autobiography, published in 1964. The differences in their perspectives actually reflect the main ideological schism that occurred in the 1930s and 40s. Kenyatta, who would later become the president of Kenya, studied under Malinowski at the London School of

Economics and wrote with a clear nationalist agenda. It is apparent that the writing of his book was motivated largely by a desire to preserve the Gikuyu society in which he had grown up and to contest popular misconceptions about his people. To this end, he felt it necessary to "set down in black and white the knowledge which had hitherto remained in my head, for the benefit both of Europeans and of those Africans who have been detached from their tribal life" (Kenyatta 1938:xvi). Of course in ethnographic writing there is no such thing as "black and white", and his agenda expresses itself most clearly in the chapter on circumcision. I will discuss his views on circumcision in more detail shortly, but it is worth noting here that his desire to present Gikuyu women as respected and cherished by Gikuyu men must have made its way into his descriptions of things as mundane as everyday housework chores. In contrast, Gatheru, having grown up in a different period, writes about his perspectives as a Christian Gikuyu. His book was published after Kenyatta had become the first president of an independent Kenya and, more importantly, after the violent Mau Mau rebellion that had captured world newspaper headlines just a few years earlier. His purpose was also to educate and to describe his own experiences as a young man studying abroad during the crisis in his homeland. His perspective, as someone who had already accepted religion brought by Europeans and who sees the Gikuyu as "neither savages nor heroes" (Gatheru 1964:1), provides an important contrast to Kenyatta's account. He represented the other side of the debate that divided the Gikuyu into nationalists and loyalists. Although Gatheru was careful not to align himself politically with any one side and

was, in fact, very supportive of Kenyatta's presidency, his Christianity stood in opposition to many of Kenyatta's beliefs and agenda. His circumcision experience will be discussed more in the next chapter.

Gikuyu women's accounts of their beliefs and experiences with circumcision in this thesis come from Jean Davison's interviews in Mutira in the Central Province of Kenya. She selected seven women from an early sample of 101 women that she interviewed initially. They were selected to represent different stages of Gikuyu women's lives and other demographic variability. The interviews she includes in her book were conducted over a period of nine months. They provide a rare glimpse into the personal histories of Gikuyu women.

Understanding Gender in Gikuyu society

When missionaries arrived in Gikuyuland, they took it upon themselves to improve the status of women and girls and protect them from perceived abuses at the hands of men. This perception of injustice against women reflected preconceptions and biases that the missionaries brought with them as well as a profound misunderstanding of Gikuyu gender relations and rites of passage. Although Gikuyu society was in many ways patriarchal and included such practices as polygyny and female circumcision, close examination of gender dynamics does not suggest that women were either powerless or undervalued. On the contrary, women enjoyed a great deal of parity with their male counterparts in many areas.

One of the most referenced origin stories for the Gikuyu explains the beginnings of the Gikuyu ethnic group in terms of gender relations. According to the story as recorded by Kenyatta (1938:7-8), it all began with a father (Gikuyu) and a mother (Mumbi) who had nine daughters and no sons. Ngai (the creator god) told them that the daughters could have husbands if their parents sacrificed a ram. The parents sacrificed the ram and the daughters were able to found nine clans with their husbands. For a time, women ruled society. However, men were growing displeased with this power arrangement because they felt they were being treated unfairly and staged a coup by impregnating all the women at the same time. When all the women were weakened by their pregnancies, the men took over and changed their name from the Moombi to the Gikuyu, after the founding father of their ethnic group.[4] They allowed the clan names to stay the same and retain the names of the nine daughters. In this way, Gikuyu men gained the power to govern as they pleased, but women would always be respected as the originators of the clans. An important theme in this story is that men did come to take power from women, but the central argument in favor of their revolt was that the women rulers treated them unjustly. This does not necessarily prove that the gender order they established was based on equality, but it suggests that there was a level of mutual respect that acknowledged the important contributions of women. This is perhaps most evident in the division of labor in which men and women were mutually dependent and worked together toward shared goals.

[4] Gikuyu sometimes refer to themselves as the "clan of Mumbi."

Women played important roles in economic affairs. They were charged with cultivating the crops and storing them and had the corresponding responsibility to decide on their distribution. Their decisions affected the family's food supply and their success in barter. Women were solely responsible for the difficult task of storing just enough food to last until the next harvest and determining how much their families could profit from the surplus. They consulted with their husbands before going to market, but were rather independent in how they turned their surplus harvest into wealth, selling it or trading it for other necessary household goods. Since, "large markets have been, and are, an important feature of Kikuyu life" (Middleton and Kershaw 1965:19), women's involvement in this trade should not be overlooked. The autonomy and agency that Gikuyu women had in running their households contradicts popular notions of them as repressed and burdened by male domination of productive roles.

Of the activities listed by Middleton and Kershaw (1965) as being traditionally in the male sphere only two—"(g) hunting and fighting" and "(j) legal and ritual duties" (1965:20-21)—would have coincided with European ideals of power and led them to the conclusion that women were powerless and undervalued. The segregation of men's and women's spheres, however, did not mean that women's duties were regarded as less important, meaningful, or challenging as those of men. One indispensable duty that only women performed was long-distance trading, specifically during times of war. They traded goods such as "spears and swords, tobacco, gourds, lonely and alive" (Middleton and Kershaw

1965:19) with neighboring ethnic groups and were the only people allowed to cross the no man's land during times of warfare for the purpose of trade. A woman also often performed "certain ritual duties, depending on the social status of her husband" (Middleton and Kershaw 1965:21). Perhaps, this was not considered part of the women's sphere, but this shows that women were not completely exempt from these kinds of roles. They also had a number of duties relating to agriculture, craft-making, and housekeeping that resulted in them sometimes laboring alongside men and often with comparable levels of physical exertion. Interestingly, when certain missionaries witnessed the intensity of women's labor, they interpreted it as oppressive and demeaning, in keeping with European middle- class ideals of domestic womanhood as liberation from the menial labor of working-class women. In Gikuyu society, the complementarity of women and men's work was an important feature of gender relations that was overlooked because of the missionaries' preoccupation with the role that men traditionally played.

Education

The Gikuyu system of education plays a large role in the socialization of these gender dynamics. Children learn about gender and other important social distinctions through both informal and more formal means, but a Gikuyu child's education is purposefully shaped to make gender expectations clear. In the interest of explaining the role that circumcision plays in a girl's education, my focus on this section is on a Gikuyu girl's educational trajectory, though similar mechanisms were

at play for boys. A common thread throughout a girl's education is the importance of community and a woman's role in working cooperatively to serve the needs of the clan, age-mates, and the community at large.

The education of a Gikuyu girl begins in infancy and is the responsibility of her mother and older female relatives. Kenyatta's ethnography (1938) offers the most detailed account of this process and the following descriptions come from his work. His description of the teaching and learning process for a young child emphasizes how naturally, yet deliberately, the lessons were imparted from parent to child. The main form of instruction in early childhood is the lullaby. Through songs, mothers teach their children about the history of their people as well as the names of relatives, past and present. The emphasis appears to be on the memorization of two or three previous generations of family members on both the mother's and father's sides and their age-set names. After toddlerhood, children begin learning how to perform some of the tasks that are expected of them in adulthood, through instruction and imitation. The mother takes part in the education of both male and female children, but is most responsible for the training of her daughters. She teaches her children using folklore and riddles. According to Kenyatta, the riddles come up often during everyday activities and are a way of instructing the children and assessing their mastery of the material in a fun way. They test not only history and family relationships but knowledge of etiquette and the moral code in Gikuyu society. Kenyatta presents the riddles and stories in functionalist terms, as a means of inculcating important concepts and assessing a

child's understanding, this emphasis on educational function aligns expressive culture with formal schooling practices. Most storytelling takes place in the evening when the family is home together. Children's dances provide another opportunity for parents to see how well their children have learned the important lessons by observing how they interact with other children in a social setting. Girls are also taught about health, agriculture, and craft-making, but the emphasis in education is on the ancestors, how to behave in social situations, and how to contribute to the household and community by the performance of gender-specific tasks.

It was Kenyatta's opinion that the most important topic covered in a Gikuyu child's education was social relations—the respect and obedience younger people accorded to elders and the expectations held of members of different age-grades. Briefly put, age-grades were life stages that roughly correspond to age and into which people graduated after having undergone some kind of ceremony or rite. Kenyatta summarizes some of the functions of the age-grades:

> [The Age Group] determines the different salutations used, the manners people may adopt in eating certain foods, the different tasks in homestead or garden; it rules habits of dress or demeanor in the community; and it explains the rights of different people in judging cases, in exercising authority in the clan or family, in ceremonial or religious proceedings. [Kenyatta 1938:103]

With each age-grade, especially the younger ones, people were expected to mature and achieve a better understanding of the world and Gikuyu life. People in lower age-grades were expected to show the utmost respect to people in higher age-grades and special knowledge that came with each age-grade could not be shared with any others. With appropriate mastery of the teachings, a child became closer to

adult or, if already an adult, moved up in the hierarchy of social influence and political power. Circumcision, as the rite that officially transformed a child into an adult, was perhaps the most important transition between age-grades for boys and girls. However, circumcision was but one event in a series that together codified the expectations for successful maturation.

The following describes the different age-grades that a girl would belong to in her lifetime: "baby girl, small girl, uninitiated girl, initiated girl, betrothed or married woman without child, mother of young children, mother of one or more initiated children, toothless old woman" (Middleton and Kershaw 1965:33). The third stage is achieved through piercing of the ears, which is done twice; the first piercing (*ndogera*) is performed at around four or five years old, and the second piercing (*gotonya mato*) between the ages of six and ten for girls. Permission to pierce a child's ears is given by the eldest maternal uncle after he has been paid in livestock or, in later times, shillings. The stage that follows is "initiated girl" which comes with circumcision (*Irua*), described in greater detail below. The second to last stage comes when a woman's children are circumcised. Proper conduct in intergenerational relationships was strictly adhered to. Children of the same age-group respectfully referred to each other's parents as if they were their own parents. Kenyatta's observation that disrespect from a child to a parent was "the worst form of sin… [the] only one from which deliverance cannot be gained by purification" (1938:110) conveys the importance of following the social codes taught in childhood. The ancestors were also seen as enforcers of the social code because

“nothing disturbs the dead more than an offence against family unity and loyalty” (Kenyatta 1938:111). Especially in family affairs, the ancestral spirits were believed to respond to misconduct by punishing the family member who disrupted the harmony. To win back the favor of the ancestral spirits, a *mondo mogo* (medicine man), had to be called and sacrifices made.

Moving into higher age-grades could also lead to gradual ascendance to the highest position of the council of elders (*kiama*). The smallest political unit was the family, in which the father was the president and its representative in the Gikuyu government. The next largest unit was the village council, which consisted of all heads of the family councils within a village. Seniority decided who was to be the head of the village council and represent the village to the larger government. A still larger organization for a district included all the elders of the villages and was presided over by the senior elders. All men involved in the government were over the age of thirty. This worked in tandem with the system of eldership, which created ranks of seniority for individuals. It seems that this was a system that was more inclusive of men, and information about women’s access to these positions is scant and confusing. It appears, however, that they too had such a council which mostly had jurisdiction over other women and whose members “[were] feared on account of their powers of witchcraft” (Middleton and Kershaw 1965:34). All adults in the community were expected to serve the collective interests of their families, villages, clans, and ethnic group. Individualism was strongly looked down upon. As Jomo

Kenyatta puts it: "The spirit of collectivism was so much ingrained in the mind of the people that even drinking, working, and sleeping were done collectively" (1938:188).

What is the *Irua*?

The following descriptions are put together from *Facing Mt. Kenya* (Kenyatta 1938) and the writings of Europeans before and during colonization. There seems to be considerable variation in the descriptions of the *Irua* ceremonies, perhaps owing to individual reporters being misinformed or privy only to some aspect of the rites, and perhaps also to regional variations. The majority of what is presented below comes from Kenyatta[5] who has written the most detailed account of what happens before, during, and after circumcision. Middleton and Kershaw note that different accounts of the *Irua* rites have varying timelines. Again, Kenyatta's timeline is used here, being that it is the most comprehensive. Another source of confusion is that girls were circumcised every year (to make sure it happened before menstruation) and boys were circumcised about every four years. Kenyatta's account seems to describe the ceremonies in the years where both girls and boys were circumcised. It is unclear how the girls' circumcision differs when boys are not also initiates with them.

Irua refers to the circumcision event itself as well as the larger collection of ceremonies that make up the rite of passage. The transformation to responsible

[5] According to Middleton and Kershaw, part of the confusion in reports of *Irua* rites comes from the fact that "the Kikuyu have two forms of rite, according to whether the novice is a member of the kikuyu or Masai guild," and adding that Kenyatta is of the Masai guild. In Facing Mt. Kenya, Kenyatta makes no mention of such a difference within Gikuyu rites or being part of the Masai guild.

adult commences through ceremonies and preparations in the days and weeks leading up to the modification of the physical body. Preparations for girls start about two weeks before the circumcision ceremony. They are put on a special diet that is meant to prevent the loss of blood and other potential complications of the surgical procedure. Each girl has a sponsor, an older woman who acts as a mentor and director, helping the girl achieve the next stage of her life. She makes sure that the girl will not be menstruating before *Irua* or in the month after while she is healing. She also questions the initiate about her past sexual history, and if she is found to have indulged in a taboo behavior she must be visited by a "family purifier" before she gets circumcised.

Three or four days before circumcision, the girls partake in the blessing of the children led by two senior members of the ceremonial council. The parents of the initiates sit in a circle while each initiate is called in one at a time. The man in the senior office of the council marks the bodies of the boys with white chalk from Mount Kenya. A female member of the council anoints each girl, "on the head, round the neck and on the face" (Kenyatta 1938:132), with oil. Afterwards the girls go home accompanied by singing friends and family. They are met at their homes by married and unmarried women. The girls drink a special gruel from calabashes brought by the women and then rest for a couple of days.

The cultivation of social relationships is a dominant theme in the activities surrounding the I*rua*. Three to four days before initiation all the initiates in a particular community meet at the homestead at which the ceremony will take place.

The husband and wife whose homestead it is take on the role of father and mother and "adopt" all the initiates as children. That night the initiates and their friends and family celebrate through dance and song—an act of communion with the ancestral gods. This communion is considered so critical to the successful transformation of the child that the initiates are not allowed to sleep lest they miss the opportunity of direct contact with the ancestral god. The day before initiation, the sponsors shave the female initiates' heads and dress them with beads. The girls participate again in a short reunion with the ancestors, and this is followed by a great procession to the site of the circumcision. At the homestead, relatives, friends, and initiates dance, and acts meant to chase away evil spirits are performed before and during the celebration. A banana tree and sugar-cane arch is built in the afternoon at the entrance of the homestead. This arch is meant to connect the ancestral spirits with the *Irua* and earn their approval and support of the ceremony. Nobody who is "unauthorised" (Kenyatta 1938:134) may go through this arch. When the arch has been erected, the dancing stops and initiates get ready for a race that Kenyatta calls a "sacrifice" (1938:134). In addition to being a meaningful challenge, the race helps determine age-set leaders for the boys and girls[6]. Boys run and girls walk a distance of two miles at the same time to a sacred tree, and whichever boy and girl gets there first become the leaders of the age-set for their respective sexes. The girl who is selected "becomes the favorite, and all try to win her affections with the hope of marrying her" (135). While for the boys, the race is a measure of strength and

[6] It is not clear if the same process is used to determine age-set leaders in years when boys are not initiated.

endurance, the girls take a supportive role and pick up the leaves and twigs dropped by the boys from the top of the tree. They sing songs. At the bottom of the sacred tree the adults sing songs about sexual relationships to prepare the initiates for their lives as adults permitted to have sex. The race demonstrates very nicely how the *Irua* is gendered and how social expectations for men and women differ. The girl who becomes the age-set leader is a leader, not in physical strength, but in character. The twigs and leaves gathered by the girls are used to keep the sacred fire burning and also to build the initiate's beds. Their contributions are essential to the success of the initiations.

After the race and tree-breaking ceremony, the boys and girls line up to take the tribal oath. This ceremony is presided over by the elders in the ceremonial council. The initiates pledge to behave like adults from that moment on and "take all responsibilities in the welfare of the community, and that they will not lag behind whenever called upon to perform any service or duty in the protection and advancement of the tribe as a whole" (Kenyatta 1938:136). After they take the oaths, the procession goes back to the homestead and on the way they sing songs about proper adult behavior. As they move together they are told to never look back. The last ceremonial activity before the day of the *irua* is the "ceremony of parting" in which members of the ceremonial council form a circle and spit out liquids onto the initiates. The spitting is done by an elder male and an elder female. The purpose of the special liquids is to "protect the initiates against fear, bad temptations and attacks of evil spirits" (Kenyatta 1938:137). This ceremony seems to

correspond to van Gennep's description of the segregation phase of the rites of passage.

