

The Clitoridectomy Controversy in Kenya: The "Woman's Affair" that Wasn't

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In the late 1920s, Kenya was the site of an intense controversy over the indigenous practice of female circumcision. The missionary community, the colonial government, the Local Native Councils (LNCs), the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), and ultimately the British Parliament became embroiled in the clitoridectomy controversy: a popular and legislative debate occurring in Kenya and Britain over whether or not female circumcision¹ should be permitted to continue in Kenya. The clitoridectomy controversy is discussed most frequently as part of the narrative of Kenyan nationalism. Nonetheless, each group posited, in some form or another, that female circumcision was specifically a "woman's affair" (Thomas 1998). Ironically, Kenyan women's voices were noticeably absent from the debate over female circumcision despite the fact that the procedure irreparably modified women's bodies and was typically performed by female "operators."

The term "female circumcision" can denote a variety of procedures. As Judith Muasher and Leonard Kouba explain, the *modified sunna operation* involves the "partial or total excision of the body of the clitoris" and results in hard scar tissue (Muasher and Kouba 1998). Excision refers to the "removal of part or all of the clitoris" and "all or part of the labia minora and labia majora." After excision, "the edges of the vulva are then sewn together" or joined together using thorns. The suturing or pinning together is done in such a way that the "opposite sides of the labia majora will heal together and form a wall over the vaginal opening." A "small sliver of wood is inserted into the vagina," Muasher and Kouba note, in order to create a small hole to "allow for the passage of urine and menstrual flow (*ibid.*, 95-110)." In this paper, I will use the term "female circumcision" to refer to "excision" and the term "clitoridectomy" to designate the "modified sunna" procedure.

When viewed from a gendered perspective it becomes clear that while clitoridectomy was an issue *about* women, it was not an issue *of* women. That is to say, the clitoridectomy controversy was not a debate that publicly engaged women in contesting the control of their own bodies. Rather, the clitoridectomy controversy was a gendered debate in which various parties used the control of women's bodies as a means to forward their own programs in the colonial context. The central point of my inquiry is not to determine "what African men and colonial men 'did' to African women" in the controversy over clitoridectomy (Manicom 1992: 458). Instead, I am interested in articulating how the issue of female circumcision amongst the Kikuyu provided a discursive space in which the Kikuyu Central Association, the missionary societies, the colonial government, the Local Native Councils,

and British MPs were able to contend that the regulation of Kikuyu women's reproduction and sexuality was essential to their respective agendas in Kenya during the late twenties and early thirties.

Theorizing "Woman": the Roles of Sex and Gender

In order to appreciate the clitoridectomy controversy as a contest over the control of women's bodies it is first necessary to note that gender provides a framework with which to organize both the cultural and biological reproduction of society. Control over sexual access to women, who are society's primary (re)producers,² is a central function of gender. Indeed, "societies" have historically established patriarchal systems that defined normative gender roles and "controlled sexual access to females" via a "combination of beliefs, law, custom and coercion" (Ekong 1992: 40). The control that patriarchal systems of gender exercise over women's sexuality³ has often placed women in a subordinate position within society.

Very often, such concern with the control of female sexuality and reproduction is tied to anxieties about the cultural and biological purity of society (Johnson-Odim and Strobel: 39). Unauthorized sexual access to women, the cultural and biological (re)producers of society, carries the potential of damaging or diminishing society. In Western patriarchal systems, these anxieties were historically heightened by the fact that marriage, rather than being viewed as merely the uniting of two individuals, constituted an alliance between kin groups who composed the primary units of biological and social reproduction (*ibid.*, 43).

Similar themes of control over women's sexuality and fears about social contamination played an integral role in determining the status of women members of many pre-colonial and colonial African societies. A number of ethnic groups in Kenya — the Kikuyu, the Embu, and the Meru — were "bridewealth societies." In bridewealth, or *lobola/roovorolo/roora* societies, "women are transferred between lineages" in exchange for goods or for services (Jeater 1993: 19). The bridewealth exchange signified both compensation to the bride's parents for her loss and the groom's rights to the children of the marriage.¹⁶ Claims to "sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, and rights to people" were thus implicit in the bridewealth exchange (Rubin 1998: 544).

The transfer of women between men of different lineage groups, Diana Jeater argues, is one of the primary factors in "establishing gender differences and separate social identities between men and women in bridewealth societies (Jeater 1993: 19)." Because women are "transacted" in the bridewealth exchange, men who give and take women become linked, and women often serve as "conduit[s] of the [exchange] relationship rather than partner[s] to it (Rubin 1998: 542)." The bridewealth exchange grants men "certain rights in their female kin," and leaves women without "the same rights either to themselves or their male kin (Johnson-Odim and Strobel:

44)." Since the bridewealth exchange therefore renders women less able than men to effectively exert control over their own lives, the manner in which women are conceptualized and the ways in which their gender identities are constructed entails "gender subordination (Rubin 1998: 544)." Such subordination in turn creates an imbalance of power between men and women by curtailing women's voices and social, political, and economic options (*ibid.*, 544).

Issues of gendered social control were crucial in determining the status of women in contemporary British society as well. Though the feminist movement in Britain had been steadily gaining ground for several decades, in the 1920s British society was generally wedded to a patriarchal ideology in which men had historically "rejected prominent and public roles for women" and had instead empowered themselves to "represent women's interests (Johnson-Odim and Strobel: 60)." This historic ideology of female subordination in Britain was linked to a predominant economic philosophy that placed women's (re)production exclusively in the private or domestic sphere and demanded men's labor in the public or economic sphere. This focus on women's private and exclusive (re)production in turn stemmed from a long process that Michel Foucault has dubbed the "*hysterization of women's bodies* (1978: 104)." This process was one in which "the feminine body was analyzed—qualified and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality." As Foucault explains, the female body was situated in "organic communication with the social body (whose fecundity it was supposed to regulate)" and in "the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element)." Finally, the feminine body and women's sexuality were linked to the "life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologicico-moral responsibility)." European women had therefore been identified fundamentally by their sexuality and attendant reproductive capacity. The equation of Woman with Sexuality assigned or denied particular roles, spaces, and privileges to women (1978: 104).

The similar Kikuyu and British ideologies of gendered social control intersected in the colonial context and were mapped onto the bodies of Kikuyu women. Susan Geiger explains that African and European men often maintained a "notion of shared interest in the control of African women" and that both groups of men generally conceptualized women as "essentially and appropriately subordinate to men (Geiger 1997: 23,24)." This mutual conception encouraged and enabled both Kikuyu men and British men to control various aspects of Kikuyu women's sexuality and (re)production in order to extend their own economic, political, and social power (Schmidt 1992: 181).

The particular cultural and economic challenges proffered by colonialism stressed the need for gendered social control to both Kikuyu and British men. Control of Kikuyu women's sexuality and reproductive capacity became even more important to Kikuyu men during the colonial period because of the social and economic consequences of colonialism such as land alienation.

Historically, Kikuyu women played the dominant (re)productive role in agriculture and family. As Cora Ann Presley explains, Kikuyu women farmers had the "primary role in producing food" and thus their labor was "crucial to agricultural production" (*ibid.*, 19). Further, all elements of the care of male and female children came under women's authority (*ibid.*, 3).

