

## Intercultural Conflict: The Fight over Female Circumcision, 1914–1932

by G. Macharia Munene

### Introduction

One of the most controversial cultural issues in Kenya's colonial history pertained to the circumcision of women. The fight was between the Agikuyu, Aembu and Ameru on the one hand and the white Christian missionaries and colonial government officials on the other. Politics, religion, economic and administrative policies were affected by this issue. It became the symbol of cultural survival for the people and Christian and colonial triumph for the whites. There was, however, no uniformity of thought on either side, as Africans became divided and Europeans disagreed on how to deal with the colonized subjects. What was apparent, however, was the seriousness with which they defended their respective positions, in what was an intercultural clash between the ways of the whites and those of the blacks.

### The beginning to 1914

The first encounter between the Agikuyu and Europeans was one of mutual suspicion. Before 1883, white travellers skirted Gikuyu land on their way to Uganda because they had been warned, possibly by Arab and Swahili traders, that the Agikuyu were hostile to travellers. Joseph Thomson, the first white man to enter the Gikuyu country in 1883, reinforced this view by describing the people as the 'most troublesome and intractable in this region.' The Hungarian Count Teleki in 1887, after fighting his way through Southern Gikuyuland, had to find an alternative route in his return trip, (Murray-Brown 1972).

Stories of Gikuyu hostility ended in 1890 when Captain Lugard, an employee of the Imperial

British East African Company (IBEA), was received at Dagoretti by Waiyaki wa Hinga. Waiyaki, who at the time was expanding his influence in the vicinity of future Nairobi, entered a blood brotherhood deal with Lugard which paved the way for European infiltration (Murray-Brown 1972; Muriuki 1974). Unknowingly, Waiyaki had signed off Gikuyu claims to this strange *mzungu* (European) Brother.

It did not take long before Lugard's *wazungu* brethren came to subdue the people on behalf of IBEA. Among them was a Major Eric Smith who built Fort Smith, right in Waiyaki's Dagoretti village in 1891. Other Europeans included a George Wilson and an agent known as William J. Purkiss. It was Purkiss who first helped Waiyaki against the Maasai and then subdued Waiyaki himself and sent him to exile; Waiyaki died at Kibwezi on the way to the coast under IBEA custody (Rosberg J. and Nottingham 1966). With tension mounting between the IBEA and the Agikuyu, in 1892, one of the more ruthless IBEA administrators, Francis Hall was sent in 1892 who then launched a series of 'punitive expeditions' on the Agikuyu in order to procure food from the uncooperative Gikuyu. 'To tell the truth,' he wrote, 'I want a lot of food for Macdonald's caravans... In fact, this is the real reason I have been so keen to smash them properly (sic) as they would otherwise be a continuing menace to our food parties and probably take the first opportunity (sic) of cutting them up!.' With Hall, any pretensions of friendship ceased to exist.

Following Hall's footsteps were different European missionaries emphasizing a variety of Christian denominations. Most of these were from Britain but the Italians and the French also established themselves in different areas. The Church of Scotland Mission led the way when Reverend Thomas Watson established a base at

Thogoto in 1898; Watson died in 1900. His successor, Clement Scott, acquired 1,200 hectares of land and helped to make Thogoto a staging ground for mission expansion among the Agikuyu. It was from Thogoto, therefore, that Arthur R. Barlow moved to Nyeri and established a mission at Tumu Tumu in 1909 (Murray-Brown 1972).

Other missionaries followed, particularly after the building of the railway, and established themselves using trickery, force and government persuasion. In 1903, for instance, one Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission and two Italian missions were set up in Fort Hall district (present day Murang'a) from where missionaries were sent to Embu and Meru. An Italian missionary 'established an unauthorised station at Mugoiri' in 1905 and 'struck Karuri.' Karuri wa Gakure was the leading government agent and had a commanding influence in Fort Hall. The French are reported to have 'pursued a policy of obstruction'<sup>2</sup> to British desires. Since British East Africa was a British protectorate, as of 1895, the behaviour of the Italians and French disturbed the administration which often assisted British missionaries. At least, in Chogoria, according to Chief Mbogori, in 1929, the administration had urged the Aembu to grant land to the mission with assurances that educated children would not be treated differently from the others<sup>3</sup>.