The morning of the *Irua*, the girl is fed a special meal that is only eaten for this occasion and is dressed in a single string of beads that goes across her shoulder. Then the initiates are led to a river where they bathe with ceremonial leaves in their hands, boys are upriver and girls downriver. As they bathe in the frigid, early-morning water they chant: "We have bathed with the cream of youth" (Kenyatta 1938:138). The initiates shake their wrists and drop their leaves into the river "as a sign of drowning their childhood behaviour and forgetting about it forever" (138). Friends and relatives are present during this ceremonial bathing. The initiates then line up and a procession is made towards the homestead where the circumcision will take place. No one is allowed to cross the road during the procession because that would be a bad omen. At the homestead, the initiates are greeted by a small boy and a small girl as lucky omens. As they get nearer to the homestead the initiates assume postures that show they are ready to be circumcised, walking "firmly and fearlessly" with hands up and formed into fists.

On this day the tone of the activities changes from more celebratory to anxious and mournful, as Kenyatta describes it. The reason for this change in tone seems to be an emphasis on the loss of the childhood self and the gain of a new adult-like sobriety. Parents whose eldest child will be initiated that day are also anxious about the imminent change in their own status. The female initiates sit in the center of a large circle on tanned cowhides. The inner layers of the circle are

comprised of female friends and relatives. No man is allowed near or to see what is happening within. The girl sits with her sponsor behind her, their legs intertwined to prevent the girl's movement. An elder woman comes in and pours very cold water on the girl's crotch to numb the area[7]. The girl is told to look to the sky and show no emotion "or even blink" (Kenyatta 1938:140). A strangely-dressed woman, whose face is painted in black and white, jumps out at the girl and quickly makes three cuts. The elder woman who poured the water a few moments earlier, immediately comes back to pour a mixture of milk and herbs which is to prevent complications related to the fresh wound. The girl is then escorted to her home where she lies on a special bed prepared for her with special sweet-smelling leaves.

In the days that follow, the girl is carefully tended to by female relatives and women specialized in caring for newly-circumcised girls. They make sure that she is well fed, rested, and that her wound is healing properly. She is not allowed to appear in public, and in the meantime relaxes with her fellow age-mates, both male and female. They sing songs about the *Irua* and how they will soon go out into the world as adults. They refer to each other as brother and sister and they develop a close bond. After six days of seclusion the sponsors for the initiates make a report to the ceremonial council and if the initiates are strong enough to walk a rebirthing ceremony will be arranged for the initiates in the coming days.[8] On the day of this ceremony, parents gather at the homestead and bring presents of beer, bananas

[7] Kenyatta says that "the girl hardly feels any pain for the simple reason that her limbs have been numbed" (1938:141). The testimonies of the women interviewed by Davison contradict this.
[8] Middleton and Kershaw (1965) disagree with this chronology and state that Kenyatta would "seem to be incorrect since no child can be initiated without having undergone [the rebirth ceremony]" (59) before the beginning of *Irua*.

and vegetables. At the homestead, a sheep is sacrificed and its skin is cut into ribbons which are then tied around the wrists of the initiates. Outside of the entrance of the homestead the husband and wife who "adopted" the initiates stand facing each other. The other elders stand facing each other in two rows—one of men and one of women. The initiates walk through the two rows towards the entrance of the hut and the elders pat them on the heads with sacred leaves and the ribbons of sheep skin are tied on their wrists by the mother and father. The mother and father along with the initiates go inside and the mother and father lay in bed, while their "children" watch silently. Shortly, the mother screams as if in labor and the father calls for a midwife who rushes in with the gut of the sheep sacrificed earlier. The gut is placed on the hide where the mother sits, and when another midwife cuts open the gut, a boy roars as if a lion and the girls clap. The gut is then cut into a long ribbon and the initiates, standing close together in a mass, are wrapped in this ribbon (with special attention to it touching them at their belly buttons). Then a midwife cuts the ribbon with a razor that has been dipped in sheep's blood. The entire ceremony symbolizes a rebirth of the children "not as the children of an individual, but of the whole tribe" (Kenyatta 1938:145). The children, now reborn, return to their homes with their relatives, and their parents kill a sheep or goat "to welcome them home again and anoint them as new members of the community" (Kenyatta 138:145). After this ceremony the boys and girls exist in society for a period of three or four months as "children (*ciana*) or new-comers (*ciumeri*)" (Kenyatta 138:146). Kenyatta refers to this as a "transition" period when

“neither juvenile nor adult laws can be applied to them.” This appears to be the beginning of the liminal period of the rite of passage into adulthood. At this ceremony the heads of initiates are shaved, everything worn during the transitional period is discarded, and boys are given warrior equipment while girls are adorned in “beads, armlets, and other adornments.” Then they go to a dance where they are incorporated into society “as full-fledged members of the community” (Kenyatta 1938:146).

Age-sets (*Riika*)

Through the confirmation of the age-sets, the *Irua* ceremonies unite the nine recognized clans that make up the Gikuyu ethnic group across the whole of Kenya. An age-set is comprised of all the boys and girls who are circumcised together in the same year. Gikuyu children are considered to be symbolically in the same age-set as their grandparents and are therefore held in very high regard (Kenyatta 1938:17). This is seen in the naming system in which grandchildren have the same name as their grandparents. For example, a grandfather may be named patronymically, Chris-son-of-Mike. His son would be Mike-son-of-Chris and his grandson would be Chris-son-of-Mike again. The first and second male children are named after their paternal grandfather and maternal grandfather, respectively. The same naming tradition is followed for girls and their grandmothers. The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren seems very warm and playful. Children are treated the same as their grandparents in religious ceremonies and generally seem to have a high status

owing to this relationship with their grandparents. The age-set system unites Gikuyu across generations. This is one way in which Middleton and Kershaw's observation that "the Gikuyu conceive of individuals, institutions, and the people as a whole, as they are living in the present, embodying the past as well as the future" (1965:38) appears in formalized relationships.

Admission into an age-set, which is only granted through circumcision, renders the new adult part of an alliance of cohorts that will age together and be a source of support and evaluation for the rest of their lives. Not only does the moment of circumcision symbolically transform a child into an adult, it transforms the individual into a member of an association that actively protects against the tendency toward dispersal of people who become geographically separated. The age-set spans the entire Gikuyu ethnic group and in this way a Gikuyu man or woman is ritually connected to people many miles away. Circumcision ceremonies also physically connect distant relatives as they come together to witness the initiation of a new age-set.

Age-sets serve as an extensive history of the Gikuyu. Age-sets are named after an important event occurring in the year during which the circumcision takes place. This seems to be true only for years when males are circumcised, suggesting either that males are traditionally connected with history or that it is the union of boys and girls that is historically important. Each group of boys and girls circumcised in one year gets their own name, and after boys and girls of the same age-set get to know each other at dances and other social events, the group who earns the most

honor is used as the source for the name that will apply to the entire age-set. When girls are circumcised in the years when boys are not circumcised, they take their own name and are considered a sub-set (Middleton and Kershaw 1965:35). Because of boys and girls being circumcised at different times, there is confusion in the literature about how the naming is done. A couple of examples of names given to age-sets marking an important event are the age-set of famine and syphilis. As mentioned earlier, throughout a child's preparation for adulthood and involvement in the affairs of their clan or village, he or she is expected to learn the names of previous age-sets. In a society that until recently had no written language, this method of record-keeping constituted one of the primary forms of instruction in history and created a place for new age-sets as new additions to an ongoing history that every member was expected to be able to recite. At the cutting of the foreskin or of the clitoris, boys and girls became officially allowed to embody the history of their people.

The bond among members of an age-set was very strong. It was so strong, in fact, that "when a man of the same age-group injure[d] another it [was] a serious magico-religious offence" (Kenyatta 1938:111). Age-set members monitored each other and if one member of the group dishonored the group in any way, he or she was likely to face sanctions from the others. Such sanctions included anything from being last to be served during meals to being completely ostracized. The reward for being a member of this cohesive unit was that they could rely on them as allies during serious situations such as war or famine, but also as helpers during smaller,

celebratory occasions like feasts. The properties of age-sets reflected many of the core values of Gikuyu society, especially the values of codependency and responsibility.

Circumcision, as the only entry-point into the age-sets, represented a means by which children were initiated into adulthood with the expectation that they would act collectively and uphold the aforementioned values. The Gikuyu child enjoyed the benefits of being in their grandparents' age-grades without having contributed to the community. The socialization that occurred primarily through education and participation in gender-segregated tasks emphasized relational ties and service to the community in preparation for adulthood. The "sacrifice of the individual," as Morinis (1985) described it, that took place during circumcision was enacted through the symbolic loss of childhood and the reintegration into strong collectives with fellow age-mates. The months available for initiates to simply associate with each other and develop close bonds ensured that the Gikuyu adult would emerge as no longer an individual. Given the complementarity of men and women's roles as analyzed earlier, circumcision of women and their resulting inclusion into the codependent collective was necessary to the functioning of Gikuyu society as it was. In the decades that followed the establishment of the British colony, the attack on female circumcision became a much larger battle over the preservation of Gikuyu culture.

CHAPTER 3

THE CREATION OF THE CIRCUMCISION PROBLEM

The British established formal political rule in Kenya in 1895 under the East African Protectorate. Shortly thereafter, the territory was opened to white settlers. Cora Ann Presley (1992:35) argues that one of the first and most important consequences of the influx of European settlers was the restructuring of the economy. The new cash crop economy demanded many laborers, and the settlers wanted Gikuyu men to fill those positions. The imposition of a tax on males, and later women, of the household necessitated their entry into the workforce so that they could earn the shillings necessary to pay the tax. Men's involvement in wage labor disrupted the traditional division of labor in Gikuyu society, resulting in a shortage of men to do what was traditionally men's work. Women were employed to work on communal projects for low wages, but it was not until World War I that they began to be deliberately drawn into the workforce. In the meantime they were left with the burden of fulfilling both their own traditional agricultural roles as well as those vacated by men. Without making concerted and tactical efforts to change Gikuyu society in general or the lives of women, in particular, the colonial British government had initiated the transformation of Gikuyu society that would begin in earnest with the arrival of the missionaries.

By 1910, most Christian missions had established themselves in Gikuyu territory. Their initial role was in aiding hungry Gikuyu during the years of low production at the end of the 19th century. They also served as brokers between the colonial government and the Gikuyu by advocating for "more liberal policies and attitudes towards Africans" (Presley 1992:83). Additionally, they established a few centers of Western-style education, which they felt was necessary for the Gikuyu to succeed in British colonial society. But as Presley notes, another side to their work was less benevolent. One of their primary goals as missionaries was to intervene in the spiritual and social affairs of the Gikuyu, and they found their greatest success in this endeavor when they convinced the colonial government to get involved. In the process, they established the circumcision problem and initiated a controversy that forced Europeans and Gikuyu alike to find a solution.

A Problem is Created

The eradication of female circumcision as a practice among the Gikuyu was from the start a major goal of the "civilizing mission" undertaken by the various Christian organizations that established themselves in the British colony. The Christian missions which would come to dominate the ideological and legal fight against female circumcision were the Church of Scotland Mission, the Church Missionary Society, and the African Inland Mission (Presley 1992:86). Conversion to and membership in the Christian faith as practiced in the missions was predicated on the rejection of certain Gikuyu traditions and practices that mission leaders felt to

be immoral or oppressive for women. Because the Christian faith and European culture were inextricably linked for the missionaries, Westernizing the Gikuyu was always part of their mission. More specifically, Presley explains, several missionaries "saw themselves as liberators who freed women from domestic oppression" (Presley 1992:87). To the missionaries this "domestic oppression" expressed itself most clearly in what had been prejudged to be barbaric practices concerning Gikuyu women and girls, which included polygamy, bridewealth, ear piercing, heavy physical labor, and of course, female circumcision. The few Gikuyu women and girls who sought refuge with the Christians in the early years of their work in Gikuyuland provided them with evidence enough of that women wanted escape from the harshness of the Gikuyu way of life. The allegedly unhappy Gikuyu female was soon to become the grounds of the circumcision debate.

Dr. John Arthur of the Nyeri Church Missionary Society was a key figure in the missionary fight against circumcision. As a medical professional, his opposition to circumcision focused on the health repercussions of the practice, and his testimony of circumcision being "unnecessary and unhealthy" (Presley 1992:91) was relatively well-accepted by those Gikuyu who were already sympathetic to what they regarded as European efforts to improve their lives. In a 1916 meeting of Gikuyu church representatives held at the Church of Scotland Mission, efforts to gain Gikuyu support of missionary objectives were becoming effective in more official ways. According to Presley, the outcome of that meeting was that the Gikuyu church representatives "did not oppose [anti-circumcision efforts] but indicated that if

European missionaries decided to take action on the issue there would be little opposition" (1992:92). However, moral objection to circumcision had not lost its important place in the crusade. Dr. John Arthur also complained about "immoral dances" (Presley 1992:92) that were part of the circumcision rites. This situation closely parallels more contemporary iterations of the fight against FGC that use medical concern to scientifically justify moral concern. The potent combination of medical and moral reasoning against circumcision had moderate success, at least with a few LNC leaders.

In the early days of mission work with the Gikuyu, intervention in the cultural practices most offensive to Europeans was difficult to orchestrate because of the relatively small numbers of missions in the area and the hundreds of thousands of Gikuyu men, women, and children who were distrustful of the Europeans and saw little advantage to conversion. Additionally, the colonial government initially showed little interest in the welfare of the Gikuyu—and conversion to Christianity along with the eradication of certain traditional practices *was* represented as promoting the *welfare* of the unenlightened natives—but under the influence of the missions these issues gradually became a concern for the British colonialists. The missionaries were in many ways the instigators of change in governmental policy and came to exert a tremendous amount of influence in matters that dealt with the social and moral development of the Gikuyu. No issue ultimately came to have more significance in the conflict than female circumcision. This practice captured the colonial

imagination as embodying the violence and injustice being committed against women by traditional culture.

Up until 1929, the colonial government was opposed to female circumcision, but felt it was sufficient to discourage its practice by "prohibiting the major operation and closer control of the circumcisers, educating, Christianizing and westernizing women" (Presley 1992:93). Direct involvement of the larger colonial government in such issues began in the 1930s, during the crisis in education. Until then, the courts maintained a level of conditional respect for Gikuyu law and custom, except for cases in which it contradicted colonial law or was "'repugnant to justice and morality'" (Presley 1992:88). Still, the attack on Gikuyu custom, although officially restrained by law, was carried through on a more localized level by the missions for a long time. The local native councils (LNC) and elders engaged in negotiations with the missions and the district commissioner, which produced more immediate changes in the cultural practices of Christian Gikuyu and their families. Among the first issues to be negotiated was the future of runaway Gikuyu women and girls who had found sanctuary at the missions. Other issues that arose were who should be allowed to arrange marriages, whether bridewealth should be paid, if non-Christian and Christian Gikuyu could marry, and the future of widows. In 1927, several councils voted in favor of passing resolutions "stipulating the modification of the operation" (Presley 1992:92). The resolutions had three parts: 1) only "minor circumcision" would be performed in which only a small part of the clitoris would be removed to prevent "scarring of the birth canal", 2) the women who did the

circumcising had to be licensed by the government, 3) girls had to be at least thirteen years old at the time of circumcision. Presley (1992) notes that many Gikuyu, especially women, were opposed to these resolutions. Enforcement of these resolutions also proved to hurt women in particular because they were the customary practitioners of circumcision and were subjected to large fines in shillings.

The full on battle between traditionalist Gikuyu and the missions began in earnest when church missions began to demand that all girls at the missions sign pledges that they would never let themselves be circumcised and "prohibited converts from allowing the circumcision of their female offspring" (Presley 1992:89). Several church missions imposed these restrictions, and members who did not agree to them would lose membership. A kind of tug-of-war was created between the village elders and the missions, with women and girls as the rope which both groups were pulling. To the surprise of mission leaders, "nearly 90%" of Gikuyu left the churches rather than agree to the restrictions. Despite the decline in church membership, the churches continued with these tactics. They began to require that all instructors in the schools "sign declarations affirming their support for the mission position" (Presley 1992:93). In a similar response to the church's restriction on formal membership, upwards of 80% of Gikuyu left the schools where these restrictions were imposed (Presley 1992:93).

Besides decreased Gikuyu church and school membership, one important consequence of these efforts was to split the Gikuyu into two factions: pro-circumcision (nationalist) Gikuyu and Christian Gikuyu. Apparently, the division

between these two groups was so strong that “marriages between them were never arranged” (Presley 1992:94). The Native Affairs Commissioner, in response to the increasing political activism from the Gikuyu, rightly saw circumcision as “a force that united the Gikuyu” (Presley 1992:94). The pro-circumcision Gikuyu called themselves the Gikuyu and Mumbi group which emphasized the role of the founding mother and father of the ethnic group. Presley also notes the allusion to Adam and Eve in this naming. Perhaps this could have been one way of affirming the important role of women in Gikuyu history and tradition.