Economic objectives also stimulated British men's interest in controlling Kikuyu women's sexuality and reproductive capacity. Colonial men had an interest in preserving the traditional, gendered systems of Kikuyu agricultural labor and reproduction of the family. British men hypothesized that the Kikuyu system would motivate women to exercise the "peasant option," choosing commodity production over wage labor which would in turn free men to join the wage labor force to the benefit of the colonial economy.⁴

The control of African women's sexuality and reproductive capacity was significant to colonial men from a social standpoint as well. The ideology of the "civilizing mission" was key to the propagation and success of British imperialism worldwide. This ideology held generally that non-European peoples were in a lower, unenlightened stage of development than that of Europeans, and that it was the task of Europeans to bring non-European peoples into a higher stage of enlightened progress through imperial governance and "tutelage." Further, this notion of an imperialist "civilizing mission" was highly gendered. In their various colonies, the British consistently looked to indigenous traditions and customs that they viewed as being oppressive and degrading to native women for evidence of the need for imperial tutelage and governance. These customs and traditions that the British highlighted were most often tied to the control of women's sexuality and of female bodies.⁵ In Africa, the British focused on the practices of clitoridectomy and polygyny as evidence of the Africans' lack of "civilization." African women were thus central to the British "justifications for colonialism" (Johnson-Odim and Strobel: 136). In sum, for colonial men, the construct of the "Native Woman" was highly sexualized and "framed as a social problem" (Manicom 1992: 457) The "civilizing mission" thus consisted largely of "saving women from themselves, from their men, and from their barbaric, pre-modern cultures" (Hunt 1996: 322).

Therefore, the concerns of Kikuyu men and British men often worked in tandem—either coincidentally or intentionally to regulate the sexuality and (re)production of Kikuyu women. "Indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and enhanced one another, evolving into new structures and forms of domination" (Schmidt 1992: 1-2). The clitoridectomy controversy is a prime example of such a phenomenon. During the debate over clitoridectomy, the ideologies and interests of various groups of Kikuyu men and colonial men intersected and enabled one another. New sociopolitical structures governing the control of Kikuyu women's bodies resulted from this intersection. These new Kikuyu and British structures in turn enhanced the existing patriarchies.

The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA)

In the course of the clitoridectomy controversy, "The ritual unmaking and reworking of women's bodies became central to the construction of national identity" (Pedersen 1991: 648). The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) drew upon popular anxieties regarding land alienation, religion, and cultural integrity in order to build a political platform. The party posed the preservation of "traditions," and of female circumcision in particular, as a counterpoint to British colonial domination. The rhetoric of the KCA thus proved essential in creating the link between the control of female sexuality and (re)production, and nationalist concerns.

By the 1920s, disputes between the colonial government and indigenous communities over the control of land led to the formation of anti-colonial political parties. White settlement began in Kenya in 1903, (Buell 1928: 299) and by the late 1920s severe land shortages in Kikuyuland had resulted from the colonial government alienating the "vast adjacent territories" of the White Highlands to European ownership and moving the Kikuyu onto reserve lands held by the British crown (Ambler 1932: 143). The issue of land alienation "focused attention on the racial inequalities" that accompanied the imposition of imperial rule (*ibid.*, 143). Writing in 1928, Harvard Professor Raymond Leslie Buell summarized the inequitable land situation and accompanying racial politics in Kenya. Buell writes,

At the present time, the average European farmer occupies about five hundred acres of land in comparison with the eight acres of land held by the average native. He justifies this discrimination on the ground that he, the European, makes use of his land while the native does not. But census returns...show that the European in Kenya to-day [sic] has only nine percent of occupied land under cultivation. Settlers and some officials have asserted that if the native does not put his land to better use it should be taken away and given to the white man. But in view of the overcrowding and communal land tenure, it is very difficult for one native to improve his land because of cross-fertilization and the encroachment of his neighbor's cattle. It is now impossible for a native to obtain an individual title to land within the reserve, and practically impossible for him to keep his neighbor's cattle out. Even if the native has the wherewithal, he finds it impossible to purchase land outside the reserves from the government which restricts the sale of Crown lands to Europeans, or to purchase land from a settler, inasmuch as the governor has the power to veto the transfer of land from one race to another (324).

Colonial land policy therefore excluded the Kikuyu people from owning land outside the reserves despite the fact that the European population in Kenya kept only a fraction of the colony's arable land under cultivation. The Kikuyu

had historically held land privately in individual plots called *Gethaka* (Buell: 308). Kikuyu landholders leased portions of their *Gethaka* to tenant farmers who were responsible for clearing and cultivating the land (*ibid.*, 308). Overcrowding and communal landholding in the reserves thus challenged historical patterns of land holding and prohibited the Kikuyu from making efficient use of the limited, available lands. Furthermore, a racialized discourse in which the Kikuyu were depicted by settlers and colonial officials as being lazy, ignorant farmers developed from these circumstances and reinforced the colonial contention that Kenya's fertile land would be wasted unless it was under European control. The Kikuyu were allowed to leave the reserve areas and work on the alienated lands if they acquired government passes (*vipande*) permitting them to labor for European plantation owners.

The Kikuyu Association (KA) was formed in mid-1920 by conservative, Christian Kikuyus with the purpose of petitioning the colonial government about such injustices.⁶ The organization was followed quickly in 1921 by the Young Kikuyu Association, later known as the East African Association (EAA), a group of young Kikuyu men based in Nairobi who were concerned with fostering pan-tribal unity and implementing direct lines of contact with the colonial administrations in the colony and in Britain (Tignor 1976: 230). The EAA lost its thrust when its leader, Harry Thuku, was deported in March 1922 for making seditious remarks against the colonial government. Thuku was arrested and punished under the Removal of Native Ordinances (1909), a law which empowered the Governor to "deport a native conducting himself so as to be dangerous to the peace and good order from one part of the protectorate to the other without making specific charges against him" (Buell 1928: 375).

The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), "a reformist opposition" group organized formally in 1924 by young Kikuyu men who were strongly anti-colonial despite having been educated in mission schools, filled the vacuum left by the decline of the EAA (Ambler 1989:143). Robert Tignor explains the seeming paradox created by the KCA members' mission, backgrounds and anti-colonial sentiments. "The dialectic of colonialism is such that the first to be colonized tend to be the first to espouse anti-colonial and nationalist feeling, and to be the people, because of education and intimate contact with their rulers are capable of organizing and articulating a movement of protest" (Tignor 1976: 11). Members of the KCA concentrated primarily on formal attempts to secure the return of lands appropriated for European settlement and lobbied for the return of Harry Thuku (Pedersen 1991: 652). For example, the KCA petitioned the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Passfield, to amend colonial laws such as the Crown Land Ordinance (1915) that empowered the Governor of Kenya to declare reserves (KCA 1931). Challenging the exile of Harry Thuku, KCA Secretary Johnstone Kenyatta pithily wrote to Lord Passfield, "I have told my people that it is not unusual for the British Nation to exile a man from his home and country for daring to voice the legitimate grievances of his people . . ." (KCA).

The missionary societies' ban on female circumcision and membership in the KCA among their adherents in 1929, along with the attempts of the colonial government and the Local Native Councils (LNCs) to regulate the female circumcision, provided the perfect *popular* rallying cry for the KCA's anti-colonial platform. The KCA published the missionary societies' resolutions banning female circumcision in *Muigwithania*, the association's Kikuyu-language newspaper, and distributed a circular condemning the ban to all seventy-four (Kikuyu Chiefs Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: 30). The circular read that "It is a great sorrow that all the Akikuyu are prohibited circumcision." It admonished the chiefs, "Now it is well for you to be ready, for when we have this law forced upon us, it will make trouble for us later" (*ibid.*, 30).

