

'Ngaitana (I will circumcise myself)': The Gender and Generational Politics of the 1956 Ban on Clitoridectomy in Meru, Kenya

LYNN M. THOMAS

Those of the iron-wedge knife (*ciorunya*), stay at the side, you.
Do not abuse those of the razor blade (*ciokaembe*), you.
A circumcised girl without water on the stomach when guarded by the
Government.
A circumcised girl without water on the stomach when guarded by the
Government.¹

In the mid-1950s, recently excised girls in Meru, an administrative district on the northeastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, sang this song as they performed punitive hard labor for defying a ban on clitoridectomy.² The *Njuri Ncheke* of Meru, an officially sanctioned local council of male leaders, unanimously banned clitoridectomy in April 1956.³ Today, people in Meru recount how news and defiance of the ban spread quickly and widely. Ex-Chief M'Anampiu of Mikinduri remembered returning in the evening from the *Njuri Ncheke* council meeting only to find that 'all the girls had been circumcised'.⁴ In the three years following the passage of the ban, over 2,400 girls, men, and women were charged in African Courts with defying the *Njuri's* order.⁵ Interviews suggest that thousands of others who defied the ban paid fines to local *Njuri* councils and headmen.

As adolescent girls defied the ban by attempting to excise each other, their initiations marked a profound departure from the past. They also differed from earlier practices by foregoing the preparations and celebrations associated with initiation and the instruments typically used. While *atani* (s. *mutani*), the older women specialists who performed excisions, had previously used special triangular iron-wedge knives, *irunya* (s. *kirunya*), these girls of the mid-1950s simply used razor blades purchased at local shops. These departures caused some from Meru, both then and now, to doubt the legitimacy of these initiations.⁶ The song is, in part, an appeal by these girls to older age groups, 'those of the iron-wedge knife', to stop abusing them and to recognize their initiation as proper. Similarly, *Ngaitana*, 'I will circumcise myself', the Meru name given to these girls by older groups of men and women, mocks the girls' determination and

highlights these elders' sense of the absurdity of their undertaking. Today, mention of the name in Meru draws chuckles or, on occasion, head-shakes of knowing disapproval from those who can recall the time of *Ngaitana*. For those younger than forty-five years, however, the name most often elicits perplexed faces and queries.⁷

The song and the name of *Ngaitana* also suggest the political exigencies of the mid-1950s, during the Mau Mau rebellion and ensuing State of Emergency. While the ability to remain calm and brave—'without water on the stomach'—when being detained in a headman's camp or police station would have been a feat for an adolescent girl at almost any time during the twentieth century, such courage took on special significance during the Mau Mau rebellion, when Africans were often tortured and killed by government personnel. The name of *Ngaitana* also conveys many adults' reluctance to defy the ban for fear that their homes would be burnt or they would be fined or imprisoned. In the face of parents and *atani* who refused to assist them, some members of *Ngaitana* apparently proclaimed 'I will circumcise myself'. Others who received assistance from parents or *atani* refused to implicate their co-conspirators, claiming before headmen and African Court personnel that they had 'circumcised themselves'.

Current international debates about clitoridectomy and infibulation⁸ originated during conferences organized as part of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85).⁹ Some feminists denounced these practices as 'female genital mutilation'. Fran Hosken, for example, claimed that clitoridectomy and infibulation ravaged women's health and underpinned patriarchal structures, while Mary Daly posited these practices as one instance of the 'Sado-Ritual Syndrome' structuring 'planetary patriarchy'.¹⁰ Human rights activists and feminist medical doctors Nawal El Saadawi and Asma El Dareer exposed clitoridectomy and infibulation as medically dangerous practices intended, among other things, to control female sexuality.¹¹ At international conferences, however, some African women protested these calls for eradication as a neo-colonial intrusion that drew attention away from more pressing development issues.¹² Anthropologists, accused by Hosken and Daly of a 'patriarchal cover-up', responded by drawing attention to the racist underpinnings of earlier campaigns against both male and female circumcision,¹³ and by elaborating how processes surrounding excision and infibulation often are 'the primary context in which women come together as a group, constituting a ritual community and a forum for social critique'.¹⁴ Drawing on post-structuralist theory, others criticized eradicationists for their discursive construction of a de-contextualized, passive and oppressed 'third world woman'.¹⁵ Eradicationists responded to these critiques by strengthening networks with African women's and health organizations engaged in anti-clitoridectomy campaigns.¹⁶ The controversy continues in Europe and North America today as debate turns to the threat of clitoridectomy and infibulation as grounds for political asylum, and the legality of these practices among African immigrant populations.

A historical analysis of the 1956 ban in Meru, one of the few attempts to outlaw clitoridectomy or infibulation in twentieth-century Africa,¹⁷ demonstrates the limitations of universalist discourses of sexual oppression, human rights, and women's health, as well as post-structuralist deference to 'the Other', for an understanding of the social complexities of clitoridectomy. Whereas the international controversy has largely cast girls and women as victims, examination of adolescent girls' efforts to excise each other situates girls and women as central actors. Patriarchy, 'the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general',¹⁸ clearly structured familial and community relations in 1950s Meru. Yet to reduce adolescent girls' belief that clitoridectomy would transform them into adult women to patriarchal conspiracy would be to ignore how the institution of female initiation regulated relations among women as well as between men and women. Observers of female initiation have long noted that girls and women tend to defend the institution more vigorously than their male counterparts. While colonial officials and missionaries attributed female adherence to clitoridectomy to the inherent 'conservatism' of women,¹⁹ contemporary anthropologist Janice Boddy, more insightfully, has explained such adherence as women's efforts to preserve 'bargaining tools with which to negotiate subaltern status and enforce their complementarity with men'.²⁰ In Meru in the 1950s, where adolescent initiation of males and females constituted the pivotal moment in the construction of an influential age group system,²¹ female defense of clitoridectomy must also be viewed as an effort to maintain processes which differentiated females of various ages. Initiation transformed girls into women, and mothers of initiates into figures of authority within the community. Evidence suggests that while members of *Ngaitana* associated female initiation with the disciplining of sexual desires as well as notions of fertility and cleanliness, they did not fully anticipate the physical severity of clitoridectomy. The reluctance of older age groups to accept *Ngaitana* initiation as legitimate thus added insult to injury.

Within African, and particularly Kenyan, historiography, it would be tempting to situate a history of the 1956 ban on clitoridectomy within the now familiar paradigm of resistance to colonialism. Passage, defiance, and enforcement of the ban took place amid the Mau Mau rebellion, the most virulent period of anti-government protest in Kenyan colonial history.²² Moreover, historians have interpreted the controversy surrounding clitoridectomy during the 1920s and 1930s as crucial to the emergence of nationalist politics within Kenya.²³ Yet the Mau Mau rebellion provided the context, not the causes, for passage and defiance of the ban. As Frederick Cooper, in a recent critique of resistance historiography, has argued: 'the dyad of resister/oppressor is isolated from its context; struggle within the colonized population—over class, age, gender or other inequalities—is "sanitized"; the texture of people's lives is lost; and complex strategies ...

of multi-sided engagement with forces inside and outside the community, are narrowed into a single framework.²⁴ Like current international debates over clitoridectomy and infibulation, the resistance paradigm reifies dualities, obscuring the tangled layers of political relations which animate social protest. Within Kenyan historiography, the resistance paradigm reduced clitoridectomy disputes to political contests among men about women.²⁵

In addition to situating girls and women as important participants in debates over clitoridectomy, examination of the 1956 ban through oral and written sources illuminates how relations of gender and generation structured the elaboration of a more interventionist and authoritarian colonial state in rural Kenya after World War II. Studies have revealed that the burdens of post-war development and welfare initiatives, particularly soil conservation campaigns, often fell disproportionately on women.²⁶ Similarly, historians have noted that women and young men comprised the bulk of Mau Mau fighters and supporters and, consequently, became the prime objects of rehabilitation campaigns inside prison camps and beyond through state-sponsored women's groups, *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, and Youth Training Schemes.²⁷ No scholar, however, has explored how relations of gender and generation determined the limits of this 'second colonial occupation'.²⁸ A few young Africans with advanced formal education and close ties to the mission societies assisted in the formulation of the 1956 ban. Older men of the *Njuri Ncheke* and African District Council unanimously supported the passage of the ban, if only nominally. For these older men whose local authority had become increasingly tied to the colonial regime during the 1930s and 1940s,²⁹ a vote for the ban demonstrated their loyalty to the colonial government and their political distance from 'the Kikuyu'. For colonial officers, the ban became a test of older men's ability to control women and young men. Oral sources which present adolescent girls and older women as the organizers of *Ngaitana* suggest that older men did not possess the authority to transform institutions of womanhood. Headmen's and Home Guards'³⁰ failure and/or reluctance to deter transgressors reveals that even at the height of interventionist and repressive policies, colonial officials lacked the intermediaries to remake gendered social relations. In punishing those who defied the ban, headmen and Home Guards pursued their own political interests.