This newly-formed nationalism resulted in the founding of two types of independent Gikuyu schools based on the Western system. Both types of schools were founded to educate Gikuyu while maintaining traditional Gikuyu values and eliminating or minimizing European intervention. However, one type, the Independent Schools, soon began to seek government funding assistance and began to receive regular visits from government officials checking on their investment. The other type, the Karing’a schools, remained completely independent from the colonial government and from Christian missions. Karing’a schools also maintained strong ties to the Kikuyu Central Association, a nationalist political organization that was active in supporting female circumcision. Initially, Gikuyu parents generally preferred sending their children to the Independent Schools over the mission schools. This changed, however, as mission schools were much better equipped than the inadequately funded Independent Schools, which parents came to see as unreliable. Eventually, the Independent Schools negotiated with the government to

protect the supremacy of the mission schools and at the same time ensure that Gikuyu who wanted to attended Gikuyu-run schools would not go to the Karing'a schools instead. The colonial government supported Independent Schools because they were impressed by how they were run, but through their funding and negotiations also limited how much they could compete with mission schools as legitimate sources of education. The Karing'a schools were left with no government support and as a result faced shortages of teachers and supplies as well as closings and other sanctions against school authorities. Presley (1992) notes that one of the results of the school closings and other actions taken against the Karing'a schools is that their very existence became highly politicized and the association between them and the KCA became stronger. The perceived injustices against the Karing'a schools further incited the nationalists and contributed to mounting resentment against not only the Europeans, but the Christianized Gikuyu who collaborated with them.

Gikuyu women during this time were not involved in the negotiations over circumcision, as is evident in their reactions to the resolutions passed by the LNCs. But that does not mean that they were passively watching their educational opportunities be decided for them and their children. Mission schools had been first to educate girls, though their education was qualitatively different from the one the boys were receiving. The focus of girls' education was in "the domestic arts: sewing, knitting, childcare, and hygiene" (Presley 1992: 101). Presley's own interpretation of this curriculum as girls being "taught to be good and suitable potential wives for

male converts" seems accurate. The missionaries who were upset about girls being abused by traditional cultural practices did not seem to be concerned with offering girls the same opportunities for success in colonial society as boys. In their vision of gender progress, Gikuyu girls should exchange the codependence between the sexes that precolonial Gikuyu society offered them for a purely domestic role and economic dependence on male providers. On the whole, this dependence would not have benefitted women, considering how the opportunities for men to succeed were severely limited even with a mission education. The rhetoric of the civilizing mission "ignored the ways in which colonialism, and the economic transformations that accompanied it, systematically oppressed both colonized women and men" (Walley 1997: 423).

It would seem then that the concern over women's welfare was restricted to their "spiritual" well-being. Abolishing female circumcision was one part, albeit a very emotionally-charged part, of a larger ideological program to Westernize and Christianize the Gikuyu. However, the resistance that missionaries and colonial officials encountered from the majority of Gikuyu catapulted the practice to unique prominence as the symbol of Gikuyu culture. The concern for women's well-being was likely genuine, but it was inevitably wrapped up in ideas of Europeans being morally obligated to rescue women from the dark men who oppressed them. Walley mentions Leila Ahmed's argument that "budding Euro-American feminist ideals were co-opted into the service of justifying colonial domination" (Walley 1997:424). This was most evident in the education crisis that manipulated Gikuyu access to and

control over education in the name of protecting women from circumcision and other practices believed to be harmful women in particular.

The transformation of the figure of the Gikuyu woman into a bargaining chip was facilitated by the already established patriarchal and male-dominated political organization of the Gikuyu. The male-dominated colonial government negotiated with the traditional Gikuyu political hierarchy in which only men were in the position to act on what had become political matters. Women's roles as the primary arbiters of women's issues, of which circumcision was one, were ignored in these negotiations. Women in Gikuyu society were also apolitical as evidenced by their role as interregional traders during wartime. Caravans of women would travel for as long as a month through hostile territory. These caravans were led by women who had knowledge of the Masai language and could act as interpreters and facilitators in economic exchange. The female traders were granted amnesty as they traveled even by wartime enemies. The presence of a male would have put them into danger because he would have been suspected of spying. The transformation of circumcision into a legal and political matter when the colonial authorities got involved effectively obstructed women's involvement in the discussion according to traditional Gikuyu governing practices. The colonial government also followed their own tradition of preserving politics as a male arena and did not invite Gikuyu women to join the negotiations.

The persuasiveness of Dr. John Arthur's medical opinion that female circumcision was "unnecessary" demonstrated that the feature of the *Irua* that most

captured the outsider's imagination was the pain involved. Namely, it was the "unnecessary" nature of the pain and its perceived role in the subjugation of women that bolstered efforts to eradicate the practice. Wanjiku's story, which will be presented shortly, illustrates clearly that the circumcision event was expected and welcomed by the initiate, despite prior knowledge that it would be incredibly painful. Having already established in previous chapters that pain was not incidental but rather a functional component of the affective response necessary for the child's transformation into adult, I will apply the psychology framework developed in the first chapter to demonstrate that the coping and appraisal of Gikuyu girls would have allowed them to undergo the pain without the harm presumed by the missionaries and colonial authorities.

Two Circumcision Stories: A Non-Christian Girl and a Christian Boy

Wanjiku

Despite the highly visible battle over circumcision and the moderate success of the missionaries in limiting its practice, the coming-of-age experience for most non-Christian girls seems to have largely stayed the same as before missionary intervention. Wanjiku, interviewed by Jean Davison (1989) in the early 1980s, was a Gikuyu woman from Mutira Location in Central Kenya born in 1910, just as the missions began to be well-established in Gikuyu territory. At the time of her birth, the British had yet to establish a presence in Mutira. She completed her *Irua* ceremony in the mid 1920s a few years in advance of the more overt attempts to

eradicate female circumcision. Although there was not yet an official government-sanctioned ban on female circumcision, the practice was undergoing criticism from mission workers and to a lesser extent, local government officials when Wanjiku came of age. In many ways she represents the type of woman that the Europeans wanted to reach and to "save," though they were likely not familiar with the kind of account she entrusted to Davison.

Before she even reached the age for circumcision, Wanjiku had internalized the concept of individuals reaching different levels of maturity through specific ritualized life events. She described to Davison the stages she had to go through before getting to the *Irua*: *mbuci* and *gutara matu*. *Mbuci* was the piercing of the upper cartilage of the ear and *gutara matu* was the piercing of the lobes, through which a wooden stick was placed. The next major life stage, *Irua*, was reached a short while later, after her breasts began to grow and before she commenced menstruation. She also described having gone to several *Irua* ceremonies as a child and recalls how older women and her mother persuaded her that it was "a good thing" (Davison 1989:41). While believing that it was indeed "a good thing," Wanjiku described the *Irua* as "[buying] this stage [of maturity] with pain" (Davison 1989:40). She went on to observe that "the pain of the old days and the pain of nowadays are different… With *Irua*,… it was like being slaughtered" (Davison 1989:41). It is unclear if this is an analogy that she developed before or after her own circumcision experience, but it is significant that her support for the practice was in no way challenged by the intense pain she felt. This acceptance of pain stands in contrast to

the missionaries' insistence that Gikuyu women needed to be rescued from the needless suffering that the practice inflicted.

According to Wanjiku, on the morning of the *Irua,* the initiates (five total her year) were taken to the river by women of their clans. Everyone went into the river and began to wash one another. Then mud was smeared on the candidates, who were then again washed by the women. The candidates were then carried to their mothers' houses on other womens' backs to be changed into their ceremonial outfits. These outfits consisted of a reed skirt and ceremonial beads strung across the chest. Only the initiates wore these outfits, others dressed as they normally did. They then moved to the field where they were to be circumcised, serenaded by women who sang and played on bamboo flutes. Wanjiku described sitting down on leaves in the center of a large circle of onlookers. Two women were her physical supporters: her maternal grandmother behind her and another woman to hold her hands. In Waniku's own words, an older woman began "cutting and hewing away meat from my body" (42). Although other personal accounts of the *Irua* stress the importance of not showing any pain or fear, Wanjiku said that she "felt so much pain and… screamed very loud" (42). It is interesting that she described her clitoridectomy as the taking away of "meat," which differs greatly from the descriptions that outsiders have used for clitoridectomy as the removal of a girl's "sexual organ" or "ability for sexual pleasure." This recalls Boddy's argument that FGC is often wrongly characterized by outsiders as an issue of women's sexuality.

In her descriptions of her experience interviewing Wanjiku, Davison mentions certain difficulties that are helpful in understanding the meaning of circumcision for her informant. In their early interactions, Davison reports difficulty getting Wanjiku to speak about her personal experiences. According to the author: "Wanjiku could not separate her own life experiences from those of all Gikuyu—she is firmly rooted in her cultural community" (Davison 1989:33). One of the remarkable features of Gikuyu society in the absence of modern communications technology, is that it was so cohesive, despite very large numbers and dispersed settling across what is today Kenya. This was in large part achieved by the *mariika* as described in the previous chapter. Wanjiku's initiation into a *riika* through the *Irua* enhanced her understanding of herself as one member of a large coalition—the Gikuyu more generally and women in particular. The strength of this interdependent self-construal was part of the source of the difficulty that Davison encountered. Having internalized the Gikuyu collectivistic orientation and values in growing up, Wanjiku was unaccustomed to separating herself from her community in the narrative style that an interview demands. Her circumcision was crucial to formalizing her inclusion into the larger collective and in developing a sense of belongingness and shared identity.

Davison also describes Wanjiku's initial hesitancy to share information with her about the *Irua*. The researcher inferred that it was because of her research assistant's presence. Her assistant was young, unmarried, and not a mother. Davison was older and had a child. When the assistant was not present at interviews,

Wanjiku seemed to feel more comfortable sharing details and secret knowledge (*kirira*) of *Irua* and other important things in a Gikuyu woman's life. Wanjiku's perceptions of the foreign women as having reached different levels of womanhood highlight another important role of the *Irua*. Circumcision determined womanhood in a way that no other life event could for a Gikuyu girl. Wanjiku made an exception for the foreign researcher who had given birth and was never circumcised, but nonetheless the distinction between girls and women was a powerful one for her. After describing the pain of her own circumcision ceremony, she says to her interviewer that she gives her "this *kirira* because you are my friend and you will understand" (Davison 1989:42). It is likely that she makes an exception for Davison because she too had to "buy maturity with pain," that is the pain of childbirth. For Wanjiku, the *Irua* had a special role in making a woman out of a girl through the experience of pain.

Davison's interviews with Wanjiku reveal two important ways in which circumcision secured status for Gikuyu women. The first is that *Irua* for girls has parallels to school graduation in its relation to the acquisition of "more brains" (Davison 1989:42). (Many of the other women interviewed by Davison used similar language relating to the Irua as the gaining of knowledge and "graduating.") As described above, a Gikuyu girl could not have access to the secret knowledge of womanhood without circumcision. Circumcised women were not allowed to share this knowledge with uncircumcised girls. That circumcision was indicative of girls having gained the maturity necessary for higher knowledge and that Gikuyu women

saw it as a test of a successful early-life education is particularly interesting given the battle over schooling that took place in the 1930s and 40s. The kind of "brains" that Wanjiku valued could not be acquired through an education at a missionary school. Gikuyu women saw circumcision to be, among many other things, a significant part of a much larger process of education that was embedded in social practices and unfolded over one's lifetime. The inadequacy of missionary schools in educating girls for womanhood, as valued by Gikuyu, was one cause of the strong resistance to the anti-circumcision efforts of the missionaries and colonial government.

A second way that circumcision contributed to women's status was as an important part of their power base. Circumcision was the most important in a series of ritualized events in a Gikuyu girl's life which all moved them up a hierarchy that gave them greater status with each new life stage. The highest position that a woman could have in society was as a member of the council of elders. Circumcision was required to achieve adult status and to enter into the hierarchy and have the possibility of moving higher up. Although it seems that the highest positions in society were reserved for men, women could be quite powerful, especially concerning women's affairs. An uncircumcised woman would be forever inferior to circumcised women of the same age. Had the missionaries' succeeded in eliminating female circumcision completely, it would have rendered girls powerless both in relation to the men who dominated the affairs of the village and in relation to the older women who had great social influence. One of the most heavily guarded and valued forms of women's power was the possession of the *kirira*. In fighting so hard

to have their daughters be circumcised, then, older Gikuyu woment were seeking to protect their access to the knowledge that gave women standing and power within the community.

Wanjiku also makes several interesting remarks about the changes in Gikuyu society from the perspective of someone circumcised before the missionary-led movement against the practice. Of primary importance to her is the dissolution of the age-sets. According to her descriptions, there was a great camaraderie among age-mates, and they "used to help each other and straighten each other's behaviors if they saw one of the group doing things that were wrong" (Davison 1989:43). She tells of working communally on age-mates' fields, delivering food and presents to new mothers, and even thwarting attempted sexual assault on another age-mate. She also recalls with nostalgia that "then, we who were of the same *riika* could do anything. We would share our secrets" (Davison 1989:43). For Wanjiku, a girl who does not go through *Irua* is "missing something" (Davison 1989:42); the uncircumcised girl has lost out on the opportunity to develop and benefit from this codependent bond with other women. Moreover, Wanjiku is unhappy with the social relationships between people who are of different ages and at different stages of their lives. We saw earlier that she did not feel comfortable talking about women's things with a young woman who had not borne children. Wanjiku also feels that formal differences in life stages should dictate how younger women talk to their superiors. For example, she worries that a typical uncircumcised girl nowadays "does not know when she is talking nonsense in front of a grown person" (Davison

1989:42). She is not happy that in her old age she sees “people…talking to anybody” (Davison 1989:43). She sees mothers spending time with friends who have not given birth and is disturbed by mothers who give their friends secret knowledge that they have not yet earned through childbirth. It is clear that for Wanjiku circumcision was a painful body modification that had a very important role in a girl’s education and in her acquisition of social status. From her stated disapproval of the way the decreased prevalence of circumcision has changed things, it makes sense that women opposed the abolition of the practice that (along with other important life event) guaranteed them their position in society and social hierarchy.

Mugo Gatheru

Wanjiku was the only woman interviewed by Davison who came of age during the 1920s. While her experience was likely typical of most Gikuyu girls at the time, another perspective also merits attention—that of a Christian Gikuyu. During Wanjiku’s youth, Christianity was beginning to exert a great deal of influence, and a growing number of girls were transitioning into adulthood without circumcision. Unfortunately, a Christian female perspective is not available for the pre-Independence period. However, an available male Christian perspective can provide an interesting point of comparison for what it shows about how female and male circumcision were treated differently by Christian authorities. In his autobiography, Mugo Gatheru (1964) describes his nontraditional circumcision experience. As a converted Christian coming of age in the early 1940s, he still felt an obligation to be

circumcised, although in a way that accommodated his and his family's new belief system. For him circumcision was necessary to "become a man", and his Christian faith did not make this traditional transition any less important. The basis for his decision to be circumcised with other boys his age seems to have been mounting social pressures from older circumcised boys. Circumcision was the norm in his community, and he had attended many circumcisions when he was younger, which he "enjoyed… very much" (Gatheru 1964:57). Even though he was a Christian, his religious beliefs were very much influenced by traditional Gikuyu beliefs. Gatheru's understanding of Christianity was that "there were many things which the Kikuyu were practicing in their society that resembled what the Christians believed and practiced" (1964:57). In his community, there seems to have been an established circumcision procedure specific to Christian males, which reflected a compromise between the two value systems. Christian males were "not supposed to go through these very complicated processes to which the 'primitive' or 'un-Christian' boys were subjected" (Gatheru 1964:58). The "complicated processes" he is referring to were the multitude of ceremonies and events that traditionally made up the *Irua* besides the circumcision itself. This seems to be similar to the compromises made between LNC leaders and colonial authorities who decided on a less severe form of circumcision for non-Christians. However, it is unclear if that resolution was ever put into practice and in any case it was not meant to apply to Christian girls. According to Gatheru, "transculturation which was taking place in the Kikuyu society seemed to have been accepted without serious resistance although bitter misunderstanding

had previously occurred on account of female circumcision" (Gatheru 1964:58-59). There is no indication that the bitter misunderstanding he is referring to ever dissipated, and it is probable that most Christian girls did not get circumcised.

Gatheru's circumcision was a simplified version of what occurred for non-Christian boys. His *Irua* experience consisted only of the events that normally took place on the day of the actual circumcision. On the day of his circumcision, he went to the river and ceremonially bathed himself. He was "very embarrassed" (Gatheru 1964:60) to be naked in front of other people, especially the women and girls. He felt "even more embarrassed" (Gatheru 1964:60) when he had to walk naked to the homestead where he would be circumcised, followed by women and girls who were cheering him on enthusiastically. The songs that encouraged him to be "firm and brave" and "never show any sign of fear" succeeded in making him "fearless" and "ready for the knife" (Gatheru 1964:60) by the time he was called to sit in the center of the crowd. The cutting of the foreskin was very painful for him, but he was proud of not having shown any sign of his pain. His circumcision was interrupted by his sponsor, who reminded the circumciser that no *Ngwati* should be left. The *Ngwati* was a "'small skin'" that hung under the penis. For Gatheru, the *Ngwati* would have served as "a sign that [Gatheru] was a 'primitive' Kikuyu" (1964:61). He also believed that it helped to mark Gikuyu men and differentiate them from men of other ethnic groups. His use of the word "primitive" indicates that he had already accepted some of the rhetoric used in the "civilizing mission." It is notable that he was able to opt not to receive a bodily marker of Gikuyu identity. That men had this choice suggests

that male circumcision had not come to be so deeply tied to Gikuyu nationalism in the way that female circumcision would following the intensification of the circumcision controversy.