A number of Kikuyu, Theodore Natsoulas explains, "considered the ban an assault on traditional culture," and "the KCA took advantage of this perception" (Natsoulas 1998: 143). Many Kikuyu felt their culture to be threatened by colonial attempts to regulate or abolish female circumcision for a number of reasons. Female circumcision and its attendant initiation ceremonies, numerous Kikuyu maintained, offered a fundamental framework for organizing gender and (re)production in Kikuyu communities. David Sandgren succinctly spells out this viewpoint. He writes,

Female circumcision was considered the only proper means to become an adult and to have access to the future. In addition, it was an important link with the community, both living and dead. In their [Kikuyus'] view an uncircumcised female remained perpetually a girl, unfit for marriage and incapable of bearing children (1982: 200).

Furthermore, KCA discourse then tied the controversy over female circumcision to issues of land alienation and Westernization. Many Kikuyu felt that clitoridectomy was necessary for fertility and concluded that the attacks on the practice were "aimed at reducing their population so that more land could be taken away from them" (Robertson 1996: 629). These fears that a ban or limitations on female circumcision would impede Kikuyu women's (re)production were given voice in the *Mitherigu* or protest song sung by young KCA supporters (Natsoulas 1998: 143). As a colonial official reported, the song was "a powerful incentive to disobedience on the part of the young Kikuyu to all constituted authority" and described its performance as "orgiastic in nature" (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: App.5). Some selected verses of the *Mitherigu* read,

1. Little knives
 In their sheaths,
 That they may fight with the Church
 The time has come.

2. I'm going to break all friendships
The only friendship I will retain
Is between me and Jehovah.

3. The D.C. _____
[Insert name]
Is bribed with uncircumcised girls
So that the land may go.

4. When Johnstone shall return
With the King of the Kikuyu
Philip and Koinange
Will don women's robes.

5. I used to think Jesus was the son of God
Now I found out that he was a picture.

6. He who signs
Shall be crucified.

The song thus illustrates a widespread loss of faith in the Protestant churches that the ban on female circumcision incurred among the Kikuyu. In the first verse, the "little knives" used in circumcision are posed as offering a means with which to resist the missionary societies' inroads. The second verse, in which the singer states his plans to sever all friendships except that between himself and Jehovah, answers the missionaries' pledge to excommunicate anyone engaging in female circumcision. For the Kikuyu singer, the community of the church becomes negligible to the maintenance of his faith while his individual relationship with Jehovah emerges as central. The fifth verse of the *Mitherigu* expresses further disillusionment with the teachings of the missionary societies, while the sixth verse employs the Christian trope of martyrdom by crucifixion to indicate the fate of those signing the missionary societies' pledge repudiating female circumcision and membership in the KCA.

In addition, verse four exemplifies the belief that Harry Thuku would be released from exile upon Johnstone Kenyatta's return from Britain. Together, Thuku and Kenyatta would wrest power from the colonial government and humiliate the Kikuyu chiefs Philip and Koinange who were popularly viewed as allies of the British. Further, verse three contends that Europeans had "ulterior motives in supporting a ban on female circumcision" which involved the appropriation of Kikuyu women as well as Kikuyu land (Natsoulas 1998: 141). Since non-Christian African men would not marry uncircumcised girls, the girls would thus have to marry Europeans who

would take "not only the women but also the land" (*ibid.*, 141). The song, as Susan Pedersen points out, demonstrates one of the ways in which "the defense of the sexual order became entangled with a revolt against the British and their African collaborators and with the political protest against the loss of Kikuyu land" (*ibid.*, 653).

The female circumcision controversy was also tied up in the issues of Christian education and conversion. The translation of the Bible into local languages, Lamin Sanneh explains, had the consequences of "affect[ing] ethnic sensibility" and giving it "material expression, moral affirmation and a historical vocation," while simultaneously "mediat[ing] the spread of European cultural ideas (Sanneh 1998:13). Discrepancies in the translation of the Kikuyu-language Bible created contention over the missionaries' motives in outlawing circumcision. First, *irua*, the Kikuyu word for "circumcision" does not differentiate between the male and female practices (Natsoulas 1998: 144). Second, the Kikuyu language distinguishes between an uncircumcised girl, *irigu*, and a circumcised girl, *muiritu*. The majority of literate Kikuyu, who had learned to read in mission schools, had both encountered the term "*irua*" as well as ambiguous usages of "*irigu*" and "*muiritu*" in the Kikuyu-language Bible and were confused by what seemed to be contradictory teachings in the missionary rhetoric and the Bible. Dr. Louis Leakey, an anthropologist and longtime resident of Kenya, wrote that many Kikuyu had expressed to him their frustration with trying to reconcile Biblical and missionary teachings on female circumcision (1931: 280). A typical complaint, Leakey explains, took the following form.

They [the missionaries] want us to promise to have nothing to do with *irua ra aka* (the *irua* of women), and they want us to keep our daughters *irigu* (the word used to describe girls before they were initiated and operated upon), and yet the Book of God tells us that Mariamu, the mother of Jesus, was a *muiritu* (i.e., a girl who has been both initiated and operated upon). Besides, in the passage in Corinthians which discusses the merits and demerits of 'circumcision,' it says 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing' (1931: 280).

From their reading of Biblical texts, the Kikuyu thus concluded and asserted "since circumcision had been part of the Christian tradition...there had to be ulterior motives or reasons for the mission campaign against the practice" (Natsoulas 1998: 144).

Yet despite such a broad and vocal opposition to multiple aspects of colonial rule, the Kikuyus' various oppositions were not articulated as a *formalized* body of grievances in the political sector until the KCA adopted these oppositions as part of their platform. The KCA's role in the clitoridectomy controversy thus consisted of co-opting Kikuyu peoples' anxieties about the consequences of colonial rule, organizing Kikuyu opposition into a nationalist political platform, and converting the practice of Kikuyu traditions like female circumcision into nationalist statements.

The KCA, as noted above, had represented the missionary societies' ban on female circumcision and KCA membership as "laws." This representation of religious authority as a form of legal authority conflated the power of the mission societies with that of the colonial government. The KCA's "description of the mission rules as 'law' reflected," as Pedersen explains, "their refusal to accept British claims that the missions were distinct from the government" (1991: 663). Then KCA rhetoric began to promote female circumcision as having "always been the sign 'true' of a Kikuyu," as a means of expressing "loyalty to the incipient, as yet imaginary nation," and as an "act of radical nationalism" (*ibid.*, 651, 655). In their third strategy the KCA addressed directly the critiques of female circumcision voiced by the missionary societies and colonial government of female circumcision and then defended the female circumcision in light of these objections.

The most thorough KCA defense of female circumcision is found in the writings of Johnstone (Jomo) Kenyatta, who was studying in London and acting as secretary of the KCA during the clitoridectomy controversy.⁷ Kenyatta answers the missionaries' and colonial government's critiques of female circumcision on multiple levels. Kenyatta's response can be classified as what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the "autoethnographic response" (Pratt 1992: 7). "Autoethnographic texts," Pratt explains, "are those the [colonized] others construct in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan representations" in order to locate "a point of entry into metropolitan literate culture" (*ibid.*, 7). Accordingly, the first part of Kenyatta's response, in which he addresses the cultural ramifications of the regulation of female circumcision, is fairly predictable and takes into account the popular anxieties discussed above. Kenyatta first underlines the significance of female circumcision in maintaining the gendered framework of Kikuyu society. He explains that in Kikuyu society, female circumcision is "regarded as the very essence" of the ceremony in which girls are initiated into the adult community (1953). Kenyatta then equates female circumcision with the Judaic rite of male circumcision as explained in the Bible, and points out that both practices and their attendant ceremonies hold "enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications" in their respective communities (*ibid.*, 127-8).