Despite such assurances, the missionaries began to interfere with traditions and customs, often with government support. Initially, there were inducements to receive medical treatment, attend school and be converted to Christianity. Conversion involved gradual removal from traditional beliefs and then systematic acquisition of European habits. As a result, some Africans vacillated between the old world of tradition and the new one of the white missionaries. They were attracted by the offer of education and medicine but were sceptical of missionary demands that conflicted with traditional beliefs.

A number of Africans sought, on their own, a

compromise between tradition, on the one hand, and missionary expectations, on the other. This was especially the case on the question of circumcision. In turn, some missionaries actually favoured a compromise in the circumcision of boys in which circumcision would be done in the hospital. An alternative was for a traditional circumcisor to perform the operation without the accompanying ceremonies and on condition that the boy's supporter, *mutiri* was a Christian. As a rule, Christian parents were to circumcise their boys at infancy<sup>4</sup>. Several future leading personalities sought circumcision compromises. In 1908, Harry Thuku was circumcised at Kambui Mission without the usual ceremonies. Kamau wa Ngengi, alias Jomo Kenyatta, was circumcised in 1913 in secret and without the usual ceremonies to avoid antagonising the missionaries from whom he expected baptism in 1914. He was baptised Johnstone. Years later, in 1940, R. Mugo Gatheru also sought a middle way between tradition and the missionary ways by going through a modified circumcision where he did not receive *ngwati* (Thuku 1970; Gatheru 1972; Murray-Brown 1972).

While the issue of male circumcision led to individual compromises, that of female circumcision would lead to cultural and political controversy. The missionary attack on female circumcision was led by Rev. John Arthur of the Church of Scotland Mission (CMS). Arthur, a medical doctor, arrived on December 25, 1906 and started campaigning against female circumcision saying that circumcision was not necessary for child bearing<sup>5</sup>.

Arthur's message was, however, viewed by the local people as interference with tradition. This can be seen in the fact that in 1911, the District Commissioner (DC) for Kikuyu District, noted that the Agikuyu resented missionary encroachment on land and 'interference with tribal authorities.' To them, missionaries were 'just the Europeans who should have been excluded from the Reserves and the natives must regard there

being there as ruthless disregard for their feelings.' This disregard for feelings made the Agikuyu sceptical about the missionary<sup>6</sup>. This scepticism was intensified by interference with female circumcision.

### The war years, 1914-1918

In the war years, 1914-1918, conflicts between the Agikuyu, Aembu and the Ameru, on the one hand, and the missionaries on the other, began to manifest themselves; contradictions among the missionaries became evident, and cooperation between the administrators and missionaries to force Africans to work for European settlers was sanctioned.

The issue of female circumcision attracted interest during the war years because of the missionary interference. There was an attempt to regulate the practice and to find a compromise for female circumcision similar to the one for boys. In Kiambu in June 1914, two girls were circumcised in private and without the usual ceremonies. Two more girls were similarly circumcised in 1915. These girls were said to be Christians whose parents were still 'pagans.' At Tumu Tumu, Nyeri, Dr H.R.A. Philp tried the compromise which had worked out in Kiambu in 1915 and abandoned it. After those experiments, the CSM decided to wipe out the custom. In July 1916, the Kikuyu and Tumu Tumu missions banned female circumcision for Christians or children of Christian parentage or wardship. Other missionaries, though with less zeal, had also shown interest in interfering with the custom. The African Inland Mission at Kijabe, for instance, condemned the custom in 1914. At Kahuhia, Rev Hooper of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1915, tried to convince christian elders to abolish the custom<sup>7</sup>.

This interference began at a time when the colonial government wanted everyone's support in World War I, a war that was received with mixed feelings. In February, 1915, G.A.S. Northcote, the Kiambu District Commissioner,

asked missionaries to report on 'native' administration and the spread of venereal diseases and tuberculosis. Many missionaries complied with the request but a Mr J. Caysac of the Catholic Mission at Mang'u did not cooperate. He disqualified himself from being an expert on the 'distribution of venereal and other diseases.' Wondering why he should report on native administration, he wrote, 'I feel rather puzzled and really do not know what to say<sup>8</sup>.'

Gikuyu response to the war was ambivalent and generally unhelpful to the government. Few supported the war. In Kiambu, only Koinange wa Mbiu, a local headman, subscribed to the 'Local War Fund' giving 100 rupees (Rs) and offering 30 loads of potatoes. Although the Agikuyu did not like the Germans, the District Commissioner wrote in his Annual Report for 1914-1915, they did not 'love us (the English) and would prefer our absence.'