Application of the Stress Models

I will use Wanjiku and Gatheru's stories, along with the analysis of the battle over circumcision presented at the beginning of the chapter, to construct a model of the subjective stress experience for girls undergoing circumcision in the first half of the 20th century. The following psychological analysis is not meant to be absolute or all-encompassing, but it should provide insight into how the different components of a typical rural Gikuyu girl's life would have resulted in a certain kind of circumcision experience. Below, I use Moos' stress model, supplemented by Lazarus and Folkman's work on coping and appraisal, to consider how a girl would have experienced circumcision before the arrival of Europeans and how this may have started to change with Christian intervention.

Environmental system

The environmental system, which includes social climate as well as "ongoing stressors and resources," began to change in important ways during the first few decades of colonization. Some of the change directly involved circumcision, but a number of wider social transformations touched circumcision more indirectly. The rise of Christianity, the founding of multiple independent Gikuyu schools, and the

change in women's roles as a result of men's involvement in wage labor outside of the village, all had important effects on the environmental system. On the level of ongoing stressors, quite a number emerged as a result of colonialism and missionary intervention in Gikuyu cultural practices. The need to pay taxes made it necessary for men to go outside of the village to earn wages; this created a burden on women, who had to make up for the absence of men in their communities in addition to fulfilling their traditional roles. The crisis in education was symptomatic of the volatile tensions that had developed between Gikuyu traditionalists and Christian missionaries. Although not all Gikuyu villages and clans were affected in the same way by European intrusion, the stresses of needing to defend valued traditional practices were becoming widespread as the colonial government became more heavy-handed in their efforts to transform Gikuyu culture. Importantly, this cultural battle was not fought exclusively between Europeans and Gikuyu; there was dissension within Gikuyu communities as some converted to Christianity and began to modify long-standing traditions, including but not limited to circumcision. The social resources available to Gikuyu changed as well. While some people turned to Christianity for guidance and support, many sought out other non-Christian Gikuyu in nationalist political organizations like the KCA. Church groups, nationalist organizations, local communities, and families were all sources of social support in terms of encouraging particular ways of life and providing examples of successful navigation of the circumcision issue.

To better understand how these changes would affect a girl's experience, it is helpful to look at them in the context of the three categories of dimensions in the social climate of Moos' model. The relationship dimensions—that is, the quality of the relationships between people and the degree of openness in expressing feelings—changed in a couple of important ways. Among traditionalist Gikuyu there was a great deal of support in resisting missionary efforts to convert them and abolish certain practices. Converted Christian Gikuyu found support in the churches and in the writings of the Bible. Both sides of the battle were vocal and openly expressed their opinions. However, those who were caught between sides—for example, a non-Christian who believed that there could be a secular transition to adulthood—would likely not have had many opportunities to voice their opinions. Precisely because of such obstacles to articulation of minority opinions, it is difficult to determine just how many people were caught in the middle, but it seems probable that they represented a large percentage of the population. Gatheru's circumcision experience is a good example of how lack of allegiance to any one side can result in accommodations that were rhetorically constructed as impossible by the opposed sides. However, Gatheru's gender seems to have given him possibilities that girls would not have had. Because it was women who were really caught in the middle of the ideological battles, such a compromise between Christian and traditional beliefs as Gatheru's circumcision presented would have been very unlikely. It is thus likely that many girls had ambiguous or contradictory feelings about both Christianity and circumcision, but the likelihood that their coming of age

experience would reflect this is low. As a collectivistic society, one of the main pressures for the Gikuyu would have been to avoid disrupting group harmony. This pressure would have been very important for Gikuyu who had dissenting feelings. They would have probably faced heavy consequences, perhaps even ostracism, for going against the group.

Aspects of the relationship dimensions that seem to have remained stable through the early assault on Gikuyu culture relate to gender and age. From the age of about five or six, girls and boys began gender-specific tasks and started to segregate socially as taught by older members of the community. The expectations for how males and females should interact with each other became more clearly defined as they got older. It is also important that girls' relationships with boys as they get older are clearly defined in terms of expectations and quality of interaction. Relationships between people of different age-sets were based on respect and knowing one's proper place. These relationships were especially important because they provided powerful motivation for girls to be circumcised so they could gain this respect. In terms of motivation, the interdependent self-construal would lead to being more motivated by a trusted authority figure than by feelings of having a choice. Thus being able to "choose" whether to be circumcised would not motivate the girl as much as being told that that is what the elders feel is important. The importance of social roles was heavily emphasized throughout a girl's life. Girls rarely, if ever, spent time alone and were often with older women who taught them through speech and social practice about gender roles and relations. Their

interdependent self-construal was especially accentuated during the *Irua* rites as they were reminded of their connections to ancestors, their age-mates, and the community at large. Also, the events of that morning were attended solely by women, which established the importance of the ceremony as being a woman's event and emphasized circumcision's collectivizing effects. Being carried on a woman's back could also have the effect of emphasizing the support from other women and the kind of solidarity and interdependence that they would find as part of a new women's network upon completion of circumcision. Overall, the relationship dimensions indicate strong social support and strong interpersonal relationships, with the potential consequence of being restrictive people who had more moderate views on circumcision. Because this restriction is an inherent feature of collectivistic societies and individual opinions were almost certainly not as highly valued as social roles, girls who were unsure about circumcision were likely not distraught about not being able to express their uncertainty.

The changes in the personal growth dimensions seem to encapsulate many of the major changes that occurred in the first few decades of colonization. The circumcision controversy could be characterized as a fundamental disagreement over the direction that a girl's growth should take. In the previous chapter I described precolonial expectations for a girl's growth. The typical sequence for development involved various stages that roughly corresponded to age. With each stage, the girl or woman was to gain more wisdom and prestige in the community. Missionaries and colonial officials came in with a different idea of how a girl should

develop. Key to a girl's development, in their eyes, was schooling and the acquisition of knowledge in basic subjects (e.g., math and reading) gained through ascension in class grades. Missionaries saw the ideal final result of education as an educated Christian woman who had European values. As Presley postulated, the Christian education program for Gikuyu girls seemed to be structured to prepare them to be good Christian wives. The Gikuyu, on the other hand, had for a long time held that a woman attains ultimate wisdom when her grandchildren became circumcised. Female circumcision ended up as one of the major sticking points in the culture wars because for the Gikuyu it was the most critical point in a girl "graduating" into a new important stage, but for Christian missionaries it represented an irreversible change that marked a girl for life as an uneducated non-Christian woman. The establishment of the independent Gikuyu schools indicates that many traditionalist Gikuyu accepted the usefulness and perhaps necessity of formal schooling. However, the majority of students enrolled in these schools were male, perhaps because there was not as much of a contradiction in males developing through life stages *and* school or because women were more strongly associated with the household and private spaces. Since males in traditional Gikuyu society were also expected to ascend into political councils and make the important decisions concerning the village and clan, their incorporation into the formal schooling system, which helped them have access to colonial forms of power, was not much different. The clarity of traditional Gikuyu expectations for a girl's maturation was only amplified by the circumcision controversy.

The system and maintenance change dimensions capture some of the instability that was developing during these years (and reached its peak in the following decade). The instability centered mostly on the establishment of schools, churches, and other institutions as well as the loss of Gikuyu land to European settlers. However, the instability mostly made observable changes in boys' lives, while the particulars of girls' lives remained similar to what they were before colonization. It is also likely that the environmental context stayed relatively stable in rural areas and changed most in urban centers.

Transitory condition

That circumcision was "stressful" in the colloquial sense of the term is arguable, but it was certainly supposed to be taxing and challenging, which makes it a stressor in the psychological sense. This transitory condition was accepted and common for all girls to undergo. When circumcision was a well-understood requirement for all girls, the possibility of not going through it would have represented a threat because it would threaten her inclusion in society and her reaching adulthood. The decorations she put on her body for the ceremony also emphasized her femininity. Wanjiku was still very much concerned with the aspect of pain as seen in her idea of "buying maturity with pain," but the women that morning probably helped her turn her attention to her femininity and impending womanhood. Thus, when missionaries first started trying to abolish the practice it would have been met with a lot of disapproval and caused stress for young girls as

well as other family members for whom her circumcision is important. On the other hand, for Christian girls and families who believed that circumcision was immoral, it would have been very stressful (as a threat) to their religious faith and sense of morality to be circumcised. Especially as female circumcision came to exemplify the war between tradition and modernity/Christianity, circumcision would have had more threat attached to it for either side. On both sides, the biggest threat for girls would be to their sense of interdependence. For that reason, going for circumcision (for Christians) or avoiding circumcision (for non-Christians) and disagreeing with the group would generally have been seen by the girls as a negative thing.

Coping and appraisal

While primary appraisal would have included a greater element of threat through the years owing to circumcision's central position in a much larger debate, circumcision would likely still have been appraised as a challenge more than a threat. Using the model of challenge and threat appraisals of stressful encounters given by Lazarus and Folkman, it appears that both challenge and threat were present in anticipation of the circumcision ritual for Gikuyu girls as traditionally practiced. Circumcision presented a challenge as an opportunity to demonstrate courage and achieve a higher status in the community. But it was also threatening because of the fear of potential pain and failure to act in the valued stoic way. The *Irua* ceremonies leading up to circumcision helped the initiate perceive the impending stressful event as more challenging than threatening by emphasizing the

initiate's agency in achieving adulthood in following certain guidelines and by creating smaller, reachable goals in the days leading up to the ultimate goal of undergoing circumcision. For example, the two-mile walk to the sacred tree reaffirmed the joyous exhilaration of reaching an important goal. Throughout the ceremonies, reminders of what is to be gained in circumcision make it a challenge and something to look forward to. The challenge appraisal is also likely when the individual feels that they have control. Girls are made to feel that they have control in circumcision because it is presented as a step they must take and the success of their initiation depends entirely on them. Girls are told to look away from the circumciser and to hold steady and maintain their composure. In addition, threat of pain is reduced by the numbing of the lower half of the body with ice water. The resulting appraisal of challenge more than threat would make the initiate's emotions much more positive going into circumcision and lessen anxiety, which could otherwise make it very difficult to maintain composure during the painful procedure.

Secondary appraisal which assesses how a person might be able to change their reaction to the stressor rather than the stressor itself is also important because it is likely that Gikuyu girls relied heavily on secondary control coping strategies. These strategies would help the girl control her emotions before and during circumcision. The songs during the rites leading up to circumcision also helped to regulate a girl's emotions. The happy songs early in the *Irua* rites helped to create happy emotions, while the change to a somber tone before circumcision reminded

the girl of the gravity of the moment and that it should be dealt with maturity and like an adult showing composure. In anticipation of painful circumcision, the girls probably used emotion-focused coping, as is common in collectivistic societies where avoiding the stressor would have negative consequences. The girls who ran away to Christian churches to avoid circumcision were using problem-focused coping. The use of this strategy could have resulted from differences in the personal system, for example runaways were perhaps less sensitive to rejection than their peers. It could also have resulted from the growing variability in the environmental system, including the establishment of the missions and anti-circumcision movement which would have acted as a resource for a girl who was struggling with her impending circumcision.

Health and well-being

Overall, the circumcision event should not have caused any distress that would have long-term consequences for health and well-being for girls who were circumcised before colonization or during its early years. Girls who underwent circumcision had many social support resources in the form of older women and age-mates. The likely challenge appraisal also made circumcision a much more joyous event, one that indicated an opportunity for growth and gain in status and wisdom. For girls, getting circumcised was a way of achieving these things. Even more so because of the importance of circumcision in the battle of tradition, a girl who wanted to assert herself as interdependent would have found a great deal of

support and personal sense of success. Although popular thought at the time among missionaries and colonialists perceived of circumcision as harming Gikuyu girls, the analysis of Gikuyu gender relations and social organization in Chapter 2, Wanjiku's account of her own experience, as well as the above psychological analysis of the stress experienced by girls who were circumcised, shows that the perception was incorrect. Still, in constructing circumcision as a problem, the missionaries effectively changed the circumcision experience for Gikuyu girls, by precipitating a series of events explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Gikuyu Women and the Mau Mau Rebellion

After decades of mounting tension between the Europeans who wanted to abolish many Gikuyu customs and the Gikuyu who wanted to preserve them, Gikuyu nationalists began to organize themselves in defense of their traditional way of living. As governmental constraints increased in intensity and scope, the nationalist organizations developed more violent and radical tactics. The Mau Mau Rebellion, also known in official colonial documents as the Kenyan Emergency, began in earnest in 1952 and continued through to the end of the decade. The movement was composed mostly of Gikuyu, although a couple of other ethnic groups were also represented. Because of the tight control the British colonial government had on Kenyans, the Mau Mau, whom Gikuyu referred to as Land and Freedom fighters, had to conduct much of their activities in secret. Consequently, historians have had to piece together the development of the movement using government resources and personal narratives. Although much had been written about the Freedom and Land fighters, Presley (1992) argues that the role of rural women had been largely unappreciated or ignored, owing in large part to misunderstanding and bias on the part of the colonial government, the source of much of the documentation. Using data from oral histories as well as government documents, reading the latter in a critical way, she was able to challenge the prevailing notion that women were

passive in the rebellion and that their role was minimal compared to the dominant role of men. During this period women successfully adapted traditional roles and activities to the new rebellion context and, in so doing, impressed themselves upon the cultural battle as political beings.

Up until the 1930s, when the crisis in education prompted frustrated Gikuyu to organize themselves in nationalist organizations, "women's political activities…were localized and largely centered on rural issues" (Presley 1992:125). Rural women tended to their traditional responsibilities, which included the welfare of women and children. Even though women were not formally involved in political activities on the local or national level, the importance of their role in social matters should not be underestimated. One area of Gikuyu culture that was primarily the domain of women was songs and singing. We have already seen that songs played an important part in the *Irua* to educate and support initiates. Gikuyu women adapted this role to the colonial context and exerted their social influence through creating and performing protest songs. The protest songs first appeared with the circumcision controversy, but women also sang about other topics, such as the prominent anti-colonialist Gikuyu politician Harry Thuku. In addition to the performance of protest songs, women began to be allowed membership in nationalist organizations following the founding of independent Gikuyu schools and churches. Most studies of the nationalist movement focused on English-speaking men in urban areas. This was partly due to a bias that understood urban spaces as centers of change. Because men moved into cities in greater numbers than women,

historians ended up looking almost exclusively at men. In fact, Presley has found that rural women became involved in "every aspect of the movement and performed vital tasks which sustained the struggle" (Presley 1992:124). She argues that women enjoyed a "far greater degree of sexual parity in the movement" than previously thought. Women served in the rebellion in many different ways, such as by cooking and delivering food, rallying social support, and even fighting as armed combatants. While the nationalist activities of these women were largely kept concealed from government officials, the colonial government documentation reveals that they did make efforts to kept track of women's involvement and "mood" because they recognized their potential to be influential in the movement.

It is unclear when the violent nationalist movement began, but the Mau Mau organization came to the attention of the colonial government in 1950. A major part of participation in the Mau Mau movement was the taking of oaths. All members had to take at least one oath, but more senior members took many oaths during the course of their movement activities. In the attempts to suppress the anti-colonial activities British officials arrested anyone believed to have taken the oath to disobey colonial authority and expel Europeans from their country. The idea behind the arrests was that imprisoning major leaders would disrupt the organization and power of the movement. However, the colonial government grossly underestimated the numbers of Gikuyu taking the oath. According to Presley, "hundreds of thousands" of Gikuyu ended up taking the oath and began attacking anti-Mau Mau Gikuyu who refused to take the oath, resulting in what she describes as a "civil war"

(Presley 1992:126). Oath taking in itself was a new activity for women; “in traditional society, women never took oaths” and now this was becoming a routine part of membership in various nationalist organizations. After the British established the Emergency Orders of October 1952, which called for the imprisonment of anyone involved in Mau Mau and strict control of all Gikuyu activities, the Land and Freedom army only became more powerful and violence more widespread. Women became even more prominent, as important lifelines to the forests where the Mau Mau fighters hid and organized themselves. In this way, women adapted their roles as supporters to the context of anti-colonial resistance.

Presley’s analysis of women’s roles in Mau Mau and their treatment by the colonial government supports my earlier assertion that Gikuyu women’s strengths and efforts to create better conditions for themselves were greatly misunderstood by the Europeans, who had very specific notions of what it meant for a woman to be respected and free. The fact that women were imprisoned early during the Emergency period, Presley contends, proves that the colonial government understood that women were influential in Mau Mau and that they felt it important to hinder their activities. The same government that vocally opposed circumcision, polygamy, and bridewealth as exploitative and oppressive was implicated in a policy of violence toward women during the Emergency. As the government became aware of women’s participation in the movement, they built new women’s prison wards to accommodate the unexpected inmates. Given the earlier rhetoric about protecting women, one would have expected treatment of the female prisoners that aligned

with beliefs about nonviolence towards women. On the contrary, many of the women interviewed by Presley who were supporters of Mau Mau captured by the government reported being violently beaten when they were imprisoned. Several mentioned the insertion of glass bottles into their “private parts,” an act that is clearly motivated by intentions to sexually humiliate and dominate the women much in the same way that European critics accused circumcision supporters of doing.