Clitoridectomy first became an object of official concern in central Kenya in the 1920s. At the prodding of Protestant missionaries, administrators in Nairobi encouraged Local Native Councils, bodies of elected and appointed African men presided over by a British district commissioner with veto powers, to pass resolutions restricting clitoridectomy.³¹ In 1925 and 1927, the Meru Local Native Council, among others, passed resolutions prohibiting excision without a girl's consent, limiting the severity of the 'operation', and requiring the registration of all female 'circumcisors'.³² These resolutions proved largely ineffectual. As one administrator noted,

'public opinion does not seem to be in sympathy with the cause'.³³ Believing that clitoridectomy, as part of female initiation, transformed girls into women, most Africans ignored these resolutions. According to Mary Holding, a British Methodist missionary with anthropological training, people in inter-war Meru viewed female initiation as preparation for marriage and procreation: it marked the end of sexual freedom, affirmed parental authority and filial duty, protected one against the dangers of sexual intercourse, and ensured fertility as well as ancestral blessings.³⁴

The years 1929 to 1931 mark what has been termed within Kenyan historiography as the 'female circumcision controversy'. During this period, renunciation of clitoridectomy became the subject of declarations of Christian loyalty at some mission stations, while support of the practice became a platform issue for the Kikuyu Central Association. The Methodist Church of Meru, for example, instituted a loyalty declaration in early 1930; within weeks its membership dropped from seventy to six.³⁵ Popular protest of the missionaries' anti-excision campaigns spread with young men's and women's performance of *Muthirigu*, a dance-song which chastised missionaries, government officers, and African elders by name for corrupting custom, seducing young women, and stealing land. While the Nairobi administration moved quickly to ban performance of this critique of colonial authority,³⁶ they were reluctant to enact colony-wide anti-excision measures. Intervention did continue at the local administrative level.

Considered to be on the political margins of central Kenya, Local Native Councils in Meru and Embu Districts passed further resolutions in 1931, restricting the severity of the operation and providing instruction for 'circumcisors' in the newly authorized procedures.³⁷ Administrators in Meru, in an effort to eradicate the 'widespread' practice of pre-initiation abortion, also worked to lower the age of female initiation.³⁸ The impact of these interventions varied. District Commissioner Lambert recorded personally instructing the 'operators' in the new procedures, and interviewees Esther M'Ithnji and Julia Simion recalled how, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, *atani* carried permits on their walking sticks certifying that they had undergone such training.³⁹ A Methodist missionary, though, recorded witnessing the illegal and more severe form of excision in 1939.⁴⁰ Administrative efforts to lower the age of initiation proved more effective than efforts to regulate the severity of excision, as government police organized mass excisions for pre-pubescent girls.⁴¹ Compared with the Methodist and Catholic missions, the Presbyterian mission in Meru maintained a more strident opposition to clitoridectomy, expelling all school girls who underwent initiation.⁴² During the early years of the Mau Mau rebellion, administrators in Meru restricted initiation ceremonies and, in some cases, required that 'fees' of five shillings or fifty rat tails—in contribution to public health campaigns—be paid.⁴³ Between the 1920s and 1950s, the timing and form of initiation underwent significant change. Not only did most initiations occur at puberty rather than just prior to marriage, but few initiates chose to have abdominal

tattooing (*ncuru*) performed or large ear holes pierced.⁴⁴ Apart from a few dozen girls from strong Christian families, though, all girls in post-World War II Meru anticipated excision as the transformative moment in their passage to womanhood.

The administrative context within which officials attempted to regulate clitoridectomy in the 1920s and 1930s differed markedly from that in which the 1956 ban was instituted. During this time, administrative ideology shifted from one of 'indirect rule',⁴⁵ in which indigenous male authorities were appointed to guide the participation of 'pristine' African societies in the colonial order, to a post-war development agenda which mandated British technocrats and mission-educated African men to remake African societies through the elaboration of economic and social reforms.⁴⁶ By 1956, Africans with close ties to mission societies held greater sway in administrative circles and British officers shared a more expansive vision of the colonial mandate. Yet, given the resources devoted to quelling the Mau Mau rebellion and the political volatility of earlier efforts to regulate clitoridectomy, it is still remarkable that administrators in Meru attempted a ban in 1956.

Documentary evidence suggests it was District Commissioner J. A. Cumber who first introduced the topic of a ban on clitoridectomy at a meeting of the African District Council (formerly the Local Native Council) in March 1956. He opened the meeting by stating how the Governor's recent decision to create a Meru Land Unit, apart from the Kikuyu Land Unit, meant that the 'Meru people had now gained independence from the Kikuyu'. He proceeded to suggest two measures by which the Meru African District Council could express its appreciation and affirm its cooperation with the Government: the introduction of a coffee tax and a prohibition on 'female circumcision'. Cumber contended that in passing such a ban, 'the Meru would be setting a good example to other Tribes in Kenya who persist in the enforcement of this iniquitous Tribal Tradition'. Later in the meeting, the Medical Officer of Health explained how he could not, in good conscience, give permits to 'circumcisors', as none of them practiced the 'operation' in a clean and hygienic manner. The Medical Officer argued that boys should be circumcised between the ages of six months and one year, instead of at adolescence, and 'female circumcision' should be abandoned entirely as it resulted in complications during childbirth. Reportedly, the Council 'wholeheartedly welcomed the suggestion' as regarded female initiation and referred the matter to the *Njuri Ncheke* for a final decision.⁴⁷ The following month, the *Njuri Ncheke* issued an edict forbidding clitoridectomy within Meru and the African District Council passed a by-law endorsing it.⁴⁸

While the precise origins of the proposal to ban clitoridectomy in 1956 are unclear, District Commissioner Cumber's support was crucial to its passage and enforcement. Cumber repeatedly defended the ban against doubts raised by provincial and central government officials. Provincial

Commissioner Lloyd, Cumber's immediate superior with whom he was on acrimonious terms, pressured the Meru African District Council and the *Njuri Ncheke* to exempt the more 'backward' locations of the District from the ban.⁴⁹ The central government also prohibited the ban from being publicized in either the vernacular press or Meru-language broadcasts for fear that it would incite further unrest in areas of Mau Mau activity.⁵⁰ By 1957, with widespread transgressions of the ban apparent, the Provincial Commissioner firmly distanced the central government from 'this purely local... measure' by stating, 'the solution to this problem [clitoridectomy] lies in the progressive education of public opinion over a considerable time rather than in attempting to overcome any prejudice by sudden action'.⁵¹

An explanation of Cumber's support for the ban lies in his effort to establish Meru as a loyal and progressive district, distinct from the Kikuyu districts of central Kenya. In preparation for the March 1957 elections for the Legislative Council, Cumber orchestrated the registration of the largest number of voters in Central Province. As predicted, voters cast their ballots on a 'tribal basis' and the Meru candidate, Bernard Mate, nicknamed 'Cumber's Mate' in administrative circles, became the African member for Central Province.⁵² Cumber also sought to reform local administration by recruiting younger men with higher levels of school education to replace retiring headmen.⁵³ In his progressive administrative program, Cumber even envisioned a role for the *Njuri Ncheke*, the central institution of 'indirect rule' policy as developed in Meru. He believed that this male council, with guidance from British officers, could maintain control 'over the young and undisciplined elements in the District'.⁵⁴

The history of the *Njuri Ncheke* in the twentieth century is a complex one. While the earliest colonial officers in the District persecuted the *Njuri Ncheke* as a 'secret society', arresting members and burning their meeting places, later officers sought to work with it.⁵⁵ H. E. Lambert, stationed in Meru during the 1930s and renowned in official circles for his anthropological studies, was the first officer to recognize the *Njuri Ncheke* as the supreme indigenous council of Meru.⁵⁶ Lambert argued that, unlike other areas of central Kenya where such councils had been destroyed during the installation of colonialism, the *Njuri Ncheke* of Meru remained largely intact, commanding popular allegiance. Lambert sought to incorporate the *Njuri Ncheke* in local administration by securing its approval on issues of 'native law and custom' and requiring that all government employees become members. The *Njuri Ncheke* also chose all of the elected members of the African District Council from among its ranks. In collaboration with W. H. Laughton, a Methodist missionary, and Philip M'Inoti, the first African Methodist minister from Meru, Lambert devised a Christian oath so that mission adherents could join the *Njuri Ncheke*. Though the Presbyterian and Catholic mission stations remained skeptical of the ability of a 'heathen' institution to accommodate Christians, Methodist mission adherents became influential liaisons between the *Njuri Ncheke* and district administration.