Preference for European 'absence' was more pronounced in Fort Hall where people thought that European power was waning' and therefore defied the government and chiefs. The defiance was quickly suppressed and chiefs organised support for war. This forced support involved contributing 2,021 men to the carrier corps in 1915; the supply of 138 bullocks for troops and the selling of 652 bullocks at the 'request of government' which netted Rs. 31,710. Many men deserted the district because they did not wish to 'risk being sent to this corps, to work for an indefinite period and at an unknown destination'<sup>10</sup>.

The reluctance to participate was partly due to the initial exemption given to missionary convertees, referred to as mission boys. The mission boys had lucrative government jobs and, in theory, could not be spared. But to the other Agikuyu, these mission boys were simply cowards who occasionally needed a beating. Subsequently, to be a Christian became synonymous with being a coward. In 1915, the District Commissioner for Fort Hall noted that missionaries had made 'no

conquest over native thought or habits<sup>11</sup> and the exemptions did not help the image of missionaries.

The impression of mission boys being cowards bothered John Arthur who set out to change it. In April 1917 he was commissioned as a captain with authority to recruit an 'elite' corps of porters. In enlisting, Arthur had two objectives. First was to support the empire by using what Jeremy Murray-Brown, Jomo Kenyatta's biographer, termed 'slave gangs' and second to remove the belief that mission boys were cowards. He also hoped to make porters work appear privileged. He then assembled together about 2,000 converts at Thogoto for training. Labelled the Kikuyu Mission Volunteers, Arthur's porters left for Mombasa in May 1917. At the end of the war, the Kikuyu Mission Volunteers had done Arthur proud, with barely 100 casualties (Murray-Brown 1972).

After the war, the British missionaries wanted more control over the Africans. In this desire they had the support of the Chief Native Commissioner, John Ainsworth, previously Military Commissioner for Labour (Van Zwanenberg 1975). Ainsworth considered it his job to promote the interests of British missionaries and settlers. Thus, in November 1918 he suggested restricting 'alien' missionaries and complained: 'We have considerably more aliens carrying out mission work among natives than we have British subjects. This is undoubtedly undesirable if we want to bring up native populations to British ideals'<sup>12</sup>.

As a result, only Britons were allowed to establish new missions and to offer technical education as part of the curriculum. No grants were given to schools that were not British in every way. Medical missions, he asserted, would not be 'recognized unless the doctors employed are in possession of recognised British or colonial diplomas'<sup>13</sup>. Ainsworth wanted to squeeze non-Britons out of missionary work by denying them access to land and to the implements of propagating their faith.

In promoting British missionary interests, the

missionaries were, in turn, expected to offer technical education that would serve settlers and other labour needs. The collusion between missionaries, settlers and the administration was apparent in a July 1918, 'Conference of Protestant Missionary Societies in East Africa' held in Kikuyu. The settlers who were there as participants discussed 'women's work' and female circumcision<sup>14</sup>.

Concern for shortage of labour led to an interesting discussion on the role of missionaries and administrators in a British colony. A feud had arisen between Rev. R.T. Worthington of the United Methodist Church Foreign Mission and the District Commissioner for Meru, A.E. Chemier. While Chemier attempted to minimize potential conflict with the Ameru, Worthington, on the other hand was out to eradicate Meru customs and deny parents access to their children in mission schools<sup>15</sup>. The Kikuyu Provincial Commissioner, H.R. Tate, supported Worthington and essentially reprimanded Chemier. The missionaries, Tate said, taught the 'native' to master his 'desires and impulses' and that mission boys were actually servants to missionaries, bound for five years of apprenticeship before they could be released<sup>16</sup>.

Tate then recommended that Chemier read Sidney Olivier's *White Capital and Coloured Labour*, particularly chapter xiii, which dealt with the role of missionaries in a capitalistic endeavour to exploit colonies and expand imperialism. The missionaries, the book argued, were there to destroy traditional beliefs and cultural hangups that made the African independent and useless to capitalist progress. Colonies were not established out of philanthropic or missionary zeal but for capitalistic ends which administrators and missionaries were expected to advance (Olivier 1910). Olivier's book was then circulating in Kenya's administrative offices. Apart from advising Chemier to read this book, Tate also emphasized that the purpose of making the native literate was to make him an 'efficient and valuable worker'<sup>17</sup>.