The other side of the relationship the colonial government had with Gikuyu women was equally repressive but outwardly benevolent. Seeing that women were becoming increasingly vocal and political, and because they believed women to be “far more rabid and fanatical than the males” (Presley 1992:157) in support of Mau Mau, the colonial government gave a great deal of attention to women as targets of social reform. The Community Development Department had been created to deal with social issues and during the Emergency it had two main objectives as concerned Gikuyu women: to get women away from Mau Mau and to win their favor with social activism. It is important to note that not all Gikuyu women were involved in or supported Mau Mau. In a way, this period in Gikuyu history exaggerated and clarified the differences between women who defended tradition and those women who were more critical or ambivalent about it. The government did not seem to be able to discriminate between these different perspectives and all Gikuyu women were affected by these anti-Mau Mau measures.

One of the legacies of social reform that targeted women during this time was the development of Maendeleo (Gikuyu for *progre*ss) clubs. During the Emergency, mass relocation of Gikuyu was used as a means of surveillance and control. Hundreds of thousands of Gikuyu were put into concentration camps and reserves where their movement was strictly controlled. For those interned, an important benefit of being in one of the camps and pledging allegiance to the colonial government was the ability to take advantage of the Maendeleo clubs which provided services to women. The services for women were especially valuable during famine because they were responsible for procuring and providing food for their families. The colonialists also benefited from this relationship because it encouraged women, whose influence in family and social circles they had recently recognized, to see Mau Mau as destructive and the cause of their misery. Having secured their support, the colonial government eventually took advantage of the women's dependence on these services by allowing their involvement in political affairs that had been previously inaccessible to them.

An examination of how the colonial government treated women during the Emergency demonstrates that they had measured women's freedom in a way that served their own ideological interests and that was inconsistent with Gikuyu women's own understanding of their freedoms. Loyalists and the colonial government characterized the women involved in nationalist activities as being victims of misguided adulation of the Gikuyu men and traditional practices. Ascribing to the old trope of women needing to be saved both from tradition and the men

who imposed that tradition upon them, colonialists attributed little agency to the women involved in Mau Mau. Loyalist women were also reported to be targeted by violent nationalist activities, when in reality they accounted for only a small fraction of total casualties (Presley 1992:158). Colonial propaganda that inaccurately reported that women were the main targets of the Mau Mau activities was another attempt to justify suppression of Gikuyu activities as a means to protect Gikuyu women. This misrepresentation of women's agency and men's role in defending the Gikuyu culture was a continuation of the circumcision controversy's placing of women at the center of a much larger battle.

Presley persuasively attributes many of the inadequacies of historiography of the Mau Mau rebellion to "scholars who constructed a schema which was blind to the changes in gender roles that resulted from the skewing of traditional political and economic relationships in the crisis packed colonial era" (1997:149). Because exercising power has been traditionally understood as "characteristic male strategies of visible, public oriented activities often physically expressed through warfare," women's involvement has been overlooked and underappreciated. The result has been a history that "ignores women's initiative and concerns for change, concealing colonialism's deleterious effects on women, changes in their status, and their protests against economic and cultural changes" (Presley 1992:155). I would argue that this is a schema that extends far beyond scholars and is very much a part of the everyday conversations about women in traditional society and specifically about the Gikuyu of Kenya.

Analysis of women's involvement in the Mau Mau uprising shows how active women were in their communities in fighting colonialism. Importantly, their involvement set a precedent of parity in such struggles, encouraging future cooperation. It was not only European men who recognized the power women had, but Gikuyu themselves. One woman Mau Mau fighter describes the strength of the women freedom fighters and how it was "men and women together" (Presley 1989:136). Women proved themselves to be valuable as fighters in the cultural battle instead of simply being the figurative battlegrounds. They effectively forced men to let them get involved in roles that were not traditionally theirs as it became apparent that their traditional uninvolvement in political dealings was putting them at a distinct disadvantage. Women's engagement in anti-colonialist activities was precipitated by the changes in gender roles that came about as a consequence of missionary attempts to rectify perceived gender imbalance. Certainly these women were fighting against oppression, but from the perspective of the Europeans (and some loyalists) they were fighting against the wrong oppressor. Once women took to fighting in pursuit of their interests, the colonial government reacted violently belying their real intentions in the abolishment of Gikuyu practices that revolved around women.

Although nationalist women were successfully able to place themselves at the forefront of the anti-colonialist battle, they still had to contend with the aftermath of the circumcision controversy. They demonstrated, through their activities, their capacity to be leaders and fighters, but women were nonetheless still

constrained by their role as the center of the cultural battle. These constraints were intensified by the Mau Mau movement, which demanded Gikuyu unity and traditionalism as the solution to colonial oppression. A letter written in dialogue form published in a Gikuyu newspaper demonstrates that unity was constructed in a way that called for the restriction of women's activities:

> K: 'There is nothing else hurts me like that, my wife went away leaving a young baby whom I had to take to the hospital for feeding.'…
> N: 'Is that not the way to disgrace the clan of Mumbi?'
> K: 'Yes, but this is a tiny thing for the clan of Mumbi, if we have unity with all associations and unions' [Frederiksen 2006:292]

The wife referenced in the dialogue had left her husband to find work. Other letters published in the newspaper "urged men to keep close watch over and stay away from prostitutes" and "encouraged [urban male laborers] to protest if their wives were not allowed to stay with them in their urban lodgings" (Frederiksen 2006:292). Thus, it seems that women were granted and secured certain customarily male privileges in the interest of strengthening the nationalist movement, but were otherwise limited in how much they could deviate from normal gender roles for fear of threatening Gikuyu unity. The importance of women in the nationalist struggle resulted in their being carefully watched and guarded by Gikuyu men.

Female circumcision also gained a new importance in the nationalist struggle. Pederson, as quoted by Walley, noted that "clitoridectomy, always the sign of the 'true Kikuyu,' also came to be seen as a mark of loyalty to the incipient, as yet imaginary, nation" (Walley 1987: 425). Circumcision, in many cases, actually came to obstruct women's growing need for self-determination in colonial society and, even

worse, came to be a tool of the nationalist agenda. All Gikuyu women were affected by this change, including those who were not interested in being circumcised or whose beliefs prohibited it. Claire Robertson reports that one Gikuyu woman she interviewed "said that she was initiated because [KANU]…was rounding up uninitiated girls in the late 1950s" (Robertson 1996:628-629). Wanjiku, whose story was presented in the previous chapter, also mentioned that circumcision had started to go out of favor with missionary intervention but that "it was brought up again during Mau Mau—then the tradition was followed to show one's loyalty to Gikuyu traditions' (Davison 1989:44). As a marker of loyalty, the practice of circumcision began to emphasize its role as a way of bringing the Gikuyu together and of inculcating in women the values of collectivism, and deemphasized its role in women's organization and power.

Women's power had started to become delegitimized as Gikuyu society was adapting to the demands put on them by the colonial government and new forms of power, like wage-earning abilities, were becoming more important. The shift in emphasis for the value of circumcision in Gikuyu society ignored many women's needs for recognition as valuable producers. Walley notes that oftentimes "colonialism hurt women in particular by economically undermining what was an already vulnerable group and by subverting women's historical sources of power and autonomy" (Walley 1997:423). This very process occurred in Gikuyu society. It actually provided a way for the colonialists to gain women's support as they capitalized on their growing dissatisfaction with the nationalist movement and the

way their needs were being ignored. The transformation of circumcision's value in Gikuyu society and resentment over the restrictions and burdens placed on women had lasting repercussions for the practice of circumcision.

Four Circumcision Stories: Girls Coming of Age Just Before Mau Mau

The four women whose stories are presented here were all interviewed when they were in their 50s and thus probably circumcised during the 1940s, as nationalist sentiment grew and tensions between Gikuyu traditionalists and Christians (both Gikuyu and European) intensified. The four women represented Davison's (1989) sample of women who were in the 50s at the time of the interviews. The fact that all four were circumcised suggests that before Mau Mau, circumcision was still widely practiced despite intervention from the colonial government. Their stories are all generally similar, though there are differences in their views on circumcision and in details of their descriptions. Some of the stories indicate how the meaning of circumcision was changing for some girls as a result of the spread of Christianity and Westernization. In general, they point to greater ambiguity in how girls saw circumcision. The psychological analysis that follows looks at how the growth in nationalism, greater prevalence of schooling, and changes in the meaning of circumcision began to make important changes to the stress experience of circumcision.

Wamutira

Like most women born around the 1930s, Wamutira converted to Christianity, although she did so relatively late in her life compared to other women her age. Also like most women her age she was in a polygynous marriage, and her two co-wives were eager to share their experiences with the interviewer. For that reason Davison also included their views of the *irua* in the interview. One of the co-wives was an age-mate of Wamutira and the other was ten years younger and had received the most formal schooling. Wamutira herself grew up in a polygynous household; her father, a chief, had twenty wives and there were always many children around her. She had no formal education and instead learned necessary life skills from an early age by following elders and imitations them. Her father opposed schooling for girls because "once a girl goes there, she will become a prostitute" (Davison 1989:64). However, her brothers were allowed to attend school. Wamutira wanted to go as well but the lack of encouragement from her female siblings was enough to dissuade her. She spent most of her childhood learning how to care for the household by following the examples of her half-sisters and the other women of the compound. Among the skills she learned were water fetching, stick carrying, basket weaving, and cooking. She also played with her many siblings and as she grew older her social life began to be divided in generational and gendered ways. First she was taught to associate only with her age-mates. Hanging around older women was not her place, and younger children were to regard her in the same way. Additionally, gender segregation began to be implemented/instituted as she got

older, and she describes an older mother (her father's other wife) teaching them about how to have proper relationships with boys.

Wamutira describes the major events in her life. The first was the piercing of the ears, which was followed by a change in clothing and hair style that signified the girls' new status. These changes "made us feel more mature" (Davison 1989:65). *Irua* was the next major life event for Wamutira. She said that she was never exactly told why she was getting circumcised but was told of a man who had refused to let his daughters be circumcised and for that reason they would never marry. Clearly, the anti-circumcision movement had gained some ground, but not circumcising girls was still seen by many as detrimental to their future lives. Because marriage was another major life event, no family wanted to risk their daughter not being able to find a husband because she was not circumcised. Having known about Christian girls who abstained from the practice because of their religious beliefs meant that the possibility of life as an uncircumcised girl was salient and may have affected her perceptions of her own circumcision experience.

In preparation for *Irua*, the women of her family prepared beer for her mother's brothers, and Wamutira went to her uncles to perform a dance for them in exchange for a goat and three shillings. After this she had permission from her eldest maternal uncle to be circumcised. On the morning of the ceremony all the girls who were to be circumcised went to the river with older women and smeared themselves with mud. Afterwards they were washed by recently married women who had only one child and these same women carried them back to the fields. The

girls were not allowed to touch the ground after they had been washed, so that they would remain "clean" (Davison 1989:66). At the circumcision site, a large circle of people formed with chanting women making up the inner part of the circle. Inside the circle, Wamutira and her age-mates got into their positions with one woman supporting a girl from behind and another woman holding her hands. Before the *Irua* ceremony, Wamutira's father promised shillings to any of his daughters who did not cry but would withhold them from anybody who did. Wamutira herself fell into the latter category. She recounted: "[I] was crying because I was afraid, and I knew it would hurt even before they started cutting" (Davison 1989:67). As she walked home she was so weak that she could not walk without support from older women. Once home, she was unable to climb into bed and so slept on the floor on leaves placed there for her. While she rested, members of her clan enjoyed a feast in her home.

Wamutira says that after circumcision, "I felt like I was a grown-up girl now…people treated us differently and we were expected to act differently" (Davison 1989:68). Even though she seems to lament that "nowadays, you wouldn't know who is mature and who isn't because few girls go for circumcision" (Davison 1989:68), she still feels that "now I would not want *Irua* to come back" (Davison 1989:68). Following Wamutira's account, the co-wives joined in to express their views on circumcision. All agreed that they would not let their daughters be circumcised and if they were to go back to their *Irua* they would have run away. Wamutira reveals that either during her own ceremony or one that she witnessed

“there is one girl who ran away and left the circumciser” (Davison 1989:68). Interestingly, while Wanjiku (whose story was presented in the previous chapter) cited a loss of social harmony and order now that circumcision is no longer practiced, the co-wives who were raised after the circumcision problem was created thought there was less social harmony when circumcision was practiced. As Wamutira explains, “nowadays, things are better because nobody calls another *karigu* [silly uncircumcised girl] or *kahii* [same applied to a boy], and so there are no fights between the circumcised and uncircumcised” (Davison 1989:69). It is notable that they cited the tension between circumcised and uncircumcised women as a negative consequence of circumcision. They were likely partly referring to members of different age-sets, but also importantly to Christian and non-Christian Gikuyu. A potential reason for this could be the tensions that escalated during Mau Mau specifically centering on circumcision and the importance of female circumcision as a symbol of unity.

Watoro

Watoro’s childhood was similar to Wamutira’s although in adulthood Watoro deviated from the norm and decided to leave her husband and his co-wives. Still, Watoro’s childhood education was very much the same with no formal schooling (though she had no desire for it) and gendered-specific skill learning. She also describes getting her ears pierced as “painful, but we wanted to have it done” (Davison 1989:95) and highly desirable for beauty reasons. *Irua* was taught to her by

her grandmother and mothers as a “way of buying maturity” (Davison 1989:95-96), the same language that Wanjiku used. She added a few details about the day of *Irua*, such as that boys are circumcised in the morning and girls at dusk. In the intervening time between being washed in the river and being circumcised as the sun set, the girls were taken home and spoon-fed, which Watoro described as “it was as if we had become children again” (Davison 1989:97). She recalled her circumcision in much the same way as Wamutia, adding that she did not cry during the cutting even though some “cowards started crying” (Davison 1989:97). Watoro walked home without support but she too fell asleep as soon as she arrived home. She was also of the opinion that circumcision was a good practice whose absence now makes things worse. She blames unmarried pregnancy on the loss of *Irua* because now girls “have no way of knowing when they are grown-up” (Davison 1989:98) and boys “feel grown-up and can joke about with the girls” (Davison 1989:98). Watoro, likely typical of most Gikuyu at the time, was aware of opposition to circumcision and efforts to get girls into formal schooling. According to her, her father refused to let her attend school and she was happy instead “going to dances, because I was not alone” (Davison 1989:98). It is notable that Watoro both has and had positive feelings toward circumcision and did not cry during the performance of the cutting rite. By contrast Wamutira had negative feelings about circumcision cried during her ceremony. It seems likely that Wamutira’s negative feelings were not completely derived from the pain she experienced but had been developing in the form of ambiguity about the rite. She had been exposed to girls who ran away and expressed

desire to go to school, even though she herself was not allowed to, and this may have caused her to question the importance of adhering to tradition. Watoro did not seem to have been influenced at that time by the colonial government and missionaries' efforts to change Gikuyu tradition in the same way that Wamutira was and thus had a less difficult time with circumcision.

Wangeci

Wangeci seemed to be well liked by Davison and seemed to have an exceptional life. Her father died when she was ten and she was widowed later in life. In many ways her childhood was conventional, although "she perceived herself as unusual rather than typical of Gikuyu women" (Davison 1989:110). Most of the uniqueness of her childhood experience was due to the absence of her father, but otherwise she grew up with the same customs and values as the other women already mentioned. Wangeci got her ears pierced after realizing that friends who had pierced ears did not want to spend time with her. In terms of the pain involved in the first piercings, Wangeci says "I don't remember that the piercing hurt—it was just something one did to show she had reached another stage of life" (Davison 1989:115). She does remember that the second piercings "hurt, but the pain has faded in my mind" (Davison 1989:116). She describes in detail the processing of exchanging beer and goats with her uncles so that she could have permission to go for the *Irua*. In the eighteen days between receiving permission and the *Irua* ceremony, the women of the village sang songs about generally unmentionable

topics “about intercourse and things like that, which you didn’t hear talked about ordinarily” (Davison 1989:117).