In light of the significance that female circumcision holds in Kikuyu society, Kenyatta posits that efforts to eradicate or limit female circumcision must be part of a larger missionary/colonial plan to "detritalize," and therefore implicitly to Christianize/Westernize African society. He holds that the overwhelming majority of Africans believe that "it is the secret aim of those who attack this centuries-old custom [female circumcision] to disintegrate their social order and thereby hasten their Europeanisation" (*ibid.*, 130). Kenyatta then situates the female circumcision controversy and fears about detribalization in the context of an overall "discontentment about political and economic affairs of the country, especially about the land question" (*ibid.*, 263).

Kenyatta departs from the standard rhetoric regarding female

circumcision in the second part of his critique when he explains the mechanics of the practice and the effects that female circumcision has on women's bodies. To begin, Kenyatta substitutes the term "clitoridectomy" for the phrase "female circumcision" although the latter is actually more prevalent in Kikuyu society. He counters the criticisms of the pain accompanying female circumcision by asserting that cold water acts as a local anesthetic during the procedure. Kenyatta elaborates,

Water is thrown on the girl's sexual organ to make it numb and to arrest profuse bleeding as well as to shock the girl's nerves at the time, for she is not supposed to show any fear or make a sign of emotion or even blink...the girl hardly feels anything for the simple reason that her limbs have been numbed [by cold water]...it is only after she awakes after three or four hours of rest that she begins to realise that something was done to her genital organ (*ibid.*, 140-1).

Kenyatta then describes female circumcision, in spite of opposing medical evidence, as a simple, limited "surgical operation" that is quick, precise and sanitary.

She [the operator] takes out of her pocket (*moondo*) the Gikuyu operating razor and (*rwenji*), and in quick movements, and with the dexterity of a Harley Street surgeon, proceeds to operate upon the girls. With a stroke she cuts off the tip of the clitoris (*rong'otho*) . . . (*ibid.*, 140-1)

A close reading of Kenyatta's descriptions reveals an image of the girls who are undergoing the procedure as entirely passive participants — even objects. In Kenyatta's account, female circumcision is an "operat[ion] upon girls" and a procedure to which girls are to have no response, neither "show[ing] fear" nor "mak[ing] a sign of emotion" or "even by blink[ing]" (*ibid.*, 140-1, my emphasis). In fact, according to Kenyatta, circumcised girls are not even expected to be *aware* of what is being done to the most intimate and sensitive area of their bodies. In Kenyatta's account, circumcised girls become *active* participants in the procedure only when they fail to care for their wounds properly. He writes that failure in healing is most often due to "the negligence of the girl . . . in applying the healing leaves in the proper way" (*ibid.*, 147).

The KCA's positive stance on female circumcision, as illustrated by Kenyatta's writings, is in keeping with the common strategy of using "women (or more commonly 'woman') as symbol, icon, repository of the culture of nationalist and other political movements" (Geiger 1997: 12). The practice of female circumcision therefore renders the Kikuyu woman's body a symbolic object of social control, first on the tribal, and then on the national level. Even while the rituals associated with female circumcision "remained superficially unaltered," during the colonial period the practice "came to be

invested with new meanings" when the KCA appropriated the protection of the tradition as a cornerstone of its nationalist platform (Ambler 1989: 156).

The Missionary Societies

"Historically, pre-existing forms of power and gender regulation are appropriated and transformed by the institutions of rule" (Manicom 1992: 457). Indeed, Protestant missionaries' attempts to appropriate and transform indigenous systems of gender provided the impetus for the heated controversy over clitoridectomy in Kenya during the late 1920s and early 1930s. For the leaders of Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), the African Inland Mission (AIM), and the Gospel Missionary Society (GMS), the primary Protestant mission groups operating in Kenya, the process of Christian conversion and the imperialist notion of a "civilizing mission" went hand-in-hand.⁸ The mission societies thus concerned themselves with eradicating gender-based "tribal customs" that they found irreconcilable with both Protestant doctrines and contemporary, Western conceptions of "morality." The mission movement ultimately prompted a spate of colonial legislation regulating clitoridectomy that produced the tremendous growth of the KCA's voice and influence.

Historical practices such as female circumcision and its related ritual ceremonies, sex play, polygyny and marriage transactions, inheritance of widows, alcohol consumption and its attendant ceremonies, and Kikuyu religion and ritualized healing practices, were strongly sanctioned by the mission societies. As Beth Maina Albergh points out, four of the six customs targeted by missionaries were directly concerned with the control of African women's sexuality and (re)production (Ahlberg 1991: 76). For the missionaries, the "construct of the 'African woman'" was thus deeply imbued with notions of "female sexuality and patriarchal propriety (Manicom 1992: 458). To the missionaries, their African followers' abstinence from these customs became a sign of sincere conversion (*ibid.*, 458). Further, the missions were somewhat able to curtail these practices among the African population-at-large because mission schools held a "virtual monopoly" over Western-style education for Africans (Natsoulas 1998: 139).

Yet, if in their attempts to fulfill a "civilizing mission," the missionary societies attacked a number of local practices why was it that female circumcision became the site of legal contestation? First, the missionary societies launched their fiercest attacks against female circumcision because, unlike most of the other censured customs, the practice had the tangible, quantifiable effects on female sexuality and (re)production. Missionary medical professionals had been treating the devastating side effects of female circumcision for nearly three decades. These practitioners deemed female circumcision "a permanent mutilation affecting woman's natural functions (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: App. 2). By the close of the 1920s, mission doctors and nurses had treated numerous "cases of impaired urination, menstruation, intercourse and childbirth among excised women" (Thomas

1998: 129). In a report on the effects of female circumcision, missionary doctors argued that "cutting away the inner and outer soft parts lying around the birth canal" caused "great agony" in addition to urinary tract infections and sterility (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: App. 2). Furthermore, the doctors maintained female circumcision had "disastrous results not only for birth rate but for the physique and vitality of the tribe. The missionaries' concern with the increased infant and maternal injury and mortality incurred by female circumcision coincided with the general colonial anxiety about low population growth rates in East Africa. Concerns with the control over the health and (re)productive capacity of African women's bodies thus became a primary part of the missionaries' opposition to female circumcision (*ibid.*).

The mission societies' misunderstanding of the essential role female circumcision and its attendant ceremonies played in organizing African systems of gender also contributed to their attack on the practice. The missionaries were quick to criticize and dismiss the elaborate rituals that accompanied female circumcision as mere "pagan ceremonies" which needed to be eradicated along with the brutal practice itself (Pedersen 1991: 652). For example, a missionary report on female circumcision explained that,

It has been stated that where initiatory in character, the rite is usually accompanied by definite instruction on social matters. Among the Kikuyu however, little if any specific instruction is given. On the other hand, incidental teaching of village life, and the sex appeal of the dance-song, begun in early childhood and culminating in the emotionalism of the circumcision ceremony undoubtedly constitute a full preparation for sexual life. There is little doubt however, that this preparation is corrupting in its effect, and moreover, psychologically dangerous in the undue emphasis on sexual life which it engenders in the mind of the initiate (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: App.2).

This excerpt expresses the missionaries' view that the Kikuyu circumcision ceremonies constituted a general celebration of sex rather than a period of instruction in which young people, especially young women, acquired the gendered knowledge and expectations that were to define their roles in their communities. The missionaries assumed that since openly exhibited sexuality was a pervasive part of Kikuyu interactions, the initiation ceremonies were redundant. Furthermore, such openness about sex ran contrary to the Protestant sensibilities of the Edwardian era. The concern with the damage circumcision caused to the female body and (re)production generally, along with the missionaries' lack of understanding of circumcision's part in maintaining Kikuyu systems of gender therefore led the missionary societies to focus most intensely on female circumcision in their efforts to eradicate Kikuyu cultural practices that they deemed "uncivilized" and "immoral."