Such close links with the administration caused some in Meru to doubt the authenticity of the *Njuri Ncheke*, deriding it as the 'white man's *Njuri*' and questioning the qualifications of young mission-educated members. Other young men, who were not members, resented the administrative authority accorded to the 'old illiterate men' of the council. In spite of these criticisms, the collaboration between the *Njuri Ncheke* and colonial officers proved mutually beneficial throughout the 1940s: officers heeded the *Njuri Ncheke's* counsel on 'customary' and land matters, most notably rejecting 'Kikuyu' claims, while the *Njuri Ncheke* proved effective at instituting government policies.⁵⁷

Early during the Mau Mau rebellion, the *Njuri Ncheke* pledged its loyalty to the colonial government and participated in the official 'rehabilitation' process by performing 'cleansing ceremonies' on those who had taken the Mau Mau oath.⁵⁸ The *Njuri Ncheke*, according to historian Joseph Kinyua, opposed Mau Mau as a Kikuyu movement threatening Meru land interests and one in which women flouted social norms by participating in political activities. Many male elders in central Kenya viewed women's mass participation in Mau Mau as an unprecedented level of female participation in the political realm and a challenge to their authority.⁵⁹ By 1953, British officials, especially young district officers recruited during the State of Emergency, began to question the efficacy of the *Njuri Ncheke*. While they never appear to have doubted the *Njuri Ncheke's* loyalty to the Government, they accused the members of 'whole-sale corruption' in the collection of 'cleansing fees' as well as criticized them for forcibly initiating African Christians 'under pagan rites' and charging exorbitant induction fees.⁶⁰ Following on these criticisms, the ban on clitoridectomy became a test of the *Njuri Ncheke's* ability to function as an effective and progressive administrative institution.

Oral sources call into question whether male leaders supported the ban as uniformly as expressed in official reports and suggested by the *Njuri Ncheke's* unanimous vote at Nchiru. On the one hand, Ex-Senior Chief M'Mwirichia, a former Methodist teacher and member of *Njuri Ncheke* who worked very closely with colonial officers and missionaries, contended that the *Njuri Ncheke* strongly supported the ban. Similarly, Ex-Chief M'Iringo recalled favoring the ban, after hearing a presentation by a British medical doctor on the dangers of clitoridectomy. But Ex-Chief M'Anampiu and Ex-Subarea Headman David M'Naikiuru remembered that many at Nchiru disagreed with the ban. M'Naikiuru explained: 'you know, it was during the bad times of the Emergency. No one could argue with the authority then. Because the rule came through the District Commissioner to *Njuri*, they could not oppose it ... in my opinion, they decided to ban it during Emergency because they thought, then, no one would go against it.'⁶¹ A letter complaining of the ban written by Gerald Casey, a white settler of Timau, to a Member of Parliament, Barbara Castle, corroborates the *Njuri Ncheke's* ambivalent position. Casey wrote, 'the ordinary tribesmen

I talk to say: "It is not our will. If we ask the *Njuri* they say it comes from the Government. If we ask the District Commissioner he says it comes from the *Njuri*."⁶²

Casey also claimed that African mission adherents working for the Government, if not European missionaries themselves, played central roles in the orchestration of the ban.

I would agree that it [the ban] may represent the will of the Government servants and mission-influenced Africans: who are a minority and separated by a psychological gulf from the more primitive and illiterate tribesmen. I was assured by officers of the administration that the missions have taken no part in the matter. The ordinary tribesman tells me the missions have very much to do with it: but keep in the background. It is at least certain that the great majority of Africans holding any position of authority in the Reserve are mission-trained and under strong missionary influence.⁶³

Corroborating Casey's assertion, interviewees with the closest ties to the Methodist mission station, Stanley Kathurima and Naaman M'Mwirichia, expressed the strongest support for the ban. As Methodist mission-educated young men in the 1950s, Kathurima and M'Mwirichia served, respectively, as secretary of the *Njuri Ncheke* and a headman, and played crucial roles in the formulation of the ban.⁶⁴ Although no documentary evidence yet reveals the direct involvement of missionaries in the formulation of the prohibition, they could not have been far removed from official discussions. The Presbyterian and Methodist mission societies, though with varying approaches, had long been interested in the elimination of clitoridectomy. During the 1950s, the Presbyterians once again began to focus attention on the practice. In 1953, Dr. Clive Irvine of the Presbyterian hospital at Chogoria undertook his own initiative against clitoridectomy, only to provoke, in the words of the District Commissioner, 'a violent re-action in the Reserves'.⁶⁵ And in 1955, Irvine argued against the administrative policy that all government employees become members of the *Njuri Ncheke* on the grounds that the *Njuri Ncheke* still condoned the practice of clitoridectomy.⁶⁶ When the *Njuri Ncheke* passed the ban in 1956, the Presbyterian and Methodist mission societies received the news with prompt congratulations.⁶⁷

Women's voices were notably, if not surprisingly, absent from discussions surrounding the passage of the 1956 ban. Methodist missionary Mary Holding's 1942 ethnographic account situated female initiation in Meru as an affair of women. Holding contended that women's councils, namely *kiama gia ntonye* ('the council of entering'), organized the years of preparation, celebration, and seclusion which comprised female initiation. Female initiation, according to Holding, not only remade girls into women, it transformed adult women into figures of authority within the community. Only a woman whose eldest child was ready for circumcision could gain admittance to *kiama gia ntonye* and, thus, a 'position of authority within the tribe'.⁶⁸ By the time of the Mau Mau rebellion, the presence of women's

councils, as described by Holding, had begun to fade in most parts of Meru District. Nonetheless, as defiance of the ban demonstrated, female initiation was still a women's concern and did not easily fall within the purview of the all-male *Njuri Ncheke*.

The African District Council, unlike the *Njuri Ncheke*, was not an all-male institution in 1956. In line with post-World War II policies to broaden and professionalize the group of Africans engaged in administrative rule, officials in Meru appointed the first woman Councilor in 1951.⁶⁹ Martha Kanini of Chogoria joined the Council at the age of twenty-six years, after completing a year of study at Makerere University. She was, most likely, among the first women from Chogoria not to be initiated. Kanini remembered how the District Commissioner asked her not to participate in discussion of the ban: 'I was there alone [the only woman] and I did not even speak, the District Commissioner told me not to speak ... He wanted men to discuss it. Because I am concerned, I should keep quiet ... So long as I felt it was for their [women's] benefit, I had to keep quiet, to hear what men say.'⁷⁰ While Kanini recalled being present but silent at the meeting when the ban was proposed, the minutes of the two meetings at which the ban was formulated record Kanini as absent with apologies.⁷¹ In either asking Kanini to remain silent or to refrain from attending the meetings, the District Commissioner sought to place the banning of clitoridectomy within the control of men.

Most adolescent girls responded to the 1956 ban on clitoridectomy by defying it. Following the *Njuri Ncheke* meeting at Nchiru, headmen held *barazas* to inform people of the ban. Ex-Chief M'Anampiu's recollection that girls had begun to 'circumcise themselves' even before he returned from Nchiru suggests that news of the ban, in some places, preceded such meetings. Caroline Kirote remembers that, in Mitunguu, girls purchased razor blades and went to the bush to 'circumcise each other' while their parents sat listening to the Headman announce the ban. Though women of the *Ngaitana* age group recollect, in vivid detail, their defiance of the ban, few can recount the official reasons given for the passage of the ban or remember their defiance as having any connection to the Mau Mau rebellion. Between 1956 and 1959, *Ngaitana* spread from one area of the District to another. Most areas of the District experienced two or three separate episodes or 'waves' of girls, of increasingly younger ages, 'circumcising themselves'. Charity Tirindi, of the second 'wave', remembers how *Ngaitana* came to her home area of Mwichiune: 'it began from Igoji [to the south] and then went to Mwiriga Mieru [to the north] so we were left in the middle alone. They used to call us cowards, abusing us, and calling us *nkenye* (uncircumcised girls) so we sat down and we decided how we will circumcise ourselves.' This statement reveals how groups of recently excised girls exerted peer pressure, often through song, on unexcised girls in other parts of the District to join *Ngaitana*. While the first members of *Ngaitana* were

probably around thirteen to fourteen years old, the proper age for female initiation in the 1950s, the age of initiates decreased to eight years old or younger as the practice spread. Very few resisted *Ngaitana*. Elizabeth Muthuuri, the first girl in the Methodist schools to attain a standard seven education in 1945, stated that school girls did not participate in *Ngaitana*. While some school girls and their families, such as Martha Kanini, had repudiated clitoridectomy by 1956, other interviews suggest that such people were a small minority.⁷²