Like the others, on the morning of her ceremony Wangeci washed in the river with older women and was carried on the back of a young bride. Her explanation for this tradition was that “it was the clan’s way of showing appreciation for one of their girls who is maturing” (Davison 1989:118). She has another insight into the symbolism of her appearance on the day of the *Irua*, when recounting that a medicine marked a circle around her face in a “white, chalklike substance that signified mother’s milk, because it was as if being reborn—this time as adults” (Davison 1989:118). Wangeci described her feelings about circumcision before her *Irua*: “I had been eager to go for *Irua* so I could become a mature girl like the ones at home and be loved like them…So I was not afraid of the pains I had heard people say were experienced during *Irua*—I was excited and eager”(Davison 1989:119). Wangeci described the cuts that were made into the flesh and even pantomimed on Davison, as if the interviewer were being circumcised. During Wangeci’s own *Irua* ceremony she did not cry, even though she witnessed “cowards [who] were screaming and crying” (Davison 1989:119). Instead she looked to the sky as she had been advised as the first cut produced a “sharp pain like fire” (Davison 1989:120). She felt numb afterwards and withstood the following two cuts. According to her, girls who showed no emotion during the *Irua* could beat age-mates who cried and screamed. Additionally, once the age-mates healed and started visiting each other, those girls who had cried were always given the leftovers of their food during meals.

Wangeci did not show emotion because she did not want to be seen as a coward and she "wanted to show people now that I was mature and could endure pain" (Davison 1989:120).

Wangeci also states that girls who do not go through *irua* never mature. Whereas in her time a girl, by undergoing circumcision, "shed her childhood acts and behaviors" (121), an uncircumcised girl today "grows with them, matures with them, and even marries with them" (Davison 1989:121). Although she laments the passing of this tradition, she also believes that there would be no point in trying to get her granddaughter, for example, circumcised because "it has no meaning nowadays—it is useless" (Davison 1989: 121). She thinks that one of the worst consequences of *irua* no longer being practiced is that there is no separation between the age groups and younger folks no longer know their place. Young girls ask about things that would have been acceptable for them to ask in the old system of *mariika* and respect for those in older age groups. These sentiments echo Wanjiku and Watoro's feelings.

Wanoi

Wanoi was circumcised around the same time as the other interviewed women presented here but her experience was different in notable ways. Her mother was a midwife and circumciser and her father died shortly after she was born so she grew up with a step-father. She recalled spending time with her mother in which she would watch her doing her household chores. Her grandmother was

also a big part of her life and it was from her that Wanoi learned about how girls went for circumcision and what was expected of them during the ceremony. She also performed some light cooking duties with guidance from her mother. The first big change in her life she described as being the piercing of her ears. Her older brother, who had become a Christian, opposed the piercing of her ears. He forced her to go to missionary school instead. Wanoi did not get far in her studies because one day, when walking back from school, she was beaten by her age-mates for not having her ears pierced. One day she decided to run away from school and pierce her own ears since she had seen her mother do it many times before.

A similar scenario occurred for her circumcision. Davison writes that she was confused about Wanoi's circumcision story because it was so out of the ordinary, but after speaking with Wanoi's mother concluded that it is "likely that the account is fairly accurate, with some exaggeration" (Davison 1989:148). Wanoi recounted how one day while she was herding goats, a friend came over and told her that she (the friend) was going to get circumcised later that day. Wanoi's father had already expressed concern over her being circumcised because of her small size and she knew that her "parents would not allow it" (Davison 1989:148). Wanoi decided to leave the goats and go by herself to the homestead where her friend was to be circumcised. Her description of the actual event is brief: "I quickly put down the *mathakwa* leaves [ceremonial ground covering] and sat down on them with my legs spread. I didn't even have a supporter!" (Davison 1989:148-149). Afterwards she received the support and congratulations of neighbors and family. The women of

her clan accompanied her home and supported her physically. Upon arriving home her uncle told her that he would give her a goat for braving the ceremony by herself. Wanoi decided to get circumcised because of tremendous pressure from her peers and family members, even if her parents were not anxious to see her circumcised. Her choice seems to have ultimately been supported by everyone near to her, including her parents, who did not appear upset when they discovered what she had done. Her decision to be circumcised against her parents explicit wishes shows just how important circumcision was for Gikuyu girls and how desirable that status was. It is also an example of how at least one girl did not sit idly and allow herself to be denied the circumcision experience.

Similar to other women she lamented the lack of *mariika* today and said that girls today are "naughty" because they do not know the behaviors appropriate to their age-grades. She traced the change in the practice of circumcision to Christianity and common rationale that "Mary in the Bible was not circumcised, so why should we" (Davison 1989:150). She does not want girls to be circumcised now but does believe it is possible that it will become a popular practice once again.

Application of the Stress Models

The four women's stories demonstrate that young Gikuyu girls' experiences with circumcision were becoming much more varied with colonial influence. Although none of the four women were Christian at the time of their circumcision, it is clear that the anti-circumcision campaign waged by missionaries had an effect on

the coming of age ritual. During the period of the Emergency, circumcision emerged as a highly politicized act that had been partially divorced from its original meaning as being a marker of maturity. Where the campaign against it had previously been a tool of the missionaries and colonial government in “civilizing” the Gikuyu, now nationalist Gikuyu themselves were using the contested practice as part of their agenda. Undergoing circumcision (for women) became symbolic of loyalty to the ethnic group and resistance to colonial authority. In this politicizing of the meaning and value of circumcision, what was deemphasized was the women’s power base. Women’s transformations through undergoing circumcision were no longer conferring upon them the same privileges and influence as before. And important difficulties facing women stemming from the new mode of economic production and system of governance were ignored by the colonial government and nationalist leaders alike. The result of this was that circumcision became an imposition and distraction from women’s struggle to empower themselves.

Environmental system

None of the women interviewed were circumcised during the Emergency period, but their stories are useful in getting a sense of how circumcision was changing with the rise in nationalism. In terms of the environmental system, some things did seem to stay relatively unchanged as seen in the women’s stories. Interdependence continued to be a core value of Gikuyu culture, though the Europeans rewarded independence for girls who chose to forego circumcision. In

the relationship dimensions, all women gave descriptions of their childhoods that indicated strong interpersonal relationships with family members and the larger community. The expectations of the young girls were clear and consistent with their values. All the girls described enjoying the time they spent as children working alongside the older women and with their female age-mates. The nature of their relationships to the older women reflects that the women's social hierarchy was very much in place and that circumcision was still the only way into it. The rules governing relationships based on gender and age seem to have also remained mostly unchanged. Gender segregation seems to have been amplified by men's inclusion in the colonial economy. Much of this segregation came in the form of gender-segregated schooling. A major transmitter of independence and other European and Christian values, formal schooling, did not play a part in girls' lives as their parents were very clear in their disapproval of the practice. Still, Gikuyu girls were affected by the values coming out of the schools and penetrating society even if through the males. While the pressures of interdependence and fitting into and serving the group were still present, there was an added pressure to be independent. This pressure would have been strongest for boys but, more generally, developing an independent self-construal was associated with greater success in finding wage labor and access to leadership roles. Girls may not have had the pressures that pushed them into schools, but the pressure of success in European terms was becoming more important as it was becoming clear that the men could not always provide for the women and their families. Also, as Wamutira indicated,

there was growing resentment stemming from her not having the same opportunity as boys to go to school. Additionally, the traditional gender divisions were changing somewhat as some women participated in political organizations and even armed fighting alongside men. In some instances, this involvement in what were customarily men's domains was construed as being a part of wifely duties to the family and community. In other cases, it was clear that women were acting independently and becoming leaders in their own right. The relationships between people of different ages also seemed to be changing in some ways. Generational differences between parents, grandparents, and grandchildren developed as changing situations resulted in different ideas about circumcision and girls' roles and opportunities.

The direction of growth expected of Gikuyu women interviewed seems to have been well-understood by each and was generally the same for all of them. It also did not differ much from what Wanjiku described. The sequence of events for gender-specific development described was always the same and began with piercing of the ears, followed by circumcision, and then menstruation, marriage, and birth of the first child. The environment encouraged this kind of growth for females, although as mentioned above, school was an added dimension of the pattern for males. Every girl spoke of these events as steps towards greater maturity and adulthood. It was clear that moving on to the next stage of life was one of the greatest motivations for undergoing some of the painful procedures. Growth in this direction was especially encouraged by the system of age-mates and the difficult

sanctions against people who did not reach each stage, reached it late, or in the wrong way. For example, the beatings described by Wangeci are strong examples of the very clear social encouragement to go through each stage and mature with courage. While for males, formal schooling was more acceptable and indicative of different life goals that related to involvement in colonial society, girls raised in non-Christian environments were clearly not expected to have that kind of involvement in formal sectors of the colonial political or economic system so school was forbidden. One important change was that life success could not be exclusively tied to moving up the ranks in the age-grades and was now coming to be related to participation in the colonial economy.

System maintenance and change dimensions of this period also showed some important differences in comparison to the precolonial and early colonial periods. Importantly, at least some of the girls knew of other girls who had not undergone circumcision and were probably aware of the circumcision controversy. The social setting seems to have remained stable despite this, although it is unclear besides schooling, what other European institutions had made their way into their society. One subtle but important difference between the stories presented in this chapter and Wanjiku's story from the previous chapter is that shillings were used as part of the exchange between parents and uncles for permission to go to *irua* and also as incentive for *irua*. The fact that shillings had value demonstrates that at least on some level the idea of exchange value was changing. The presence of shillings in circumcision exchanges indicates that Gikuyu were beginning to value involvement

in the European economic system. Having shillings was desirable because they could be used to pay taxes and purchase other goods. All of the women presented here were circumcised, but for those who did not want to be circumcised (and it is likely that there were always girls who felt this way) the presence of another social system (surrounding the missions and schools) nearby decreased the incentive to get circumcised and resulted in less stability of the system as compared to before European intervention.

Personal system

The four interviews provide great insight into the personal systems of Gikuyu girls during the rise in nationalism. In terms of personal motivation to go through with circumcision for girls who had more interdependent self-construals (probably the majority but not exclusively), it would have been greatest for girls whose parents encouraged it for them. Girls with interdependent self-construals would also likely have been very sensitive to rejection. Because circumcision had developed as a central issue in defining loyalty to either the Christian or nationalist factions of the Gikuyu, the rejection that would come with going against what family and friends decided would have been very great. Wanoi's example illustrates this very well. Although her father was not interested in seeing her be circumcised, the pressure from her age-mates and female relatives was enough to convince her to have herself circumcised. In this act she demonstrated some behavior that would seem to be

individualistic but the importance of fitting in with her peers exemplifies the interdependent self-construal typical of collectivistic cultures.

Transitory condition

The transitory condition of *Irua* was similar to what was described in the previous chapter, though it was tied more closely with colonial resistance. Collective Gikuyu interests were a really important driving force during the nationalist struggle. Because of this, circumcision grew in importance as a symbolic act that reinforced Gikuyu ethnic identity. Its role in the preceding battle between colonial authorities and traditionalist Gikuyu also made circumcision an essential component of a person or family's contribution to upholding their group membership. As discussed in previous chapters, undergoing circumcision would have been especially threatening in a society where it was not practiced, but it would have been a challenge to not undergo it in societies where it was practiced. Wanoi's experience illustrates this point very well. Not undergoing circumcision would have been an incredible stressor that she felt would have been much more challenging than the pain she would have had to endure in the *Irua*.

Coping and appraisal

As during the early decades of colonization, coping and appraisal should have remained largely emotion-focused. All of the women who underwent circumcision described the intense pain involved in it and awareness that it was a central part of

the *irua*. They perceived circumcision to be a necessary event in their lives in order to reach adulthood and acceptance by their peers. Watoro, Wangeci, and Wanoi all were able to control their emotions during the event and did not describe any difficulties afterwards making it back home and dealing with the aftermath. Wamutira, on the other hand, was somewhat questioning of circumcision and did cry out during the event. She also subsequently described a much more difficult time making it back home and described a lot of pain after the ceremony that the other women either did not feel or did not discuss in their interviews. For the first three women, emotion-focused coping was the route that they took and it seemed to have been successful. Wamutira's difficulty in controlling her emotions suggests that she was not as committed to the ceremony as the other women. It also suggests a possibly more independent self-construal that some research suggests is more closely associated with problem-focused coping. Her interest and subsequent disappointment regarding enrollment in a school points to a greater interest in at least some Western values, which could have been related to a self-construal that was a bit more independent than the other girls'. Interestingly, Wanoi used problem-solving coping to resist the Western influence that was preventing her from being circumcised and fitting in with her peers. In that case circumcision could itself be seen as a coping mechanism for being outcast.

Health and well-being

Considering the positive outcomes each woman described from her circumcision and the broad social support they enjoyed from relatives and other members of their community, there seems to have been no adverse effects to their well-being and development as a result of being circumcised. Of all the women, Wamutira seems to have been the only woman who regrets being circumcised. She did not attribute any negative outcome to circumcision, but seems to have felt that running away would have been a better choice. It is impossible to know whether she would have chosen not to get circumcised if she had the option, but the knowledge that some girls took different paths in their lives likely contributed to her questioning the necessity of circumcision. It is probable that other Gikuyu girls who also were aware of girls not being circumcised would have also engaged in this questioning. Had there been more girls who resisted circumcision in Wamutira's life she might have followed through on her idea of running away. Still, it seems that all of the women saw circumcision as a challenge, and undergoing the rite resulted in the gain and growth that they were hoping for.

From the four women's stories it is clear that many aspects of rural Gikuyu life stayed the same through the first half of the 20th century, though European-engineered change was underway and beginning to make its way into their societies. This outside influence affected the women in different ways in the period just before Mau Mau, but as Wamutira shows—the opposition to circumcision was making its effect felt even in Gikuyu villages that remained largely isolated from the urban

colonial setting. This isolation was a great help to the Mau Mau uprising because colonial biases against rural people resulted in their actions going unnoticed for a long time. However, this isolation was not to last, and with the forced relocations and heavy emphasis on social reform which women could not afford to not be a part of, the colonial government succeeded in altering Gikuyu society so profoundly that the meaning of circumcision would never be the same again.

Chapter 5

Post-Independence Kenya

In 1982, following the deaths of fourteen girls and the hospitalization of nine others who had been recently circumcised, then-President Daniel T. arap Moi formally declared a ban on the practice of female circumcision. He ordered police to jail anyone who practiced female circumcision that resulted in a girl's death. That same year the Director of Medical Services in Kenya forbade health workers from performing or aiding in female circumcision (The Economist 1982). This was the first time Kenya's post-Independence government had created this kind of penalty for female circumcision, which had already been on the decline for many years. The formal ban neither signaled the beginning of the end for circumcision nor discouraged its practice. One of the unintended consequences of the ban was to make circumcision less visible and more difficult to punish. As a result of the secrecy that surrounds there is not much information about how circumcision has been performed in the last few decades making it somewhat difficult to compare to earlier periods. However, since circumcision had never been an isolated practice in Gikuyu society it is possible to get a sense of how circumcision's traditional role in women's lives has changed by looking at other changes in Kenya that occurred post-Independence.

Statistical Trends in the Practice of Female Circumcision

One of the only sources of information regarding the practice of female circumcision in Kenya in the past few decades has been government-collected statistical information. In particular, the Kenya Demographic and Health Surveys (KDHS), which are conducted every few years to "provide policy makers and programme managers with a comprehensive look at levels and trends in key health and demographic parameters" (Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 1988) have been useful in assessing trends in the prevalence of circumcision. Demographic and Health Surveys are conducted in numerous countries around the world and represent collaborations between local governments and large international aid organizations. The 1998 KDHS was the first DHS survey in Kenya to include measures for female circumcision. For a period of about six months, staff from the Central Bureau of Statistics travelled the country and surveyed 8,380 representative households. All female inhabitants of the households between the ages of 15 to 49 were surveyed. Because there has been so much secrecy surrounding the practice, the Kenya DHS presents a rare opportunity to look at circumcision. Although the survey does not record any qualitative data about the women's views on circumcision, the statistical data is still useful to getting a sense of recent trends in the prevalence of female circumcision.

Using the data provided in the 1998 KDHS, Sarah R. Hayford analyzed the trends in the practice of circumcision for the previous three decades. Her objective was to study the applicability of convention theory from sociology to explain the

decline of female circumcision. Briefly summarized, convention theory proposes that "female genital cutting [is] a social practice determined by group norms as well as individual decisions" and as such "will end when the group of parents ready to refuse to circumcise their daughters is large and visible" (Hayford 2008:123). Once this contingent is large enough, convention theory postulates, social change reaches a "tipping point" where parents who were otherwise opposed to circumcision now feel comfortable publicly opposing it. Hayford analyzed the data to discover trends in how the women interviewed felt about having their daughters circumcised and how prevalent they thought it was in their society. The KDHS used the following approach in gathering their data:

> In this section, women were first asked whether they themselves had been circumcised, and if so at what age. Women with at least one living daughter were asked if their oldest daughter was circumcised; if they answered no, they were asked whether they planned to have her circumcised. Women with circumcised daughters were then asked more detailed questions about their daughter's circumcision, including who performed it and when and where it took place. [Hayford 2008:125]

Hayford's analysis of the data points to several trends in circumcision among Kenyan women. The least surprising finding is that circumcision has declined over time in Kenya. The increasing percentage of men and women advocating for the abolition of FGC in Kenya had already indicated that there was decreased support for circumcision and greater pressures to denounce it. By looking at the ages of the women surveyed, Hayford determined that circumcision began to decline in women born in the mid-1960s, just after Independence. The parents of this cohort would have been coming of age during a time of intense nationalism and the important

shift in circumcision's meaning described in the previous chapter. Hayford also found that higher circumcision rates were positively correlated with level of education and variety of media they were exposed to and how rural the setting was. At the time of the survey, approximately 43% of Gikuyu women had been circumcised, a relatively low figure compared to other ethnic groups in Kenya. The Gikuyu are also notable in that, compared to other Kenyan ethnic groups, they have had the most dramatic decline beginning around Independence through the late 1990s. Overall, Hayford concluded that the data did support convention theory. What would complicate the application of convention theory is that there are many smaller communities in Kenya, which would make it difficult for there to be any one "tipping point." The strong social divisions between rural and urban dwellers and between Christians and non-Christians have perhaps contributed to circumcision's persistence, seeing as it would be harder to find a community with large coexisting groups who were overwhelmingly pro- or anti-circumcision. Ever-smaller communities of FGC supporters would be created each time avoiding the "tipping point" by not including the anti-circumcision perspectives. Either way the findings do support my assertions made in previous chapters that education, participation in colonial and capitalist society (greater in urban centers), and greater exposure to Western social influences were partly responsible for changing circumcision experiences.