In their attempt to eradicate female circumcision, the missionary societies influenced the colonial government to pass legislation regulating female circumcision, whereas other Kikuyu cultural practices remained subject

only to informal, religious sanction (Natsoulas 1998: 139). The East African governors issued an official policy on female circumcision in which they instructed the Native Administration Directors to allow "minor" female circumcision and directed the African-led Local Native Councils (LNCs) to outlaw "major" operations which would cause "grievous hurt" (*ibid.*, 139). In addition, the three primary Protestant missions in Kenya took their sanction of female circumcision one step further when they issued a formal declaration in 1929, forswearing both female circumcision and membership in the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), and then required all their adherents in school and church to sign it (*ibid.*, 137-138). The KCA defended female circumcision as a "crucial social custom," and the missions subsequently lost the majority of their adherents (Berman and Lonsdale 1992: 230).

Therefore, missionary-led efforts to eliminate female circumcision sparked the clitoridectomy controversy. These efforts came at a time when "the effects of land alienation, taxation, forced labor, poor salaries and other forms of colonial repression were considerably felt by the Kikuyu," and were read by the Kikuyu as an imperialist attempt to legislate their system of gender organization out of existence (Albergh 1991: 77). Also, the tie between the "disavowal of the practice of female circumcision and membership in the KCA" (*ibid.*, 76) established an important linkage between the preservation of gender-based traditions and politics while supplying the KCA with "their first real chance for popularity" (Pedersen 1991: 652). Missionary activities were therefore "part of the entire process of colonial domination" which was predicated in large part on gendered social control (Albergh 1991: 76). Through efforts to "civilize" and "Christianize" African peoples, the missionary societies "probably played the greatest role in dismantling Kikuyu customs and values which defined male/female relationships and sex and reproduction (*ibid.*, 76).

The Colonial State

The colonial government of Kenya, as noted above, entered the legal debate over female circumcision partly at the behest of the colony's missionary societies. The missionaries were able to help draw the colonial state formally into the clitoridectomy controversy because the two groups shared a loose notion of the "civilizing mission." However, the colonial government's active interest in the debate over female circumcision was fueled both by concern over low birthrates and abortion, and by the political threat that the KCA's advocacy of the practice posed to the stability of gender-based relations of colonial domination.

Generally, colonial officials and missionaries shared similar prejudices about the Kikuyu (Geiger 1997: 46). However, there was much less consensus between the two groups over what the shape the "civilizing mission" should take. Officials in Kenya generally took a much more pragmatic view of the "civilizing mission" than did the missionary societies. On the one

hand, colonial officials were quick to invoke the rhetoric of the "civilizing mission" and to attack indigenous traditions when it suited their programs of production and social order. On the other hand, the colonial state often tolerated other local practices unless they "proved an impediment" to institutions of colonial domination (Kamoche 1981). For example, the colonial government encouraged African women to retain their historical roles as agriculturists rather than joining the new, wage labor sector.

The colonial government's dualistic attitude towards the continuance of African traditions is apparent in its handling of the issue of female circumcision. From one perspective, the colonial government sought to limit female circumcision because of what it saw as negative material and social implications of the practice. Yet the colonial officials opted to regulate rather than to eradicate female circumcision because they recognized both the place that the practice held in maintaining the gendered social order and the political threat the KCA posed by championing the practice.

The colonial government's initial interest in female circumcision was, like that of the missionaries, related to the tradition's negative consequences for female sexuality and women's (re)production. Missionary doctors' reports that increased maternal and infant mortality, along with decreased fertility, were prevalent side effects of female circumcision alarmed colonial officials. The colonial government, as noted above, was extremely concerned with the low rate of population growth in East Africa.

First, the colonial government hypothesized that a steady, increasing birthrate among African populations would provide the means by which these populations could recover from the demographic disasters wrought by natural catastrophes and by conditions of insecurity related to the imposition of colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kjekshus 1977). A steadily increasing African population was important to colonial officials for both economic reasons and purposes of prestige. On the economic level, the colonial government needed a sizable population to meet its demands for labor and then increasingly to provide additional markets for metropolitan-produced consumer goods. Yet, while the colonial government concerned itself with extracting labor from colonized men, its focus in "controlling and extracting" from colonized women concentrated on "their sexuality and their role in social and biological reproduction" as well as on the central role that colonial officials believed women played in commodity consumption (Geiger 1997: 22).

British officials at home and abroad viewed themselves as accountable for the well being of the colonized populations under their domination. "This House," said Undersecretary for the Colonies Drummond Shiels in reference to the British Parliament, "is directly responsible for the welfare of 50,000,000 to 70,000,000 of human beings scattered all over the earth whose conditions may be adversely or happily affected by decisions taken here" (Parliamentary Debates 1929-30: cols 611). Therefore, a healthy, increasing population became central to Britain's prestige and legitimacy as

an imperial power. As Lynn M. Thomas explains,

In the wake of World War I, amid nationalist and eugenicist preoccupation with the size and health of imperial populations and increased scrutiny of colonial rule by international organizations, failure to foster health and demographic growth among African populations had become a potential source of political embarrassment (Thomas 1998: 130).⁹

In addition to missionary doctors' reports, numerous accounts by missionaries and district officers linking female circumcision and abortion stimulated the colonial government's interest in female circumcision.¹⁰ The colonial officials posited that a relationship between female circumcision and abortion amongst the Kikuyu stemmed largely from the late initiation age of Kikuyu girls. In contrast to many parts of Africa where female circumcision is practiced on young children, many of the indigenous peoples of Kenya circumcised girls when they were in late adolescence (Kouba and Muasher 1985: 100-1). In Kikuyu societies, late adolescent girls awaiting circumcision were considered neither as full, adult members of the community nor as ready for marriage even though their bodies were sexually mature and their reproductive capacity at its peak. Yet, uncircumcised girls were allowed to participate in *ngweko*, "a form of sexual play which stopped short of intercourse," with slightly older, circumcised young men (Thomas 1998, 127).

The colonial officials and missionaries believed that this sexual experimentation frequently crossed the line into intercourse and often resulted in pregnancies that were not sanctioned by Kikuyu societies (*ibid.*, 126). A district report summarized the situation and related it to the low rate of population growth as follows:

Every girl upon attaining puberty acquires a lover, who is in the position of an affianced husband with whom she cohabitates. While this practice does not appear to be condemned by local native opinion it is nevertheless considered a disgrace for a girl to have a child before she has undergone clitoridectomy, or to undergo the operation when she is already enceinte. The result is that when a girl finds herself pregnant her lover takes her to a native "expert" to have abortion effected. In some cases the result is the death of the girl; in many other cases after repeated pregnancies and mis-carriages, [she] becomes incapable of giving birth to a living child. The consequential effect on birth rate is serious (Kikuyu Mission Council 1932: 21).

Furthermore, as Thomas explains, "Pre-excision pregnancy... violated local concepts of personhood; It was like a child conceiving a child". An uncircumcised girl who was pregnant or already a mother brought her family substantially decreased bridewealth and had a much less elaborate circumcision ceremony than her peers. Colonial officials therefore assumed

that societal sanctions against pre-circumcision pregnancies most often motivated uncircumcised, pregnant girls to have abortions.