Ngaitana initiations were a marked departure from most previous female initiations in Meru. First of all, they took place secretly, in the bush, forest, or maize fields. In the past, girls were initiated in large open fields, surrounded by crowds of women and peering children. Initiation in the bush was reserved for those who became pregnant before they were excised. *Ngaitana* initiations also lacked the attendant ceremonies and celebrations. In the 1920s, female initiation spanned three or four years, with an initiate having her ears pierced the first year, abdominal tattooing performed the next, and clitoridectomy the following year. Feasts and dances accompanied these physical procedures. A several-month seclusion followed during which older women fed recent initiates large amounts of food and taught them how to behave as women. Initiates emerged from seclusion to travel to their new matrimonial homes. While by the 1950s female initiation had become a pre-pubescent rather than pre-nuptial rite and practices such as abdominal tattooing and prolonged periods of seclusion had faded, people in Meru remember *Ngaitana* as a time of profound change, when female initiation was driven 'underground', stripped of its attendant celebrations and teachings, and reduced to the clandestine performance of excision.⁷³

Moreover, unlike previous female initiations, *atani*, the older women who formerly practiced excision,⁷⁴ performed few of the initial *Ngaitana* procedures. A Methodist missionary working in Meru at the time wrote that *Ngaitana* went 'against all previous custom, some circumcised themselves, others one another and others were circumcised by their own mothers'.⁷⁵ Charity Tirindi, Caroline Kirote, and Agnes Nyoroka remembered how girls, in groups of three to twenty, excised each other, and later, when healing at home, were examined by *atani* and, if necessary, cut again. Isabel Kaimuri of Giantune recounted that she excised her own daughter. Isabella Kajuju, who became a *mutani*, recalled that she first performed the operation of clitoridectomy during *Ngaitana* when the experienced *mutani*, fearing prosecution, failed to come to excise Kajuju's niece and others. In some cases, *atani* participated clandestinely in the initial operations. Elizabeth M'Iringo remembered that while she and her age mates had wondered how they would be able to 'circumcise themselves', when they arrived in the forest they found a *mutani* waiting for them.⁷⁶

The form of clitoridectomy performed during *Ngaitana* also differed from previous initiations. In 1957, the Governor of Kenya reported the findings of a Medical Officer in Meru to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

He [a Medical Officer in Meru] has examined girls who have been circumcised by friends, from which it is obvious that they have no idea what female circumcision entails. Most are content to make simple incisions on either side of the vulva or through the skin only on the labia major... He has never seen a clitoris removed, which is the object of female circumcision when performed by a professional. The only damage done in cases he has examined has been some bleeding and occasionally secondary infection, but this is surprisingly rare, and of course pain and discomfort vary with the size of the incision. In his opinion such damage would not compare with the actual removal of the clitoris as performed by professional circumcisers.⁷⁷

While the Medical Officer attributed the less severe forms of clitoridectomy he viewed to girls' ignorance of the previous practice, *Ngaitana* members may also have been unwilling or unable to perform excision. Agnes Kirimi recounted how members of her *Ngaitana* cohort were unable to finish the operation themselves: 'we could not complete, we just tried a little by cutting just the clitoris ... there was this other part, the remaining part to be circumcised and we did not know. None of us knew to that extent ... when they [our mothers] saw we had already tried, they decided to do the finishing.' The amount of cutting done by the initiates may also have been determined by the instruments they used. Whereas *atani* possessed iron-wedge knives, members of *Ngaitana* only had access to razor blades. Monica Kanana recounted that the *Ngaitana* operations were less severe because of the fragility of razor blades. Kanana also recalled her mother requesting her aunt to perform a less severe form of excision on Kanana and her cohort because of their unusually young age.⁷⁸

People were reluctant to accept the excisions which *Ngaitana* members performed on one another as proper female initiation. Selina Kiroki, who was initiated in the late 1940s, claimed that *Ngaitana* had 'spoiled' female initiation by omitting the meaningful teachings and celebrations and reducing it to the practice of clitoridectomy. Members of *Ngaitana* challenged processual understandings of female initiation by positing clitoridectomy as the crux of the matter. The incisions which they performed on one another, though, revealed that they did not understand and/or accept what excision entailed. The second set of excisions which *atani* performed on *Ngaitana* members appear as an effort to complete the procedure and to reassert older women's control over the process of transforming girls into women.⁷⁹

Drawing on their interpretations of the Mau Mau rebellion in Meru, officials explained defiance of the ban as a conflict between young and old men. In 1957, District Commissioner Cumber wrote, 'it is considered that this recurrence of female circumcision is attributable to the activities of the young men, many of whom resent the varying degree of control exercised by the *Njuri* elders'.⁸⁰ Similarly, before a meeting of the *Njuri Ncheke*, Cumber claimed that young men were encouraging girls to 'circumcise themselves' so as to undermine the authority of the *Njuri Ncheke*.⁸¹ Young

men were a potent source of colonial anxiety during the mid-1950s. Colonial officers and Methodist missionaries in Meru established a 'Youth Training Centre' to turn young men into 'responsible citizens', 'develop their characters', and 'instill a respect for discipline and agricultural work'.⁸² Most young men in Meru probably did oppose the ban. According to Charity Tirindi, even school-educated men in the 1950s refused to marry unexcised women.⁸³ No evidence suggests, though, that they organized defiance of the ban. In situating young men as the 'real force' behind *Ngaitana*, Cumber upheld a long tradition of colonial officers interpreting female political protest as male-instigated.

Njuri Ncheke members cited ethnic and gender as well as generational insurrection in explaining defiance of the ban before District Commissioner Cumber. Using the meeting, in part, as another opportunity to denounce their political rival within central Kenya, they claimed that it was people of 'non-Meru origin', presumably 'Kikuyus', who were encouraging excision. Moreover, they contended that the 'tendency had sprung up recently among the women and among the government officials to disregard the *Njuri's* authority and its existence'. Turning Cumber's critique of young African men around, *Njuri* members denounced the insolence of Cumber's junior officers, many of whom were more skeptical than the District Commissioner of the *Njuri Ncheke's* political worth. *Njuri* members also identified the prime organizers of *Ngaitana*: women.⁸⁴

While most men favored clitoridectomy, interviewees suggested that young women, mothers, and grandmothers were the organizers of *Ngaitana*. Monica Kanana recalled how she and her age mates were 'beaten thoroughly' by the first group of *Ngaitana* until they too decided to 'circumcise themselves'. Agnes Kirimi attributed her decision to join *Ngaitana* to her grandmother: 'I remember why I got motivated. It's because my grandmother used to tell me, "you're left here alone with your dirt" ... You see the grandmothers were the motivators.'⁸⁵ Grandmothers' stronger advocacy for clitoridectomy than mothers' was attributable to the historic role which older women played as the organizers of initiation as well as to the special relationship which existed between grandparents and grandchildren, enabling them to discuss intimate topics considered inappropriate for discussions between parents and children.⁸⁶ In households in which parents had differing opinions on the ban, mothers most often favored excision. The fathers of both Monica Kanana and Lucy Kajuju were Home Guards who supported the ban. Kanana remembered her father beating her mother after he learned of her initiation, while Kajuju recalled how her mother fled following her initiation to escape her father's anger. Ex-District Officer Richard Cashmore recounted older women protesting the ban outside of his office in Chuka. Reiterating many themes of the dance-song *Muthirigu* performed during the 1929–31 controversy, these women sang of the ban as a government plot to make young women infertile, eliminate the 'Meru tribe', and steal their land.⁸⁷

For adolescent girls, though, *Ngaitana* was about more than maintaining a valued practice. It became a test and demonstration of their strength and determination as an age group. Amid people being forced to live in 'villages', detained and tortured in prisons, and killed in the forest, adolescent girls too confronted the colonial state. Caroline Kirote recalled how her *Ngaitana* group, on their way to turn themselves in at the headman's camp, feared the worst: 'if it happened that we would be wiped out, girls would be wiped out together ... you know because of the way the Government carried out executions at that time.' Many interviewees contended that the ban encouraged, rather than deterred, excision. Ex-Subarea Headman David M'Naikiuru recalled, 'were it not for the ban they would not have circumcised such a large number because Christianity was spreading rapidly'. Similarly, recollections by Monica Kanana and Charity Tirindi of being taunted and beaten by older *Ngaitana* to join their ranks suggest how *Ngaitana* became a movement, gathering even unsuspecting girls to its cause.⁸⁸