Seeking New Forms of Power

One of the most important roles that circumcision has played in women's lives is as gateway into the women's social hierarchy. But as I show in the previous chapter, this form of power was becoming increasingly irrelevant in light of pressures to earn money and provide for the family. The importance of wage-labor for women seems to only have increased in the post-Independence period, but their access to the benefits of economic growth plans has been limited and "there have been fewer opportunities for them in newer capitalist enterprises than for men" (Robertson and Berger 1986:10). The devaluing of women's traditional tasks resulted in "women's dominant role in food production [being] ignored in the 'development' planning" (Robertson and Berger 1986:6). Outsider concern for Gikuyu women has recently focused on their equality with men measured as a function of sameness in productive roles, which has been especially detrimental to women for whom the gendered division of labor was key to their success. Additionally, because "'development,' assumed to be the intrinsic property of Europe and the United States, rather than a cultural construct in its own right, emerges in the discourse as the antithesis of cultural traditions" (Walley 1997:420) the importance of women's traditional roles has been neglected. One of the ways in which their traditional roles in food production have been overlooked is "in the process of developing new crops and farming techniques" (Robertson and berger 1986:10). Equally important is that land consolidation policies, which began in the 1950s during the Emergency and continued into the 1960s, turned land ownership

from lineage-based to individual-based. Owing to the access that men had to upwards economical and political mobility not afforded to women, these policies essentially gave whatever land was still Gikuyu-owned exclusively to male heads of households. Stamp (1986) acknowledges that women were not completely alienated from their former claims to land because they "continue to lay strong claim to their subsistence products and in practice attempt to dispose of them as they see fit" (1986:38). However, women's former claims to land had been a testament to the power that they held within their homesteads as individual heads of subhouseholds. Additionally, as Stamp points out, cooperative relationships between husbands and wives were not guaranteed and even then, a wife's control over the harvest was contingent upon her husband's approval.

Decades of denying women recognition for their cooperative role in Gikuyu society has manifested itself in contemporary times as their general invisibility. It has not helped that the Kenyan government is dominated by men. Some of the more powerful men, generally elders, were able to retain some of their authority working as chiefs or sub-chiefs within the larger British colonial system. Women, on the other hand, were not similarly incorporated into the formal political power of the new governing system, and as Stamp observes, general opposition (from European sources) against "polygyny and the promotion of the nuclear family [has] also undermined women's former power base" (1986:38). The nuclear household did not provide women with the opportunity to have dominion over subhouseholds and subplots of land as when polygyny was practiced. However, Gikuyu women have

been able to adapt some of their old power bases to the new system, sometimes with great success. This adaptation has been most successfully achieved by the formation of women's groups.

Changes in Women's Organization

Another way of indirectly looking at how the significance and value of circumcision has changed is by looking at what happened to the age-sets as a central form of women's organization. One of the most successful Kenyan women, who happens to be Gikuyu, is Wangari Maathai. Winner of the Nobel Peace prize for her work with the Green Belt, an organization that advocates for environmental reform, her work has shown the agency and influence of Gikuyu women and the women's organizations. Maathai was a two-term president of one of the two largest and most influential women's organizations in Kenya, the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). The NCWK, founded in 1964, was an umbrella organization for women's groups which grew to have significant political power (Robertson 1997:249). It was through this organization that the Green Belt was started. In addition to these national organizations there were many local women's groups that were critical to rural women's success.

The new self-help groups grew out of principles that customarily governed the age-sets. They also reflected the new tone of development in Kenya exalted by Kenyatta when he became President. His motto, still popular today, was *harambee* ("pull together")" (Stamp 1986:41). *Harambee* encouraged communities to work

together to improve themselves. Supported by the colonial government, the new women's groups, which had clear organizational ties to the older groups, were initially intended to organize the "utilization of new agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers" (Stamp 1986:40). Women were quick to heed Kenyatta's call for *harambee* and used their previous experience working in cooperative groups to meet the new challenges they faced after gaining Independence. In the early half of the 1960s, women's groups called *Nyakinyua Mabati* (Women Elder's Roofing) started up in tontine arrangements. In these arrangements, women contributed to a collection of money with the purpose of collecting enough to buy each woman, in turn, a metal roof. These original groups started a wave of similar groups that emerged throughout Kenya, increasing at a rapid rate through the 1970s and 1980s. From 1976 to 1988, the number of groups increased from 1300 to 23,000 and membership in these groups grew from 150,000 to 1,400,000. Through such groups, the women of Mitero, as studied by Stamp, were able to establish "amenities directly related to reducing the burden of women's labor, or to community improvements" (Stamp 1986:40) such as nursery schools and water piping. They also used funds generated from the sale of surplus harvest and wages from work on coffee plantations to establish small businesses, pay for ceremonial expenses of individual members, and even as a type of "savings society" that guaranteed each woman in turn a lump sum of money to be used for her household needs.

Maendeleo ya Wanawake, one of the largest women's organizations in Kenya, had as its "chief emphasis…women as homemakers" (Robertson 1987:249)

and was in 1987 subsumed into KANU. When Walley (1997) says that "what Ahmed labels 'colonial feminism' was often replaced in the post-colonial era by 'state feminism,' in which many women's organizations were co-opted by national governments and staffed by female relatives of male politicians," (1997: 424) the Maendeleo ya Wanawake is a perfect example. When Maathai was facing suppression from the government after criticizing and challenging its policies, Maendeleo ya Wanawake sided with the government and revoked Maathai's membership in the organization. Although the women's groups enjoyed high levels of membership, they served somewhat different audiences. The larger organizations have been favored by upper class women, while rural women have been more likely to be involved in the smaller tontine types of organizations.

One of the important similarities between the age-sets and new women's groups is that both were able to organize effectively in pursuit of women's interests. An important difference, however, was that the new groups were involved in much larger scale projects that would not have typically fallen into the domain of "women's issues." Because men were spending a lot of time in low-paying wage labor outside of the community and the majority of the burden to resolve household and community issues fell on women, they had to assume roles as providers and earners that typically belonged to men. This kind of economic self-determination was discouraged by men and even by Kenyatta himself. Letters written to a Gikuyu nationalist newspaper give a sense of the frustration with the limited economic opportunities for women. The writer of one such letter criticized "the ineffectiveness

of Kenyatta's mere words and the power of chiefs: although 'women were told by Jomo Kenyatta not to dig terraces, the women are still digging'" (Frederiksen 2006:291). Her main point was that women were being directed into certain forms of labor with little consideration for the realities of poverty, especially for rural women. One woman defended women's labor on the ground that "women were strong and quite capable of carrying heavy loads without losing their dignity" (Frederisken 2006:291).

Stamp explains the subversive power of women choosing to work for wages rather than on their husbands' lands as giving women the means to compensate for the loss of the traditional structures that gave them power. This is an illustrative example of how women continued to resist and challenge their given roles as representatives of tradition. Not surprisingly, men were not pleased with their wives choosing to work elsewhere. One way that men expressed their disapproval of "women's appropriation of the products of their own labor" outside of the home was by beating them (Stamp 1986:41). One woman gave the reason for the violent reaction in men: "'Men fear women when they are in a group'" (Stamp 1986:41). Many men opposed these activities on the same grounds that women defended them: tradition. While men characterized women's wage labor as a break with tradition, the women in the groups argued that their traditional roles as household providers necessitated new forms of participation in the economy. This disagreement over women's relationship with tradition stems from the changes in gender roles that began in earnest with the activities of women fighters in the Mau

Mau rebellion. Tradition continued to only be invoked by men when it served their own interests, often restricting women's activities as a result. Women were able to successfully work within the confines of such rigidly-defined tradition to mobilize themselves for their own welfare and that of the people who depended on them. They were neither victims of a "timeless" culture as many Euro-Americans argued, nor were they victims of industrialization. Rather, they drew from traditional structures to create new roles that reflected recognition and initiative towards their responsibilities to women, family, and the larger community.

With the creation of these groups women have incorporated and, to some extent, replaced the age-grades and age-sets. This would have important implications for the practice of female circumcision, specifically a signaling the decreased importance of the rite for girls. In a cyclical way, the decline in the practice of circumcision meant that fewer women were part of the age-sets and thus its role as forming inclusive age-based organizations of women was becoming increasingly irrelevant. Women recognized that their groups would be more effective if its members were brought together along different lines. Because the distinctions in age and age-grades no longer held the strong associations with wisdom or success, it would not have been in the interest of the women to organize themselves along those lines. In many cases, the younger women who had greater experience with Western-style schooling were actually most knowledgeable about how to manipulate finances and government resources. Knowledge of the English language and other subjects taught in schools was necessary for successful

championing for more benefits. Therefore, the type of power the individual women were wielding through these groups was dependent on personal successes in independent activities outside of the household. Previously a woman's success was much more closely tied to marriage and childbirth and her primary role was in the household. Now women were going out of the household, sometimes against the wishes of their husbands to bring back wages and knowledge.

Circumcision as a Tool

There is evidence that circumcision became heavily politicized in continuation of what happened during the Emergency and came to be used in ways that concealed the original purposes of the practice, whether intentionally or not. In recent years, Kenya has faced increasing political instability owing to domination of the political and economic arenas by the Gikuyu. Other Kenyan ethnic groups, particularly the Luo, are resentful of their continued underrepresentation in the one-party system. In addition, there is still tension between Christian Gikuyu and traditionalists who have been steadily decreasing in number and influence. One product of this tension has been a nativist militia group called Mungiki, which has terrorized Kenyans in recent years. They are fighting on ideological grounds, calling for the Gikuyu to reject what the Europeans have brought and go back to the way they were before colonization. Among the many allegations of violence perpetrated by the group, is that they have forced circumcision on randomly targeted women (Associated Press 2008). Writing on the Mungiki, Wangari Maathai expresses her

belief that they have been the unfair victims of extrajudicial suppression methods because of their animist beliefs and support of female circumcision. She goes so far as to state that "it is only among the Kikuyu community that worshiping in a traditional way is demonised, criminalised and the killing of followers is tolerated" (Maathai 2009). Female circumcision seems to have become a tactic for anti-Christian militant groups to forcibly preserve "tradition" in a seemingly much more violent way than what happened during Mau Mau. Interestingly, in the interethnic tensions of the past decade there have also been reports of forced circumcision of Luo men. The Luo traditionally have not practiced circumcision, and their forced circumcision was clearly used as an ethnically-based intimidation tactic by supporters of the Gikuyu candidate for President. An important element of this form of forced circumcision is that it plays on ideas of masculinity and what makes a "real" man. Male circumcision (at least for the Gikuyu) is unequivocally a source of manliness and male power. Yet female circumcision does not have the same associations and continues to be seen as a sign of female oppression. Robertson notes that "the meanings of clitoridectomy have been further complicated by some Kenyan men, who as unwitting enforcers of the views of some western feminist crusaders, have transposed clitoridectomy into an unambiguous symbol of female subordination" (Robertson 1997:240-241). Although cases of forced circumcision certainly support the notion of circumcision as representative of female subordination, the wholesale condemnation of female circumcision denies that

Gikuyu women who still practice it today have legitimate and different conceptualizations of the practice.

Two Non-Circumcision Stories: Nyambura and Wanja

Davison (1989) interviewed two women, Nyambura and Wanja, who were in their twenties at the time of the interviews (early 1980s). These two women went through adolescence in the 1970s and neither was circumcised. Like the majority of Gikuyu girls, they attended school from a young age. Davison reports that the mean number of school years attended was 5.8 for this age group in Mutira Location. The two women are representative of differences in access and success in the formal educational system.

Nyambura

Nyambura was born and raised a Catholic in a monogamous household. Her mother worked at home and her father earned wages outside of the village, though it is unclear what his work was. Nyambura learned about gender-specific chores, such as housework and cultivation by watching and imitating her mother. She spent most of the day at school and made it as far as fifth grade when her father's alcoholism and the increase in the price of the local brew made it impossible for all of his children's school fees to be paid. In addition to school, Nyambura went to church every Sunday and partook in "Bible lessons and singing" (Davison 1989:176). After leaving school, she went to live with relatives to work (unpaid) as a nanny for

their young children while the mother was at her job teaching in a primary school. It was here, Nyambura said, that she learned how to fulfill household duties that she had not been asked to perform at her mother's house since there she "never had to do much work, being the last born" (Davison 1989:177).

Davison asked Nyambura about going through *Irua* and she replied: "Those days are over! You know I am a Christian, and we do not believe it is a good thing. Why? Because it was a thing of the past. Going to school and learning some things helped us see the difference" (Davison 1989:178-179). In this explanation, she identified two important sources for her value orientations—the Christian religion and schools. The role of Christianity in shaping the circumcision controversy has been well-established in previous chapters. The practice of Christianity also compensated for the lack of large-scale Irua ceremonies that brought together distant relatives by providing Nyambura with an opportunity to meet with all of her relatives on Sundays. The prominent place that age-grades had in older women's narratives seems to be occupied by school grades in Nyambura's stories. In describing her childhood, Nyambura marked time using school years, unlike the older women interviewed who marked time in terms of important sequential life events (e.g., ear piercings, circumcision). She also described giving birth as her transition from a girl to a woman. Giving birth was "the biggest change" (Davison 1989:180) for her.

When asked about her ethnicity and her Kenyan nationality, Nyambura was very clear that she thought of herself as a Kenyan before a Gikuyu, and talked about

the importance of the nation after Independence. All of the women whose stories were presented in the previous chapters answered this prompt by affirming that they were above all Gikuyu. One contributor to the weakening of ethnic identity has probably been more interaction and close relationships with people of other Kenyan ethnic groups, facilitated largely by schooling.

Wanja

Wanja was also born and raised a Christian but she had significantly more opportunities in education than Nyambura did. She was also quite outspoken about gender inequality in Gikuyu society. She said that her parents never treated their male and female children any differently, and that the traditional segregation of the sexes had changed somewhat. Girls and boys did similar tasks, like fetching water and wood, and also attended school together. Her education in household work seemed to have come from older brothers and sisters alike. When talking about the people she was closest to, she mentioned her older brother whom she seemed to have greatly admired and who helped her often with schoolwork. In addition to her schooling, she described being taught important lessons through stories and riddles. Wanja described this as the method of education used “before there were books” (Davison 1989:192). For high school, Wanja attended a boarding school as most high school-level girls did. She did not do well on her examinations so she did not continue on to higher education.

Wanja had very interesting things to say about her (biological and social) transition from girl to woman. One day, while at school, Wanja got her first menstrual period. She did not tell anybody about it and handled it herself since she learned about what to do from other girls. Her own mother had never spoken to her about it. It is notable that Wanja went through such a big step in her biological maturity solely with the help of peers. The diminished involvement of older generations in girls' maturation seems to have increasingly become a feature of young Gikuyu girls' lives. Wanja also identified giving birth as her social and emotional transition into adulthood. She knew that *mariika* used to be considered as marking differences in maturation, but she felt that now "the only division is when a girl becomes a mother" (Davison 1989:195). In terms of *Irua*, she had seen circumcision ceremonies as a child, but her main form of exposure growing up seems to have been news accounts of girls dying after circumcision. The secrecy surrounding the practice meant that "one would not know if her age-mates are circumcised or not" (Davison 1989:195). As for her own thoughts on *Irua*, she saw it simply as an old tradition that took people "backwards," unlike Christianity, which "came to take people forward and bring development" (Davison 1989:195). Like Nyambura, she too credits Christianity with teaching her that female circumcision was something that should be abandoned.

Application of the Stress Models

Environmental system

The rapidity with which Gikuyu and the larger Kenyan society changed in the latter half of the 20th century was a general stressor of the environmental system because of the difficulties in quickly adapting to a context that was changing in numerous and varied ways. The relocation of the Gikuyu during the Emergency brought them into forced participation in societies that were largely organized in accordance with Euro-American, Christian, and capitalist values. Two of the major ongoing stressors brought about by these changes were to achieve financial stability and to perform well in school. Another one, specific to growing numbers of younger women and which grew out of the circumcision controversy and imported ideologies of "rights," was in addressing gender inequality and segregation. Key to the ongoing stressor of gender-based disadvantage was intergenerational differences and trying to negotiate the different perspectives. A common thread running through all of these stressors was the tension between the collectivistic orientations of pre-colonial Gikuyu society and the individualistic orientations of Euro-American societies. While these tensions had been brewing since the beginning of colonization, the rapid industrialization program of post-Independence Kenya brought them to the surface.