Hence, colonial officials in the districts came to believe that there was a relationship amongst late circumcision, premarital sexual relations, and abortion in Kikuyu communities. The colonial officials' objections to abortion were grounded more solidly in the negative consequences that abortion was thought to hold for women's health and fertility rather than in "moral" opposition to the practice.¹¹ The colonial officials aimed their criticism of abortion at what they concluded to be "devastating" methods employed by male Kikuyu abortionists that compromised Kikuyu women's fertility and lives. These abortionists, called *muriti wa mauu* or "removers of the womb," provided no rudimentary medical care with abortions. The colonial officials understood the primary methods of abortion to be administration of a elixir of "roots and seeds" which produced heavy vaginal bleeding upon ingestion; placement of "extreme pressure" on the woman's abdomen; and "insertion of a sharp instrument into the vagina" in order to dislodge the fetus from the uterus. Therefore, officials of the East Africa Commission blamed "tribal customs and practices...for the progressive sterility" of indigenous women (Thomas 1998: 127-130 *passim*).

Yet at the same time the colonial government critiqued abortionists' methods and the side effects of the practice, officials recognized that abortion was part of "a complex social nexus" (*ibid.*, 123) regulating female sexuality in Kikuyu communities. One official reported that,

Its [female circumcision] devotees firmly believe that it is a serious disgrace for an uncircumcised girl to give birth to a child and the operation is thus in their eyes an essential precedent to marriage, and the girls in most cases consistently demand it (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: 21).

Therefore, the colonial government held abortion could be most efficiently combated and women's fertility better protected by working within the Kikuyu framework of gendered social control. The colonial officials thus saw a solution to the problem of abortion in lowering the age at which girls were circumcised "thereby eliminating the period where girls were sexually mature but unexcised" (Thomas 1998: 135).

Because of the increasingly heated debate over female circumcision then occurring between the missionary societies and the KCA, the colonial government attempted to regulate the age at which female circumcision took place rather than to abolish the practice entirely. Colonial officials were reluctant to support the missionaries' ban on female circumcision because the KCA had appropriated, with great energy and popularity, the preservation of traditional customs as the bulwark of their nationalist platform. Furthermore, the colonial government's objections to female circumcision were of a different nature than those of missionaries. While both groups

opposed female circumcision on "moral" grounds, colonial officials were most concerned with the physical damage that "barbarities" of the practice inflicted on Kikuyu women's bodies. The missionaries, in contrast, were particularly concerned with the damage that the "barbarities" of female circumcision (and its attendant ceremonies) inflicted on Kikuyu souls.

Their knowledge about the significance of the age at which female circumcision occurred and about the health risks of particular types of circumcision therefore motivated the colonial government to pass additional laws that permitted "minor" circumcision (clitoridectomy) and outlawed "major" circumcision (excision). As Shiels explained, "...pending any voluntary abandonment of the custom, it was the desire of the Government that, in the interests of humanity, of eugenics, and of the increase of the population, the milder form of the operation...be reverted to" (Parliamentary Debates 1929-30: 1946). With this legislation the colonial officials attempted to placate the missionary societies without further antagonizing the KCA.

The colonial government's treatment of the female circumcision controversy demonstrates some of the ways in which "gender," as Ann McClintock tells us, "was an important axis along which colonial power was constructed" (in Hunt 1996: 331). In their attempts to boost African population growth and amend what they saw as the lack of "civilization" in Kikuyu practices, colonial officials invoked the "moral regulation inherent in state formation," and embarked on the "valorization of particular social and political relationships and the marginalization of others" (Manicom 1992: 456). Overall, colonial policies regarding the control of women's sexuality and reproduction furthered the construction of the Kikuyu, particularly Kikuyu women, "as objects of rule" by "reproducing or restricting normative gender meanings" of Kikuyu societies and "subordinat[ing] social and political identities" of Kikuyu through the same operation (*ibid.*, 456).

The Local Native Councils

Colonial officials, in keeping with their philosophy of incorporating aspects of traditional African social life into the machinations of colonial rule, chose to use the Local Native Councils (LNCs) as the instruments for enforcing the regulation of female circumcision (Berman and Lonsdale 1992: 246-7). The LNCs, the "municipal governments" of Kenya that were appointed by the colonial government and led by tribal elders and chiefs, used the dispute over female circumcision as a means to reassert and enhance Kikuyu patriarchal authority. Thus, by invoking the powers of the LNCs during the clitoridectomy controversy, the "colonial officers crafted a relationship between themselves and a group of local men which enabled" (Thomas 1998: 122) both Kikuyu and colonial men to control Kikuyu women's sexuality and reproductive capacity.

The colonial government's decision to delegate the enforcement (and limited promulgation) of female circumcision regulations to the LNCs

accorded new challenges to male authority in colonial societies. As Elizabeth Schmidt explains, colonial men were typically "held responsible for controlling African male labor, migration, and cash-crop production." The control of colonized women, however, had been primarily "left to colonized men — fathers, husbands, brothers, or uncles." During the controversy over female circumcision the "legal parameters" of control over colonized women "were defined and redefined by colonial officials," and by "Africans designated 'native authorities' by the colonial administration." Such cooperation between African men and colonial men was possible because, as Linzi Manicom explains, "African patriarchal gender values converged with the colonial administrators' and judges' own patriarchal views and their administrative interests in controlling African women and strengthening the capacity of the chiefs to govern locally (Manicom 1992: 451).

Kikuyu and European men's mutual interest in controlling Kikuyu women arose in part from colonized women's increasing physical and social mobility in the colonial era. Generally speaking, Kikuyu women had in the pre-colonial period rarely needed nor actively sought an alternative to the life ways of Kikuyu society. However, colonial conquest both established conditions of insecurity and created new social roles and spaces that encouraged some African women to leave their natal communities and migrate to mission stations and colonial urban centers.¹² Indeed, the elders of African communities who generally constituted the LNCs and served as chiefs, had by the 1920s lodged complaints about the increasing "independence" of young African women (Ambler 1989: 148).

The migration of these African women was alarming to both African and colonial men for economic and social reasons. The two groups were concerned that if women's migration increased, it ultimately would be detrimental to the growth of African populations and to the level of African women's agricultural production. Moreover, in addition to concerns about the general well-being of women who had left the community, colonized men were upset because the migrant women were no longer a potential source of bridewealth. African and colonial men were also leery of the danger that certain mission teachings and urban temptations posed to the gendered framework of African social control.

The members of the LNCs, like those of the colonial government and the KCA, recognized that female circumcision played a key role in the maintenance of the gendered African social order that was in some instances being challenged by particular side effects of colonial rule. The LNCs viewed an active role in the regulation of female circumcision as a means by which to secure their own place in the gendered power structure. By advocating and enforcing the colonial government's constraints on female circumcision, rather than joining the missionaries in calling for the practice's abolition, the LNCs secured their relationship with the dominant colonial power. Furthermore, by calling for the regulation rather than the abolition of female circumcision, the LNCs were able both to somewhat soothe Africans' anxieties about the

ramifications of colonialism and to avoid further antagonizing the KCA. Thus, through "championing controlled clitoridectomy," the LNCs "hoped not only to satisfy British objections but also to draw on the growing traditionalist backlash" against colonial rule" (*ibid.*, 148).

In sum, though the bulk of the debate over female circumcision occurred in the metropolitan and colonial capitals, the LNCs in rural Kenya "represented African customary law to colonial authorities" in order to emphasize their control over [African] women" and "instituted most of the policies to regulate" female circumcision (*ibid.*, 144, also 122). The members of the LNCs were thus able to "assert a great deal of power through the codification and reassertion of customary law: (Strobel 1982: 122). The LNCs' negotiation of the clitoridectomy controversy therefore provides another example of the ways in which a group of men used the control of African women's bodies to forward their own agendas in the colonial context.