While nearly all interviewees, when asked specifically, denied any direct connection between defiance of the 1956 ban and the Mau Mau rebellion, broader evidence suggests parallels, if not connections, between these two struggles. Those social groups which most vigorously participated in and supported Mau Mau—young people and women—were most open in their opposition to the 1956 ban. Official documents suggest that in Meru 'the unmarried girl class' was particularly active in supporting Mau Mau.⁸⁹ Interviewee Charity Tirindi illustrated how Mau Mau fighters themselves opposed the ban by recounting a gruesome tale of forcible excisions: 'if you were not circumcised, they [Mau Mau fighters] came for you at night, you [we]re taken to the forest [and] circumcised, and you [we]re roasted for what you have been circumcised [the clitoris] and you are told to eat it.' Those who publicly supported the ban—strong mission adherents and male elders serving as African District Council and *Njuri Ncheke* members, headmen, and Home Guards—ranked as government loyalists during the Mau Mau rebellion.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the punishment for those who defied the ban mirrored, in part, punishments meted out to those who had taken the Mau Mau oath, with Home Guards rounding up suspects, burning their homes and confiscating livestock, and detaining them in headmen's camps. Veronica Kinaito recounted a song performed by her *Ngaitana* group in which they compared their one month detention in a headmen's camp to young men's imprisonment at Manyani, the main camp for Mau Mau detainees.⁹¹

Enforcement of the ban on excision varied tremendously over its three-year duration, 1956–59, and from one area of Meru to another. In 'backward' areas of the District such as Tharaka, the ban was not enforced. In other areas such as Igembe, Tigania, and North and South Imenti, *Ngaitana* cases consumed the attention of district officers, headmen, Home Guards, *Njuri*

members, and African Court staff for months on end. While all suspected transgressors were supposed to be charged before African Courts with contravening the *Njuri's* Order authorized under section 17(a) of the African Courts Ordinance 65/51, oral evidence suggests that headmen and Home Guards often defied official policy, imposing and collecting fines themselves without forwarding cases to African Courts.⁹² Of the 2,400 individuals charged before African Courts, fathers of initiates accounted for approximately 43 per cent; initiates, 33 per cent; mothers of initiates, 20 per cent; and 'circumcisors', 3 per cent of those accused.⁹³ Fines ranged from 50/- to 400/- shillings and sentences from one month in detention camp to six months without hard labor, depending on the accused's wealth and status. Settler Casey explained the scale of these fines: 'my shepherd earns Shs. 50/- a month cash wage. He will have to work eight months to realize Shs. 400/-. He is one of the lucky ones. Very few old men earn half as much as he does. Some would have to work eighteen months to two years to find the money.' One district officer reportedly remarked that the African Courts were 'making more [money] out of it [*Ngaitana* fines] than out of all the rates put together'.⁹⁴ Thousands of others paid fines outside of the African Courts.

The swiftness of girls' response to the ban appears to have caught administrators unprepared. The first group of *Ngaitana* in North Imenti paid no fine; 'nothing was done, even the daughters of Chiefs, *askaris* [Home Guards]... had circumcised themselves'. Ex-Chief M'Anampiu recalled sending home all the girls whom he met on his return from Nchiru and later fining their fathers. Ex-Home Guard Moses M'Mukindia remembered arresting initiates as they came from the forest and taking them to the Meru Civil Hospital to be examined by a British Medical Officer. At Ntakira, Monica Kanana recounted how Home Guards burnt the homes of an early *Ngaitana* group found healing in seclusion. Later cohorts, fearing that such punishment would be inflicted on their homes, turned themselves in at headmen's camps. Charity Tirindi recounted why her group presented themselves for arrest: 'we had heard that those who were caught from Igoji were beaten so we might make ourselves to be beaten for no good reason [unnecessarily] so we decided to take ourselves'.⁹⁵

The walk to the headman's camp, according to Monica Kanana, was not easy as she tried to keep her legs apart and her head shrouded in a cloth. Upon their arrival, *Ngaitana* members responded to Home Guards' and headmen's queries by claiming that they had 'circumcised themselves'. They remained in headmen's camps from a few days to a few weeks, until their parents paid their fines. During their stay, they ate food brought by their mothers and slept in simple shelters or on dried banana leaves. Caroline Kirote and Evangeline M'Iringo remembered that at times the camps were filled with one hundred or more girls.⁹⁶

Headmen and Home Guards along with local *Njuri* members, who served as judicial councilors within headmen's camps, consumed all of the

livestock paid in fines. Fines paid varied across time and from one individual to the next. Lucy Kajuju recounted that as a headman, her father was forced to pay a double fine of two bulls and two he-goats. Evangeline M'Iringo recalled that she and her sister decided to be excised together, even though they were five years apart in age, so their parents would only have to pay a single goat. Ex-Subarea Headman David M'Naikiuru remembered a gradual decrease in the fines charged: 'they started with imprisoning and destroying the houses, they went down to fining cows ... as the number of circumcised girls increased they saw the bulls that were suppose to be eaten were too many so they started fining goats.'⁹⁷

Fines in kind were not the only punishment meted out in headmen's camps. Many *Ngaitana* members, after healing, performed several weeks of punitive manual labor ranging from digging roads and drainage trenches through planting trees and clearing weeds to plastering floors in Home Guard houses. In some areas of the District, punishment involved attendance at *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, state-sponsored women's groups which taught the values and practices of home craft.⁹⁸ A Methodist missionary recorded that most headmen regarded participation in *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* as a privilege and therefore, as punishment, forbade *Ngaitana* members from attending meetings for seven to ten weeks. One Christian headman, though, viewing such meetings as rehabilitation, insisted that 'all these girls should attend classes instead of doing manual work for the location'.⁹⁹ Defiance and enforcement of the ban also became entangled with sexual and marital access to initiates. Caroline Kirote recalled the following song chastising a headman named M'Mbujju for enforcing the ban and proclaiming that he would never have sex with—'cover'—a member of *Ngaitana*:

Yes, yes, M'Mbujju, you will die before you cover a circumcised girl.

Yes, yes, M'Mbujju, circumcised girls have been made to dig up a road.

Yes, M'Mbujju, circumcised girls have dug up a road, yes.

James Laiboni of Igembe recounted stories of two *Ngaitana* members who were betrothed to a headman and Home Guard, respectively, as their parents could not afford the fines imposed.¹⁰⁰

Interviewees remembered that individuals taken to African Courts were those arrested by Tribal Police, as opposed to Home Guards, or those who refused to pay fines to the local *Njuri*. According to interviewees, people refused to pay the local *Njuri* either because they thought that by furthering their case to the African Court, they would avoid paying a fine altogether, or, more often, because they did not want to provide *Njuri* members, headmen, and Home Guards with more livestock to eat.¹⁰¹ During the Mau Mau rebellion, such consumption had taken on a particular salience as headmen and Home Guards confiscated and ate the cattle of suspected Mau Mau sympathizers, depriving households of wealth as well as sources of milk and meat. In collecting fines of livestock and, possibly, young brides

beyond the purview of British officers, these African men pursued local political interests and masked their inability and/or unwillingness to prevent defiance. Some of those accused of defiance subverted these political interests by choosing to pay relatively high monetary fines in African Courts rather than provide headmen, Home Guards, and *Njuri* members with meat.

While largely ignorant of politics within headmen's camps, many European observers voiced concern over the work of African Courts. Following his investigation of a *Ngaitana* case involving his shepherd, Ngarui Kabuthia, settler Casey criticized African Court personnel for not allowing witnesses and arrogantly refusing appeals: 'He [the court clerk] implied that the Court was infallible and no good would come of challenging it. Such a thing, he said, had never happened before.'¹⁰² In reviewing the court registers, British district officers often reduced the size of fines imposed. Central government officials were wary of the ban from its inception. Monthly court returns from Meru reporting hundreds of people charged with defying the ban only added to their unease. In response to the April 1957 returns listing over two hundred *Ngaitana* cases, the African Courts Officer Rylands wrote to the District Commissioner of Meru: 'are [you] satisfied with the number of such cases so suddenly taken as a result of the *Njuri*'s order and the severity of the fines imposed? The P[rovincial] C[ommissioner] has stressed the matter is basically one for education of public opinion.'¹⁰³ Following this memorandum, the number of cases and size of fines only increased. In July 1957, the African Courts Officer wrote to the Provincial Commissioner: 'the avalanche does not slow up.... If this is not "mass action through the courts" I don't know what is.'¹⁰⁴ Central government officials, though, did not halt 'the avalanche'. That took a settler's letter of complaint and two Parliamentary questions.