It is difficult to discuss the specific categories of dimensions in the social climate without speaking in even greater generalities than in previous chapters. As urbanization expanded and some Gikuyu had access to opportunities for success,

divisions across class and residential lines intensified. For the purposes of the psychological analysis, my focus will be on the “average” Gikuyu girl. As I have determined through demographic data, the average girl had received some schooling, was Christian, and lived in a rural area (CIA World Factbook). As seen in the discussion of statistical trends in circumcision, these demographic factors were correlated to the likelihood that a girl would be circumcised. The statistics show that female circumcision has decreased steadily since Independence so that for quite some time the average Gikuyu girl would not have been circumcised. However, she was probably aware of or personally knew girls who were and probably had a mother and grandmothers who had been circumcised.

In the relationship dimensions, the proliferation of the women’s groups and the active role they have taken in their communities post-Independence indicate a generally high level of cohesion, at least among the women who belong to them. Women have a similar level of support in one another through these groups to what they would have had in their age-sets several decades earlier. A major difference, however, is that the absence of the *Irua* would have made these bonds less enduring as an important aspect of the self. The ceremonies of the Irua, and in particular the collective nature of activities, construed the adult self as fundamentally interdependent and one with the collective. This is a key difference between the age-sets and the women’s groups as collective women’s organizations; circumcision mandated that age-sets be a part of one’s identity (self-construal) while the membership in women’s groups was a function of individual initiative to better

oneself. Participation in the school system also meant that the average Gikuyu girl likely had equally meaningful relationships with males, people of different ages, and members of different ethnic groups. Greater exposure to the latter was reflected well in Nyambura and Wanja stating that they thought of themselves more as Kenyan than as Gikuyu, thus demonstrating deemphasized difference along ethnic lines. Many of these differences became more pronounced with each subsequent generation, which would have resulted in strongly differing perspectives between generations. There was much more openness of expression cultivated in the youth through education and media influences, so that the average Gikuyu girl would have been much more likely to openly object to her circumcision (if she felt that way) than a parent would have, even if they had similar feelings on the topic.

Changes in expectations for girls' personal growth continued in the trend away from age-grades and towards school grades as the dominant scale by which it was measured. The school system has replaced the previous system of gaining incremental wisdom through ritualized life events. Instead of going through the ear piercing or circumcision, girls move through grades in school. Girls used to be expected to gain knowledge about how best to perform traditional roles, especially child rearing and household maintenance. The importance of formal schooling for financial success means that more girls are expected to primarily gain knowledge related to reading and math that will ensure high-paying jobs. This is not to say that former gender roles and capacities are not valued, but they do appear to have decreased in importance. A successful and powerful woman today is generally one

who is well-educated. Even though they may not be as prominent in a girl's formal learning system, the values of community and cooperation are still very much present, but they are not necessarily the focal point that they once were. The growth that came from circumcision was no longer relevant to the context of women's social organization because there were no more age-sets and graduation from school provided more of a tangible contribution to the groups than the "graduation" from childhood immaturity of the *Irua*.

The statistical data suggests that the prevalence of female circumcision has been decreasing steadily. The environment therefore appears very open to change. Post-Independence development agendas have construed stability as indicating stagnation and the antithesis to progress. Development plans orchestrated both within and outside of the country promote change for the benefit of the people. There have always been efforts to change the Gikuyu setting, but the efforts are now often led by Gikuyu themselves. A potential outcome of this is more girls being willing to speak out against circumcision if they feel that the practice is open to debate and that change can come from their protests. The numerous groups in Kenya that have fought against circumcision also promote a culture of change and encourage that perspective.

Personal system

The major way that the personal system has changed is in increasing individualism, as mentioned in the discussion of the environmental system. Until

Independence, Gikuyu communities focused primarily on building community and strengthening collective identity. After Independence, Kenyatta's motto of *harambee* continued to bring communities together to work on self-improvement projects. However, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, participation in women's groups, enrollment in school, and women's earning of wage labor, have all played important roles in encouraging and rewarding a greater independent self-construal. The high levels of participation in the women's groups confirm that collectivistic associations were still very much important even if their form has changed. Thus *harambee* has brought communities together to help support individual goals, and the women's groups are a great example of how collectivism and individualism have come to be not antagonistic orientations but cooperative elements of Gikuyu society.

Transitory condition

The transitory condition of circumcision has changed dramatically in the past fifty years. Once the expectation for all Gikuyu girls, circumcision's prevalence has decreased amid legal and activist pressures. The average Gikuyu girl who attends school would be exposed to Kenyans of different ethnic groups that have not traditionally practiced circumcision as well as uncircumcised Christian Gikuyu girls making it much more likely that a Gikuyu girl facing circumcision would question the necessity or importance of the rite. The dissolution of the age-sets and the emergence of women's groups that provided many of the benefits of the

cooperative nature of the age-sets also lessened the importance of circumcision for inclusion into large codependent organizations of women. As mentioned several times, the school grades have become much more important markers of maturity as students go there to gain the knowledge that they will need to find success in the job market. Lastly, the demonization of circumcision as an oppressive and violent act has changed how girls are socialized to see circumcision. Its use in guerilla militia tactics has further added to its characterization as a form of violent harm to girls' bodies and a tool of control by people who are "backwards." Thus, for the average girl, undergoing circumcision would likely seem incredibly threatening.

Coping and appraisal

The magnitude of the changes that have taken place in the other panels of Moos' model would have very important consequences for coping and appraisal of circumcision. Whereas circumcision was presented as a challenge through the Irua ceremonies and its place in a larger life narrative for girls, today the appraisal of threat would be more likely for the typical girl facing circumcision. A change in values relating to womanhood and maturity has diminished the possible growth or gain available to a girl from circumcision. An average Gikuyu girl circumcised today would not gain access to the age-grade hierarchy because it has been dissolved nor is circumcision necessary to gain adult status which can today be reached through simply getting older or giving birth as Nyambura and Wanja indicate. As discussed in the first chapter, the potential for growth and gain are prerequisites for a challenge

appraisal. In addition, a challenge appraisal has been found to be more likely when the individual feels a sense of control. The ideals of freedom of choice and control of one's body promoted by the media and anti-circumcision activism, would make circumcision for the average girl who does not want it seem like a situation where she has no control. The potential for harm or loss, on the other hand, has received a great deal of attention in the circumcision controversy nationally. The newspaper reports of girls dying or being hospitalized after undergoing circumcision stress the physical danger of circumcision. The involvement of health agencies and organizations in promoting knowledge of potential health consequences also highlights the harm potential of circumcision. The framing of female circumcision as a human, and specifically, women's rights issue equates being circumcised to the loss of a girl's rights. Finally, Lazarus and Folkman identified threat appraisal as associated with negative emotions (as opposed to the joy and excitement associated with challenge), thus making circumcision highly undesirable for the typical Gikuyu girl.

How the average Gikuyu girl would potentially cope with the threat of circumcision can be looked at by using Chun et al.'s proposal for the four ways that collectivistic and individualistic cultures differ in coping goals. It is important to note here that Gikuyu girls today likely exhibit a more independent self-construal than they did pre-Independence, but that their social relationships would likely remain very important so it would be an error to identify them as individualistic. Still, individualism has been an important influence in Gikuyu society in the past fifty

years and will probably continue to increase in prominence, so that it is worth looking at how a growing independent self-construal will change how Gikuyu girls cope with the possibility of circumcision. As described in Chapter 1, Chun et al. believe that coping goals may differ in focus on the needs of the self vs. needs of others, assertion of autonomy and independence vs. reinforcing relatedness and interdependence, controlling the external environment vs. the internal self, and maximizing gain vs. minimizing loss. One of the main differences between individuals in collectivistic and individualistic societies is the focus that they place on their own needs versus those of others in their groups. In general, individualistic people focus much more on their own needs. In regards to circumcision, this could result in Gikuyu girls focusing much more on their need to avoid the harm/loss of circumcision than their parents' need to preserve tradition. My analysis in the beginning of the chapter did not indicate that Gikuyu girls would have a greater motivation to assert their independence, but there does seem to be less of a motivation to reinforce relatedness. Perhaps indirectly through school, for success it would be necessary to be independent and stand out as more intelligent or a harder worker rather than reinforcing oneself as another member of the group. As far as controlling the environment, there has been a greater focus in Kenya on the power that all Kenyans have to effect change. Some of this began with the ideal of *harambee* and continued through organizations like the women's groups and national activist organizations. International and national pressure for girls and women has been to change that which harms them because of their status as

women in a male-dominated society. For these reasons, a typical Gikuyu girl who is facing pressure from family to be circumcised would be more likely to deal with the stress of the threat by avoiding it or somehow changing her situation. Psychological studies suggest that greater uncertainty about the likelihood of an event's occurrence is implicated in greater stress. One reason for this is because "the coping strategies for anticipating an event's occurrence are often incompatible with strategies needed to anticipate the event's nonoccurrence" (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:91). In other words, a person is not able to mobilize coping resources because they are unsure of what they need to cope with. A Gikuyu girl who did not expect to be circumcised and suddenly found herself facing that possibility would face even greater stress.

Unlike before, emotion-focused coping would not likely be seen as the best option for dealing with the stress situation in light of all the options for simply getting out of it. Anti-circumcision organizations would play an important role in this endeavor by making it easier for girls to find resources if they disagree with their family's stance on circumcision, though many girls may not have access to these resources and could be left with no choice but to be circumcised. The goals of maximizing gain and minimizing loss are a little trickier to understand for circumcision. It would seem that a Gikuyu girl would want to minimize loss if she was more of an individualist. However, coping with the circumcision stressor in the early years of colonization and in pre-colonial times was about maximizing the gain of inclusion into Gikuyu society as a contributing member and minimizing the potential

loss of respect by peers and everyone else in the community. Today, the average Gikuyu girl, if she has a more independent self-construal, would probably be less interested in minimizing the loss of her place in the pro-circumcision community and more motivated by a desire to maximize gain in other areas of her life that are more important, like school. Overall, a typical Gikuyu girl today would be more likely to see circumcision negatively and be motivated to deal with the threat of being circumcised through methods that exercise her control because she is less concerned with the needs of other members of her community.

Health and well-being

The above would suggest that circumcision for the average Gikuyu today would be harmful. The appraisal of threat along with greater individualistic tendencies and an environmental system that promotes change would contribute to a girl wanting to avoid circumcision and the harm or loss that would come with it. This is what would be expected of an *average* Gikuyu girl as determined by demographic data and trends seen in schooling, women's organizations, and ideals of womanhood. Many girls still live in rural settings where circumcision is widely practiced and urbanization and Westernization have not yet made major observable differences in their lives. However, it seems likely that the trends found in more urban centers would begin to make their way to these areas as well. Some of these trends came about as a result of institutional forces like schools and churches, but a good deal came from the circumcision controversy itself. The way the circumcision

controversy has been framed from the beginning of the colonial encounter has shaped Gikuyu experiences with female circumcision. The early associations promoted by the missionaries between circumcision and tradition and Christianity and progress/modernity provoked the resurgence in circumcision during the nationalist struggle during the 1950s. However, this very association brought circumcision out of favor as Kenya tried to move forward with a unilinear conception of progress. The formation of anti-circumcision sentiment, spurred on by churches, has encouraged many women's rights advocates and groups that condemn female circumcision. The existence of these groups encouraged girls who were facing circumcision to take action against it and provided social and other resources for girls who would face heavy sanctions for going against their family's wishes. The non-recursive nature of Moos' stress model incorporates the possibilities of individual agency and action to change the likelihood of threatening stressors to occur. Thus, the individual circumcision experiences of girls affect the larger environment and women's anti-circumcision groups are one way that these individual experiences get magnified and bring about change. Girls who have gone through circumcision against their will and girls who were not expected to go through circumcision but hold strong beliefs about it will continue the trends of declining rates of circumcision whether it be by taking political action or simply not having their own daughters circumcised. Given the pervasiveness and increasing dominance of Christian and western values and institutions, it seems likely that the experiences of girls who are circumcised and would have their daughters

circumcised will not be able to have as strong an effect on the rates of female circumcision among the Gikuyu of Kenya

Conclusion

In my thesis, I have presented one way of approaching an understanding of women's experiences with female genital cutting. This approach is predicated on a view of culture that both shapes and is shaped by the discourses that emerge in transnational encounters. As has been the case with the circumcision controversy in the Gikuyu context, these discourses have often emerged and re-emerged multiple times during the course of encounters between the privileged communicators. Examination of the circumcision controversy's evolution from the early colonial period through contemporary times reveals that the communicators in the discourse have also changed. They were first Gikuyu men and Christian missionaries, later traditionalist and loyalist Gikuyu. In the post-Independence era, Gikuyu women's voices have come to a place of prominence both in advocating for circumcision's protection and encouraging its abolition. At the same time, Euro-American feminists reconstructed the discourse as an issue of women's rights and engaged with other Euro-American feminists and with the patriarchy that they believed imposed FGC on indigenous women. Gikuyu women were effectively silenced in the circumcision discourse. What I hope to have shown in my analysis, is that the simplified notion of Gikuyu women as victims has ignored the varied and changing perspectives of women and their agency in challenging the disadvantage borne out of male domination. Their relative absence in Western feminist discourse should not be interpreted as their unwillingness or inability to engage in these conversations.

On the central question that this thesis has attempted to answer—is circumcision harmful for girls?—the answer is one that initially feels unsatisfactory: *it depends*. While it is an answer that may impress upon the inquisitor a certain sense of conciliatory emptiness, or prompt the culturally-aware reader to respond with a variation of "That much has always been obvious," it is important in its room for different possibilities. Chapters 3 and 4 found that prior to Independence, female circumcision would likely not have resulted in harm for a girl. In other words, it was not internalized as a problem, despite all of the outside efforts to construct circumcision that way. The sacrificing of the individual accomplished during the Irua was welcome as a necessity for preservation of the ideals that permeated all areas of Gikuyu society. The struggle to preserve these ideals reached a fever pitch during Mau Mau. Since then, circumcision and the social context have changed so much that for the majority of Gikuyu girls, being circumcised would be an incredibly harmful experience, much closer to the typical outside representations of FGC as "mutilation" and "torture." In today's climate, for the majority of Gikuyu girls, unwanted circumcision would be a tool of oppression. Such a strong statement is usually followed by recommendations about how we as outsiders, as people sensitive to women's struggles could protect Gikuyu women from this form of oppression. But if there is one thing that should come across in my analysis it is that Gikuyu women have proven to be quite capable of mobilizing themselves to defend themselves and their communities. Many Gikuyu women's organizations have already taken up the fight against circumcision in their communities. To suggest

ways that I, or anyone else concerned with the welfare of women, could intervene in what *I* have concluded is an oppressive act, would be to deny that Gikuyu women can and have been actively negotiating their own status. It would also assume that Gikuyu women are all the same. They have their own histories as engaged in local discourses of circumcision even though perhaps the form of their discourse is not what we have come to represent as “feminist” or “empowered.” Perhaps our time would be better spent understanding their forms of discourse and interrogating how women across the world and within our own communities have been systematically oppressed by patriarchy and Western feminist thought.

The benefits of using psychology in this analysis are twofold. First, it redirects attention to the subjective experiences of circumcision. A discussion of circumcision as a practice is inadequate if it does not consider how it may be experienced by women. The trend in pieces on circumcision of including indigenous women’s narratives points to a growing acknowledgment of the inadequacies of perspectives that are not informed by indigenous women’s experiences. My use of psychology combined personal narratives and analysis of the social context to imagine how multiple factors contributed to the circumcision experience as ordeal. In using the stress models, I have framed the circumcision event as not unlike other taxing events in our lives. Circumcision need not be approached as fundamentally foreign. There is little precedence for the application of stress models to the circumcision experience in either the psychological or anthropological literature. As such, it is highly experimental and there is always the possibility that the available stress

models have been developed in contexts that are so far removed as to render them effectively useless. Still, the use of stress models to study circumcision presents a novel way of approaching the controversy and one that should be explored as potentially providing new insight. Greater efforts to bridge the divide between anthropology and psychology could prove fruitful for both disciplines.

The other benefit of using psychology is that it comes closer to addressing one of the most common arguments against FGC—that FGC hurts the girl both physically and emotionally. All of the Gikuyu women quoted in this thesis have shown that, although the two are often conflated, extreme pain is not always understood as extreme stress. The conclusion that circumcision for the average Gikuyu today would be psychologically harmful does not answer definitely if FGC is harmful for all girls. My conclusion is drawn from close analysis of a particular context and would have no bearing on the experiences of FGC as practiced elsewhere. Ultimately, examining the *problem* of circumcision without first deconstructing how this very exercise has encouraged the problematic construction of this problem does not really "solve" anything.

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