Parliament and Feminist MPs

The clitoridectomy controversy came closest to being an issue *of* women rather than simply an issue *about* women during the debates over female circumcision that took place in the galleries of the British Parliament. Though the voices of African women were still regrettably absent from the public record, British women MPs were highly vocal in the debate over female circumcision. The female MPs focused their critiques of the practice on consequences that female circumcision held for women's bodies and on the way in which they believed female circumcision to be emblematic of Kikuyu women's degraded position within their own society. Though they at times invoked a maternalistic rhetoric and pointed to earlier attempts by Parliament to combat other gender-specific practices that harmed women's bodies such as *sati*, the women MPs eschewed politicized sidelines about "imperial population growth" or "protection of tradition" (Parliamentary Debates 1929-30: 603-4). Most tellingly, the feminist politicians were the only group involved in the controversy that attempted to raise the issue of clitoridectomy's negation of female sexual pleasure. Yet, the women MPs were restricted from bringing their arguments to full form by the limits of the dominant European discourse on female sexuality.

Feminist MPs like Eleanor Rathbone and Katharine, Duchess of Atholl, premised their initial arguments against female circumcision on the practice's destructiveness to the female body. The women MPs consulted the reports of missionary medical professionals, anthropologists, and government officials to establish the negative consequences that female circumcision held for African women's health (Pedersen 1991: 669). Atholl spoke at length about the procedure, detailing the method and means by which circumcision was performed as well as the anatomical extent and health implications of the practice. The Duchess reported to the Parliament,

I doubt very much apart from missionaries and doctors, and perhaps government officials, there are many white people who realise what this rite is, and what it means to the health and well-being of the girls and women. The term applied is totally inadequate to give an idea of what it means. Our committee has been assured by medical men, and by missionaries, who have attended these women in the hospital and in their homes, that the rite is nothing short of mutilation. It consists of the actual wholesale removal of parts connected with the organs of reproduction. The operation is performed publicly before one or two thousand people by an old woman armed with an iron knife. No anesthetic is given, and no antiseptics are used. The old woman goes with her knife from one girl to another, performing the operation, returning it may be once or twice to each victim. A medical man told us that the operation leaves great scarring, contraction, and obstruction; natural eliminating processes are gravely interfered with, and there is reason to believe much blood poisoning results . . . (Parliamentary Debates 1929-30: 602).

Atholl thus invoked medical evidence regarding female circumcision to lend credence to her assertions about the seriousness of the practice. By deeming the term "circumcision" as "totally inadequate" in describing excision and by arguing that female circumcision is "nothing short of mutilation," Atholl controverted the oft-presumed equivalency of female and male circumcision. Atholl's comment that the "operation is performed publicly before one or two thousand people" illustrated the notion that female circumcision did not simply involve the initiate and the "armed" operator, but instead constituted a communal spectacle of sexualized suffering.

The feminist MPs also cited female circumcision as a vivid symbol of the degradation Kikuyu women experienced due to indigenous structures of patriarchy. Eleanor Rathbone argued vociferously that the position of a Kikuyu woman could be equated with that of a slave. Rathbone asserted, employing the familiar p/maternal imperial rhetoric that portrayed black women as victims of black men, "The position of the native women in many of these tribes I do not say all is one of sheer slavery...slavery not to Europeans, but to men of their own race." Rathbone then critiqued the practices of female circumcision and bridewealth exchange, as well as the low level of gynecological and obstetric care in the Kenya colony. She thus explained that "Endur[ing] torture and mutilation," then being "sold in marriage to a man whom she loathes," and ultimately being "obliged to endure childbirth under conditions under which childbirth is carried on, without any of the comforts of decent treatment or medical care," constituted the particular terms of a Kikuyu woman's slavery.¹³ She admonished the members of Parliament that "there has been an old principle that there is no slavery under the British flag," and that such slavery should not be tolerated under the guise of "domestic custom." With her characterization of female circumcision as a manifestation of the continued slavery of African women, Rathbone effectively linked the

eradication of slavery in Africa a purported goal of British imperialists with the issue of female circumcision (*ibid.*, 606-607 *passim*).

Overall, feminists like Atholl and Rathbone drew upon the "available rhetoric of 'racial hygiene' and maternalism" in order to structure their arguments (Pedersen 1991: 666).¹⁴ The women MPs were successful in taking this tack because their concerns over Kikuyu women's health meshed with those of British men over women's (re)production and the growth of the colonized population in Africa. In addition, the feminist MPs were successful in speaking against female circumcision because they framed their arguments in a rhetoric of imperial responsibility and justification that was acceptable to their male colleagues.

However, the female MPs were forced to abandon their tactic and its accompanying discourse when the colonial government and Parliament attempted to resolve the clitoridectomy controversy by outlawing the "major operation" and allowing simple clitoridectomy. Since it had been established medically that simple clitoridectomy posed a limited threat to women's health, the feminists were forced to find a new reason and rhetoric for arguing against female circumcision. They first asserted that the policy of allowing clitoridectomy while forbidding excision could not be enforced and again called upon medical opinion opposing female circumcision. For example, Atholl demanded to know how British authorities could "ensure that the old women who may receive instructions to practice the less severe form of this operation, will in fact carry out instructions. When the knife is in her hand, what reason is there to believe that she will restrain herself?" (Parliamentary Debates 1929-30: 602) The Duchess then argued that her committee had "been assured by a medical man of standing in East Africa that, while there is this lesser form, which is not so severe a form of mutilation as the one which I have described, it is an operation he would not sanction by anyone under his control" (*ibid.*, 602). However, these arguments largely fell flat.

Ultimately, the defense of the clitoris, and in turn the protection of women's sexual pleasure, was the remaining rationale that feminist MPs could adopt in arguing against female circumcision. Yet a conscious acknowledgment that regulation of women's sexual pleasure was indeed an important element of clitoridectomy's social function had been notably absent from the debate over female circumcision. Muasher and Kouba explain the social function that the limitation of women's sexual pleasure holds in certain African societies:

In order to protect the family honor, girls in Africa are circumcised to decrease their sexual urges before marriage, thereby preventing them from being wayward and bringing shame upon the family. By removing a female's sexual organs and preventing her from attaining pleasure, (i.e., from removing the source of her pleasure—the clitoris), she will not be tempted by extramarital affairs, thereby disgracing her husband (Kouba and Muasher 1985: 105).

Kouba and Muasher's assertions about the role played by the limitation of women's sexual pleasure in the maintenance of the gendered African social order are in keeping with earlier discussions in this article about pre-initiation and pre-marital sex, abortion, and marriage. Indeed, Jomo Kenyatta takes the discussion of the efforts to limit women's sexual pleasure through circumcision one step further by introducing the problem of female masturbation. "Masturbation among girls" Kenyatta writes, "is considered wrong." He adds that it can be argued that the prevention of masturbation, "among other reasons, is probably the motive of trimming the clitoris, to prevent girls from developing sexual feelings" (1953: 156, my emphasis). This conscious effort to limit women's ability to experience sexual pleasure thus emerges as a key means of preventing women from exercising their sexuality and (re)productive capacity outside the specific channels sanctioned by the patriarchal social order.