In July 1957, settler Casey wrote a letter to a Member of Parliament, Barbara Castle, drawing her attention to the inappropriateness of the ban and the injustices perpetuated in enforcing it. He requested Castle to secure from the Colonial Office statistics on prosecutions relating to the ban. On 1 August 1957, Castle raised the issue of the Meru ban in the House of Commons before the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Unsatisfied with his response, Castle requested a further inquiry into the matter. In this correspondence, Castle sided with Casey: 'I abhor the practice of female circumcision and certainly want to see it stamped out, but I do not think this is the right way to do it.'¹⁰⁵ While awaiting the Governor of Kenya's comments on the subject, the Secretary of State made a preliminary response to Castle's critique of the ban. He contended that if, as 'it seems obvious', the ban has reduced the incidence of clitoridectomy, it was justified.¹⁰⁶ In late December, the Governor of Kenya wrote to the Secretary of State, distancing central administration as well as officers in Meru from the formulation and enforcement of the ban.

The state of affairs brought to your attention by Mrs. Castle is the result of an excessive outburst of zeal on the part of the tribal authorities and African

Courts of Meru to stamp out female circumcision, which the more enlightened leaders of the tribe have come to abhor ... the Administration has, however, already taken steps to curb this enthusiasm and to reduce not only the number of cases being brought to court, but also to temper the sentences imposed ... the decision of the *Njuri Ncheke*, the indigenous tribal authority and the arbiters of tribal law and custom, to ban female circumcision, was taken without any influence being brought to bear on them by Government or the Missions.¹⁰⁷

The Governor explained that the anti-clitoridectomy campaign in Meru had shifted focus from prosecutions in court to education and health propaganda. Moreover, he stated that chiefs and headmen, as government employees, would no longer prosecute cases in court; that task would be left to local *Njuri* members. This represented a major retrenchment in enforcement of the ban. The Secretary of State forwarded the Governor's letter to Castle along with notification that, on appeal, Ngarui Kabuthia's sentence was reduced from 400/- to 50/- shillings.¹⁰⁸

In November 1957, the *Njuri Ncheke* held a meeting to discuss the position of the ban. They had already begun to feel the effects of the new policy of enforcement reported by the Governor. Members of the *Njuri Ncheke* agreed that while the incidence of excision had only increased of late, 'courts had tended to disregard hearing of circumcision cases'. They proceeded to complain of the *Njuri Ncheke's* inefficacy as a colonial institution:

Njuri had means of enforcing its rules in the past, but since the advent of the British Rule, *Njuri* has had to modify its punishments most of which were cruel. In the old days no one dared disobey *Njuri* but these days the British Government has tended to replace the indigenous authority, and maintenance of law and order is a responsibility of Government.¹⁰⁹

Before British officers, *Njuri Ncheke* members blamed the ban's failure on the weakening of their authority under colonial rule. They did not acknowledge that the ban was a largely unprecedented extension of male authority into women's affairs. Nor did they reveal how some headmen, Home Guards, and *Njuri* members used enforcement of the ban to pursue more immediate political interests.

After October 1957, the number of *Ngaitana* cases in African Courts decreased dramatically throughout the District. By March 1959, they had ceased entirely.¹¹⁰ As even young girls defied the ban, it is unlikely that by 1959 there were many adolescent girls left in Meru who had not already been excised.

Discourses of sexual oppression, human rights, women's health, and neo-colonialism structure current international debates over campaigns to eradicate clitoridectomy and infibulation. Analysis of the 1956 ban, though, demonstrates the significance of gender identities and generational relations

to understanding the continuance of these practices. In 1950s Meru, most people believed that clitoridectomy, as a part of female initiation, remade girls into women. Through female initiation, adolescent girls learned how to behave as young women as well as future wives and daughters-in-law. The 1956 ban was at least as much of a challenge to relations of seniority among women as to relations of subordination between men and women. Adolescent girls, some afraid of being denied adulthood and others feeling peer pressure, attempted to excise each other, not appreciating and/or accepting the severity of the practice. While older women reasserted control over the process by performing a second excision, *Ngaitana* permanently altered female initiation in most parts of the District. In appearing as a travesty of previous initiations, it lent support, in some areas and households, to a growing sentiment that female initiation was no longer necessary. In other places where the practice persisted, *Ngaitana* helped to reduce the process of female initiation to clitoridectomy; 'they are still circumcised secretly, the one who wants'.¹¹¹

Analysis of the 1956 ban also reveals how relations of gender and generation shaped and limited the more interventionist policies of the post-World War II colonial state. Various scholars have examined how during the inter-war period colonial officers and older African men colluded to exert control over women and young men.¹¹² During the post-World War II period, the weakness of this collusion became increasingly apparent. Women and young men protested labor policies, soil conservation campaigns, and the denial of economic opportunities and political rights.¹¹³ Officials responded to these protests by attempting both to strengthen the authority of headmen and elders and to incorporate women and young men more fully in colonial rule. The 1956 ban was, in part, an affirmation of the social vision of a small but increasingly influential group in administrative circles, young Africans with advanced school education. Colonial officers also viewed the ban, like the appointment of Martha Kanini to the African District Council, as a step towards elevating women's status. According to District Commissioner Cumber, 'women of Meru' as well as 'future generations of the Tribe as a whole' would appreciate the ban's passage.¹¹⁴ As part of a broader strategy of affirming their loyalty to the colonial government and protecting Meru land from 'Kikuyu' claims, the African District Council and the *Njuri Ncheke* unanimously passed the ban.

Mass defiance of the ban revealed that the colonial state's intermediaries lacked the political authority and will to remake social relations. District Commissioner Cumber interpreted widespread defiance of the ban as young men's loss of respect for the authority of older men. While most young men probably opposed the ban and preferred excised brides, girls and women organized the defiance. Cumber assumed that male elders of long ago could have eliminated clitoridectomy; he never considered that female initiation lay beyond the jurisdiction of men's councils. Headmen and Home Guards, many still favoring clitoridectomy, exhibited tremendous

discretion in punishing those who defied the ban. In accordance with the African District Council's resolution and the *Njuri Ncheke's* proclamation, they charged some offenders in African Courts with contravening the *Njuri's* order. Interviews suggest, though, that many cases never made it to African Courts. In fining offenders beyond the purview of colonial officers, headmen and Home Guards sought to conceal their inability and/or unwillingness to prevent defiance as well as to turn the meting out of punishment into personal gain. During *Ngaitana*, headmen, Home Guards, and *Njuri* members consumed extraordinary amounts of meat and, perhaps on occasion, took initiates as wives. Post-World War II interventionist state policies, even in their failures, enlarged the administrative space in which such men could pursue other, more immediate, political concerns.

Notes

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1. Interview: Veronica Kinaito, 7/5/95, tapes no. 64–65. I am grateful to Carol Gatwiri, Doreen Jackson, Grace Kirimi, Richard Kirimi, Rosemary Kithiira, Thomas Mutethia, Nkatha Mworora, Charity Nduru, and Diana Rigiri who provided translation assistance during interviews and transcribed and translated them afterwards. All tapes and transcripts are presently in my possession; they will be deposited at the Kenyan National Archives.

2. The terms 'clitoridectomy' and 'excision' both denote the removal of the clitoris and the whole or partial excision of the labia minora. Unlike 'female circumcision', these terms do not suggest equivalency between these genital practices performed on women and male circumcision. Throughout this paper, the term 'circumcision' is used in quoting oral sources, as it is the most widely accepted translation from the Meru language.

3. The African District Council in neighboring Embu District adopted the ban in late 1956. Kenyan National Archives (KNA): DC/MRU/1/1/12/1, Meru District Annual Report, 1956.

4. Interview: M'Anampiu, 5/10/95, tapes no. 41–42.

5. KNA: African Courts, Monthly Returns, Meru, 1956–58, ARC(MAA)/2/9/27/II, ARC(MAA)/2/10/27/III, MAA/7/282, and MAA/7/283.

6. Interview: Selina Kiroki, 6/30/95, tapes no. 62–63.

7. The incidence of clitoridectomy is still high in many areas of Meru: *Harmful Traditional Practices that Affect the Health of Women and Children in Kenya* (Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Nairobi, 1992); *Qualitative Research Report on Female Circumcision in Four Districts in Kenya* (PATH, Nairobi, 1993). My interviews are

biased towards areas of the former Meru District (now Meru, Nyambene, and Tharaka/Nthi Districts) accessible from Meru town by public transportation and/or a five-kilometer walk. Compared to more remote areas, the areas where I conducted interviews have better infrastructure, participate more fully in the cash economy, and have a longer history of engagement with Christianity and school education. Within Meru, these areas are reputed to have lower incidences of excision. Many of the women of the *Ngaitana* age group whom I interviewed reported that they choose not to have their daughters excised because they felt it to be an unnecessary and/or harmful practice. Clitoridectomy is not illegal in Kenya today. In 1982, Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi issued an administrative decree against clitoridectomy, but it did not entail legal sanction. Only cases of 'forcible circumcision', when a girl or woman is excised against her or her parents' or guardians' will, are punishable under the penal code as physical assault.

8. 'Infibulation' refers to the 'excision of all or part of the mons veneris, the labia majora, the labia minora, the clitoris, the raw wounds adhering or having been sewn together to leave only a small aperture for the urinary and menstrual flows'. Lilian Passmore Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women* (Ithaca Press, London, 1981), p. 2.

9. Efua Dorkenoo, *Cutting the Rose: Female Genital Mutilation, The Practice and Its Prevention* (Minority Rights Publications, London, 1994), pp. 61–82.

10. Fran P. Hosken, *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females* (WIN News, Lexington, 1979); Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, Boston, 2nd ed., 1978). Both Hosken and Daly are Americans.

11. Scilla McLean, *Female Circumcision, Excision, and Infibulation: The Facts and Proposals for Change* (Minority Rights Group, London, 1980); Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1980); Asma El Dareer, *Women, Why Do You Weep?* (Zed Press, London, 1982).

12. Dorkenoo, *Cutting the Rose*, pp. 62–3.

13. Harriet Lyons, 'Anthropologists, Moralities, and Relativities: The Problem of Genital Mutilations', *Canadian Review of Society and Anthropology*, 18 (1981), pp. 499–518; Corinne A. Kratz, 'Appendix A: Initiation and Circumcision', in *Affecting Performance: Meaning, Movement, and Experience in Okiek Women's Initiation* (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1994), pp. 341–7.

14. Kratz, 'Appendix A', in *Affecting Performance*, p. 347.

15. Vicki Kirby, 'On the Cutting Edge: Feminism and Clitoridectomy', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 5 (1987), pp. 35–55; Sondra Hale, 'A Question of Subjects: The "Female Circumcision" Controversy and the Politics of Knowledge', *Ufahamu*, 22 (1994), pp. 26–35.

16. In Kenya, the Network to Combat Harmful Practices Affecting Women (NCHPAW), formed in 1994, is an association of local health and women's organizations working, largely through education campaigns, to eradicate clitoridectomy. A range of international funders support NCHPAW's work. On health-based plans of action, Olayinka Koso-Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication* (Zed Books, London, 1987); and Dorkenoo, *Cutting the Rose*.

17. See Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women*, for an account of the unsuccessful 1946 outlawing of infibulation in Sudan. The Meru ban is mentioned, though not examined, in Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women*, p. 68, and Rev. Canon Ephantus Josiah, *Female Circumcision* (Uzima Press, Nairobi, n.d.), p. 15, cited in Dorkenoo, *Cutting the Rose*, p. 9.

18. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 239.

19. E. Mary Holding, 'Women's Institutions and the African Church', *International Review of Missions*, 31 (1942), pp. 291–300.

20. Janice Boddy, *Women and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1989), p. 319.

21. On the significance of age groups to initiation, see E. Mary Holding, 'Some Preliminary Notes on Meru Age Grades', *Man*, 30–31 (1942), pp. 58–65; Claire Robertson, 'Grassroots in Kenya: Women, Genital Mutilation, and Collective Action, 1920–90', *Signs*, 21 (1996), pp. 615–42; Bernardo Bernardi, *Age Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985).

22. For a review of Mau Mau historiography, see Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity* (James Currey, London, 1992).

23. For example, Carl G. Rosberg and John Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya* (Praeger, London, 1966), pp. 105–35; Susan Pedersen, 'National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-Making', *Journal of Modern History*, 63 (1991), pp. 647–80. An exception to this paradigm is John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', in Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*, pp. 315–504.

24. Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History', *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), p. 1533.

25. On how colonial debates over *sati* similarly silenced the women at the center of that practice, Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987), pp. 119–56; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1988), pp. 271–313.

26. David W. Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau, 1945–53* (James Currey, London, 1988), pp. 140–70; Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (James Currey, London, 1990), pp. 303, 308.

27. J. T. Samuel Kamunchuluh, 'The Meru Participation in Mau Mau', *Kenya Historical Review*, 3 (1975), pp. 193–216; Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905–63* (James Currey, London, 1987); Luise White, 'Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939–59', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23 (1990), pp. 1–25; Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1992).

28. D. A. Low and J. M. Lonsdale, 'Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945–63', in *History of East Africa*, ed. D. A. Low and A. Smith, vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, London, 1976), pp. 12–16.

29. Throup, *Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau*, pp. 144–8; Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya*, pp. 208–17.

30. Home Guards were 'loyal' Africans recruited by the colonial government and supplied with arms to eliminate passive support for Mau Mau fighters; they became notorious for their 'reign of terror'. Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya*, p. 357.

31. KNA: DC/KBU/7/3, N.A.D. Circular No. 36 of 9/21/25, reproduced in Jocelyn Murray, 'The Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy, with Special Reference to the Church Missionary Society's "Sphere of Influence"' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 122–3.

32. Meru County Council Office (MCC): Meru Local Native Council Book No. 1, meetings of 10/12/25 and 6/2–3/27.

33. KNA: PC/CP8/1/1, District Commissioner (D.C.), Fort Hall, to Provincial Commissioner (P.C.), Kikuyu, 1/4/29 and D.C., Embu, to P.C., Kikuyu, 12/27/28, quoted in Murray, 'The Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy', p. 114.

34. Holding, 'Women's Institutions and the African Church', pp. 296–7.

35. Zablon John Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya* (Uzima, Nairobi, 1982), p. 72.

36. Murray, 'The Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy', pp. 136–44. For an account of the corresponding debates in the House of Commons, Pedersen, 'National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts'.

37. KNA: DC/MRU/1/2, Meru District Annual Report, 1931; and PC/CP8/1/2, D.C., Embu, to P.C., Kikuyu, 5/14/31.

38. Lynn M. Thomas, 'Reading Clitoridectomy Campaigns as the Constitution of Authorities: Meru District, Kenya, c.1918–38', paper presented to the African Studies Association, Boston, December 1993.

39. KNA: PC/CP8/1/2, D.C., Embu, to P.C., Kikuyu, 5/14/31; and Interview: Esther M'ltinji and Julia Simion, 10/14/90, tape no. 3.

40. Bertha Jones, *Kenya Kaleidoscope: The Story of Bertha Jones for 28 Years a Servant of the Church in Kenya* (Devon, 1995), pp. 22–5.

41. Thomas, 'Reading Clitoridectomy Campaigns'.

42. Robert Macpherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Presbyterian Church, Nairobi, 1970); and Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya*.

43. Interview: Tarsila Nikobwe and Margaret Mwakinia, 9/20/90, tape no. 10.

44. For descriptions of these procedures, Daniel Nyaga, *Mikarire na Mituurire ya Amiiru* (Heinemann, Nairobi, 1986).

45. The classic formulation is Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Blackwood, London, 1922). On Meru, see H. E. Lambert, *The Use of Indigenous Authorities: Studies in the Meru in Kenya Colony* (Communications from the School of Africa Studies, No. 16, Cape Town, 1947). On how all colonial rule is inevitably 'indirect', Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985), pp. 30–60.

46. Frederick Cooper, 'From Free Labor to Family Allowances: Labor and African Society in Colonial Discourse', *American Ethnologist*, 16 (1988), pp. 745–65.

47. KNA: CS/1/14/100, Minutes of the Meeting of the African District Council (A.D.C.), 3/8–9/56; and MCC: Meru A.D.C. Book No. 6, meeting of 3/8–9/56.

48. MCC: Meru A.D.C. Book No. 6, meeting of 4/12/56; and KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/12/1, Meru District Annual Report, 1956.

49. KNA: CS/1/14/100, 'Notes of a Special Meeting of the Meru A.D.C. held 7/3/56'.

50. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/12/1, Meru District Annual Report, 1956.

51. KNA: MAA/1/5, Central Province Annual Report, 1957.

52. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/12/1, Meru District Annual Report, 1956; and DC/MRU/1/1/13, Meru District Annual Report, 1957. Interview: Richard Cashmore, 12/6/95. On Mate's election, B. A. Ogot, 'The Decisive Years, 1956–63', in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940–93*, ed. B. A. Ogot and W. R. Ochieng' (James Currey, London, 1995), pp. 54–8.

53. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/13, Meru District Annual Report, 1957; and DC/MRU/1/1/14, Meru District Annual Report, 1958. Interview: Naaman M'Mwirichia, 9/18/95, tapes no. 74–75.

54. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/13, Meru District Annual Report, 1957.

55. KNA: PC/CP/1/9/1, Meru Political Record Book, 1908–21; and DC/MRU/1/1/1 and DC/MRU/1/1/2, Meru District Annual Reports, 1910–28.

56. H. E. Lambert, *The Use of Indigenous Authorities*.

57. Joseph I. Kinyua, 'A History of the *Njuri* in Meru, 1910–63' (B.A. diss., History, University of Nairobi, c.1969–70).