The feminist MPs, despite the evidence of the use of clitoridectomy as a conscious assault on female sexuality, found themselves unable to argue effectively against the practice or in favor of the protection of women's sexual pleasure. This failure stemmed from two points. First, the women MPs lacked a discursive framework within which to make their argument. As Pedersen explains, there was no "forthright (and anatomically explicit) public rhetoric defending female sexual pleasure" (Pedersen 1991: 669). Second, the issue of women's sexual pleasure in European societies was subject to some of the same anxieties as it was in African communities. Female masturbation was also a focus of concern in European societies where "medical awareness of female sexual response went hand-in-hand with medical anxiety about the debilitating moral and physical effects of masturbation."¹⁵ The feminist MPs were thus unable to "defend the integrity of women's bodies across cultural lines" because "the norms of their own culture demanded" that women renounce "felt" sexual knowledge in favor of a vaginal sexuality. As a result, the women MPs abandoned their battle to ban female circumcision and instead threw their support behind the colonial government's plan for an anti-circumcision campaign of education and propaganda (*ibid.*, 673-674 *passim*).

On the level of parliamentary debate, the clitoridectomy controversy did in a limited way engage women in contesting the control of female bodies and sexuality. Yet, while feminist MPs were quite vocal in the debate, the voices of African women remained absent from the public record. Even though they focused their critiques of female circumcision on the damage that the practice caused to female bodies rather than on related imperialist concerns, the feminist MPs were nonetheless elite, white, Westerners presuming to speak for a colonized population.¹⁶ However, the clitoridectomy controversy ceased to be even remotely an issue of women when the problem of female sexual pleasure entered the debate. An admission of women's rights to direct their own sexual gratification proved too great a challenge to the gendered social orders of both the Kikuyu and the British.

Outcomes

The clitoridectomy controversy ultimately concluded with an agreement between the colonial government and the missionary societies to combat female circumcision through a campaign of education and propaganda against the practice in all of its forms. As one colonial official explained, "the consensus of sane opinion both from Europeans and Africans entirely support the view that the custom can only be abolished by the Africans themselves." He concluded, "the African does not see exactly as we see, nor do we in justice to their views 'think black'" (Kikuyu Mission Council 1931: App. 2).

Earlier in the debate, the colonial officials and the missionaries had come close to settling on a policy which would repudiate all forms of "non-consensual" circumcision and the practice of the major operation while allowing simple clitoridectomy. However, medical professionals' reports that full excision was nearly universal in Kenya and that simple clitoridectomy was virtually unheard of in the colony convinced the colonial government and the missionaries that banning the major procedure would be tantamount to outlawing the practice entirely. The government had no wish to give the KCA further ammunition for its anti-colonial crusade, while the missionary societies had lost 90% of their adherents over the controversy, who had in turn gone on to found their own independent churches and schools.¹⁷ Yet through the course of the controversy and in all its varied permutations, the voices of African women are notably absent from the public record. "Although the implications of excision for women were more intimate and profound," writes Claire Robertson, "we know very little of women's thoughts as they were not collected by researchers in a position to do so" (1996: 625). This absence of African women's voices from the formal debate on female circumcision reflects an androcentric bias in both the British and Kikuyu societies involved in the controversy. Rather than according women a voice—an action which had the potential to challenge the existing gendered social order—the male leaders of the colonial and African camps used the control of African women's bodies and (re)production to forward their own agendas within the colonial context. Despite the attempts of British feminist MPs, the clitoridectomy controversy remained solidly a debate *about* women rather than a debate *of* women.

Notes

¹⁷The term "female circumcision," or female genital mutilation (FGM) as it is most commonly known today, refers to various types of operations which injure the female sexual and/or reproductive organs.

²I use the term "(re)production" to denote the intertwined sexual, social, and material aspects of women's production. See Julia Meryl Ekong, *Bridewealth, Women, and Reproduction in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bonn: Holos, 1992), 206-220.

³Michel Foucault defines sexuality as "the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, *the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges*, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another with a few major *strategies of knowledge and power*." See *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 105.

⁴For an extensive discussion of the ways in which African and colonial men sought to control Shona women's labor, see Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992). For a detailed analysis of how Kenyan prostitutes challenged African and colonial men's expectations of female labor see Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵Lata Mani's essay, "Contesting Traditions: the Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," provides a detailed analysis of the intersection between the gender-specific indigenous practice of *sati* and the rhetoric of British colonial rule in India. In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 89-123. Ann Laura Stoler ably discusses systems of gender as a means of colonial control in Asia in her article, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia," in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991), 51-100. For a similar discussion of gender themes in British colonial rule in Australia see Ann McGrath's work, "The White Man's Looking Glass: Aboriginal-Colonial Gender Relations at Port Jackson." *American Historical Studies* 21 (1990), 187-207.

⁶Robert Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya: the Kamba, the Kikuyu, and the Maasai from 1900 to 1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 230. Tignor writes, "It was hardly surprising when the Kikuyu began to organize political parties in the early 1920s, especially since they had the example of Europeans, Indians, and Bagandans living in Kenya to draw from."

⁷Carolyn Martin Shaw addresses the ways in which Kenyatta positions himself alternately as an "authentic native" and an anthropologist trained by Malinowski in order to lend his writings an authority born of double

consciousness. See *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1995), 118-143.

*As Sanneh writes, the "modern missionary movement in Africa . . . identified itself with colonialism in terms of establishing schools, modern clinics and architecture, scientific agriculture, the emancipation of women, a bureaucratic state, town planning and modern means of transport and communication, also identified itself with indigenous societies by fostering the use of mother tongues in Bible translation and literacy." 4.

⁹Anna Davin offers a thorough account of the British government's similar and simultaneous concerns with raising the birth and survival rates in Britain. See "Imperialism and Motherhood," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87-152.

¹⁰Colonial officials' willingness to accept without question the reports of missionaries and district officers regarding "native customs" was not unusual. For example, James Giblin notes how erroneous missionary reports regarding the high incidence of infanticide amongst the local populations in Uzigua in colonial Tanganyika convinced German officials that "child-murder was common in Uzigua." The Spiritan missionaries contended that "infanticide was a more important cause of population decline than famine, disease and slave-hunting, and also predicted that the the inhabitants of Uzigua would exterminate themselves. German colonial officials accepted the notion of a child-murdering Zigua tribe . . ." *The Politics of Environmental Control in Northeastern Tanzania, 1840-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 197-198.

¹¹Thomas explains that abortion, to inter-war Europeans, was a "familiar" practice albeit not a "respectable" one.

¹²For an excellent discussion of conditions of insecurity which drove African women to the refuge of mission stations see Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories From East Central Africa* (London: James Currey, 1993). See Schmidt (1992) for an analysis of missionary attempts to transform African women into "domestic angels." See also John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chigo Press, 1997). See White (1990) for an examination of the relationship between colonization, urbanization, prostitution, and the breakdown of traditional, African gender roles.

¹³Ibid. For a discussion of British colonial initiatives in women's health in Uganda see Carol Summer's article, "Intimate Colonialism: The Imperial Production of Reproduction in Uganda, 1907-1925." *Journal of Women in*

Culture and Society 16.4 (1991): 787-806.

¹⁴For insightful discussions of British feminism in the Indian colonial context see Antoinette Burton's book *Burden's of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). See also Barbara N. Ramusack's article, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1946," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992), 119-136.

¹⁵The British physician Dr. Isaac Brown claimed in 1866 to have had success in using clitoridectomy to treat nervous disorders, many of which were thought to be attributable to masturbation. The majority medical opinion in Britain and the United States was opposed to clitoridectomy as a treatment. See John Duffy's article, "Clitoridectomy: a Nineteenth Century Answer to Masturbation" (paper presented at The First International Symposium on Circumcision, 1989).

¹⁶For a nuanced discussion of the dilemmas of white, First World, feminist representations of Third World women of color, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 196-220.

¹⁷For a fictionalized account of the clitoridectomy controversy and the ensuing independent school movement from the Kikuyu perspective see Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel *The River Between* (Heinemann: New York, 1965).

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