58. MCC: ADM/15/16/6/I-II, *Njuri Ncheke*. Men and women joined and advanced through the ranks of the Mau Mau movement by participating in a series of oaths.

59. Kinyua, 'A History of the *Njuri* in Meru', p. 46; Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya*.

60. KNA: DC/MRU/1/3/12, Meru District, Handing Over Report, 1953; and MCC: ADM/15/16/6/II, *Njuri Ncheke*.

61. Interviews: Naaman M'Mwirichia, 9/18/95; Daniel M'Iringo, 6/25/95, tapes no. 59–60; and David M'Naikiuru, 4/29/95, tapes no. 34–35.

62. Following a request by an employee for a loan of 400/- shillings to pay a *Ngaitana* fine, Casey investigated the ban, interviewing officers, headmen, African Court staff, and 'ordinary tribesmen'. Public Record Office (PRO): CO/822/1647, letter written by Casey, Timau, to Castle, MP, London, 7/1/57.

63. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter by Casey to Castle, 7/1/57.

64. Interviews: Stanley Kathurima, 9/15/95, tapes no. 72–73; and Naaman M'Mwirichia, 9/18/95.

65. KNA: DC/MRU/1/3/12, Meru District, Handing Over Report, 1953.

66. MCC: ADM/15/16/6/II, *Njuri Ncheke*.

67. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/12/1, Meru District Annual Report, 1956.

68. Holding, 'Women's Institutions and the African Church'.

69. Low and Lonsdale, 'Introduction', *History of East Africa*, p. 15. Three years later, officials appointed the first female 'headman', Ciokaraine M'Barungu, in Meru. See Rebeka Njau and Gideon Mulaki, *Kenya Women Heroes and Their Mystical Power* (Risk Publications, Nairobi, 1984), pp. 16–26.

70. Interview: Martha Kanini, 9/16/95, tapes no. 73–74.

71. KNA: CS/1/14/100, Meru A.D.C. Minutes, 1955–57.

72. Interviews: M'Anampiu, 5/10/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95, tapes no. 52–53; Isabel Kaimuri, 3/20/95, tapes no. 24–25; Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95, tapes no. 21–22; Agnes Kirimi, 6/12/95, tapes no. 54–55; and Elizabeth Muthuuri, 1/3/95, tapes no. 8–9. For the young age of *Ngaitana* initiates, also see KNA: MSS/7, E. Mary Holding, 'Notes of Girls' Circumcision'.

73. Interviews: Moses M'Mukindia, 1/11/95; Jacobu M'Lithara 2/6/95; Isabella Ncence, 10/19/90; Margaret M'Ithinji, 10/17/90; Elizabeth Kiogora, 10/18/90; Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; and Agnes Kirimi, 6/12/95.

74. Missionary Holding outlined the following qualifications for a *mutani*: she must be post-menopausal, sexually abstinent, and elected by the women's council, and she must perform her first excision on her own child. KNA: MSS/7, E. Mary Holding, 'The Functions of Women's Institutions in Meru Society'.

75. Methodist Mission Society Papers at St. Paul's Offices, Meru (MMS MSP): 1, Merle Wilde, 'Meru Women's Work Report, Synod 1958'. None of my oral material supports Wilde's statement that some girls 'circumcised themselves', as opposed to each other.

76. Interview: Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; Agnes Kirimi, 6/12/95; Isabel Kaimuri, 3/20/95; Isabella Kajuju, 3/20/95, and her niece, Monica Kanana, 3/23/95, tapes no. 25–26; and Elizabeth M'Iringo, 3/16/95, tape no. 23.

77. PRO: CO/822/1647, Ag. Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 12/27/57. Another medical doctor noted the continuing dangers of excision, reporting how one thirteen-year-old girl 'died of hemorrhage following on the operation of female circumcision'. Dr. Clive Irvine, Presbyterian missionary, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 12/21/57.

78. Interviews: Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; Agnes Kirimi, 6/12/95; and Monica Kanana, 3/23/95.

79. Interviews: Selina Kiroki, 6/30/95; Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; and Agnes Kirimi, 6/12/95.

80. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/13, Meru District Annual Report, 1957.

81. MCC: ADM/15/16/6/III, Minutes of Meeting of *Njuri Ncheke*, 4/15/58.

82. KNA: DC/MRU/1/1/11/2, Meru District Annual Report, 1955; DC/MRU/1/1/13 Meru District Annual Report, 1957; and AB/16/16, Youth Schemes Meru, 1956.

83. Interview: Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95.

84. MCC: ADM/15/16/6/II, 'Minutes of a Special Meeting of *Njuri* Committee held in the A.D.C. Office on 11/6/57'.

85. 'Dirt' appears to allude to the uncleanness associated with unexcised women as well as the clitoris itself.

86. Holding, 'Women's Institutions and the African Church'; KNA: MSS/7, E. Mary Holding, '*Nthoni*: Respect, Deference, Good Manners'.

87. Interviews: Elizabeth Muthuuri, 1/3/95; Moses M'Mukindia, 1/11/95; Monica Kanana, 3/23/95; Agnes Kirimi, 6/10/95; Lucy Kajuju, 3/23/95, not recorded; and Richard Cashmore, 12/6/95. They also chided Cashmore as the district officer with 'skin like a pig'.

88. Interviews: Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; David M'Naikiuru, 4/29/95; Monica Kanana, 3/23/95; and Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95.

89. KNA: AB 2/51, P.C., Central to Minister for African Affairs, 'Female Rehabilitation Centre, Meru', 9/23/54.

90. Kamunchuluh, 'The Meru Participation in Mau Mau'.

91. Interviews: Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; and Veronica Kinaito, 7/5/95.

92. Of the two dozen or more people whom I interviewed who were charged with defying the ban, all paid their fines at headmen's camps, not African Courts.

93. These percentages are estimates, as it was sometimes difficult to determine an individual's status from the court registers. KNA: African Courts, Monthly Returns, Meru, 1956–58, ARC(MAA)/2/9/27/II, ARC(MAA)/2/10/27/III, MAA/7/282, and MAA/7/283.

94. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter by Casey to Castle, 7/1/57.

95. Interviews: M'Anampiu, 5/10/95; Moses M'Mukindia, 1/11/95; Monica Kanana, 3/23/95; and Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95.

96. Interviews: Monica Kanana, 3/23/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; and Evangeline M'Iringo, 3/16/95.

97. Interviews: Lucy Kajuju, 3/23/95; Evangeline M'Iringo, 3/16/95; and David M'Naikiuru, 4/29/95.

98. Audrey Wipper, 'The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Movement in the Colonial Period: The Canadian Connection, Mau Mau, Embroidery, and Agriculture', *Rural Africana*, 29 (1975–76), pp. 195–214.

99. MMS MSP: 1, Merle Wilde, 'Meru Women's Work Report, Synod 1958'.

100. Interviews: Charity Tirindi, 2/10/95; Monica Kanana, 3/23/95; Caroline Kirote, 6/9/95; and James Laiboni, 7/23/95, tape no. 67.

101. Interview: Samuel Nkure, 5/7/95, not recorded.

102. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter by Casey to Castle, 7/1/57.
103. KNA: (ARC)MAA/2/9/27/III, letter from African Courts Officer, R.F.D. Rylands, to D.C., Meru, regarding African Court Returns, 5/29/57.
104. KNA: (ARC)MAA/2/9/27/III, letter from African Courts Officer, J.B. Carson, to P.C., Central, regarding African Court Returns, 7/16/57.
105. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter written by MP Castle to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lennox-Boyd, 10/16/57.
106. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter written by Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lennox-Boyd, to MP Castle, 10/20/57.
107. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter written by the Governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 12/27/57.
108. PRO: CO/822/1647, letter written by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to MP Castle, 1/20/58.
109. MCC: ADM/15/16/6/II, 'Minutes of a Special Meeting of *Njuri* Committee held in the A.D.C. Office on 11/6/57'.
110. KNA: African Courts, Monthly Returns, Meru, 1956–58, ARC(MAA)/2/9/27/II, ARC(MAA)/2/10/27/III, MAA/7/282, and MAA/7/283.
111. Interviews: Isabella Kajuju, 3/20/95; Lucy Kajuju, 3/23/95; and Jacobu M'Lithara, 2/6/95.
112. Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1985); Margot Lovett, 'Gender Relations, Class Formation, and the Colonial State in Africa', in *Women and the State in Africa*, ed. J. Parpart and K. Staudt (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1989), pp. 23–46; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, 1992).
113. E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, 'The Formative Years, 1945–55', in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya*, ed. Ogot and Ochieng'.
114. MCC: Meru A.D.C. Book No. 6, meeting of 4/12/56.