Tate's view on making the native a valuable worker were supplemented by the activities of his subordinates in Fort Hall and Kiambu. The Fort Hall District Commissioner, L.L.A.F. Jones, wanted to eradicate 'inhuman and barbaric practices' as a way of providing labour to settlers. He issued standing orders to chiefs 'to see that their able-bodied male population does not remain idle at home, but leaves the Reserve for a reasonable proportion of the year to do its share in fulfilling the labour requirements of the Protectorate in general'<sup>18</sup>. In October 1919, the Kiambu District Commissioner issued a circular promising 'to arrange for a temporary supply of Child Labour from the Reserves,' and asked settlers to send their names, the number of children required and the time would be needed (McGregor-Ross 1968).

The views and activities of such administrators were in line with those of Chief Native Commissioner Ainsworth. In 1919, Ainsworth who was concerned with the widespread shortage of labour for settler farms issued a circular on forced labour that received minimal resistance from missionaries. Only the Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar, among the Protestants, objected to forced labour (McGregor-Ross, 1968). There was similar opposition from Catholic Missionaries in Fort Hall who also showed 'definite hostility to Government' by failing to pay coffee estate dues and non-native poll tax<sup>19</sup>. Most of the Protestant Missionaries, however, supported the circular on forced labour and in turn hoped for government support for their work.

A formula was needed to combine settler labour needs and the missionary desire to eradicate African customs. There was an interesting suggestion to Ainsworth from D.R. Crampton, Provincial Commissioner for Kenya Province. Crampton wanted to enact a law forcing circumcision candidates to be operated at an earlier age than allowed for by tradition. This would release 'able-bodied workers' for labour since young men and women could not claim time off for circumcision.

He thought that this would alleviate labour problems<sup>20</sup>.

In trying to put his idea into practice, Crampton ordered District Commissioners to find ways of cutting down the 'length of time taken over circumcision ceremonies' to about a week<sup>21</sup>. The response was not supportive. The District Commissioner for Fort Hall, F.M. Lamb, pointed out that a minimum of two months was needed for ceremonies. He then suggested that ceremonies be regulated to coincide with *mwere* harvests. The Nyeri District Commissioner argued that the Provincial Commissioner was not being realistic as three months were needed for ceremonies. On his part, the District Commissioner for Embu stated that the Aembu, were unwilling to change customs<sup>22</sup>. Limiting circumcision period, therefore, as a way of recruiting labour did not prove a workable formula for solving the problem of the shortage of labour.

### **The Emergence of Kikuyu Central Association (KCA)**

In the 1920s, Africans became politically aroused and began to challenge both the government and the missionaries. The challenge was symbolized by the activities of Harry Thuku and the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). By 1929, the KCA had emerged as the most potent force on African rights and had capped the period by sending a delegate to England to represent it.

The decade began with a lot of problems. The protectorate, transformed into a crown colony known as Kenya in 1920, had a new governor - Edward Northey. Northey encouraged new white settlers through the Soldier Settlement Scheme. These were mostly poor and unskilled in farming and so they needed a lot of government help. Provision of labour was therefore, to be part of that help.

As a result, the problem of labour became politically intense. The settlers decided to reduce



African wages by a third in 1921, which led to the Africans resorting to secret political meetings. Organisations collected money for political propaganda, promoted disloyalty to government chiefs and widened the rift between; Christians and pagans'. The imposition of registration as a labour recruitment device aggravated the situation further, (McGregor-Ross 1968).

It was then that Harry Thuku emerged as the African spokesman and toured the country countering government registration orders. Among the Luo, the crowds attending Governor Northey's meeting were tiny compared to those of Thuku. After Northey claimed that the *Kipande* was like a passport, Thuku came later to a large crowd and told the Luo to reject the *Kipande*. As his crowds grew in size, Thuku is reported to have become more militant and 'violently anti-European'<sup>23</sup>.

Thuku, the Fort Hall District Commissioner noted in 1922, raised a number of points against the government. First, he argued, Africans had won the war for the British in Africa. Secondly, the new settlers mistreated the Africans. Thirdly the introduction of the shilling effectively cut the wages because the settlers exploited the 'similarity in appearance of the florin which was twice the value'. In addition, tax paid by Africans was raised to 16 shillings<sup>24</sup>. The injustices to Africans increased further when Africans in Fort Hall were forced to sell their oxen at less than the prevailing prices. (McGregor-Ross 1968).

To the government, Thuku had become a dangerous African unifying force that had to be eliminated. In March 1922, Thuku was detained in order to deny the Africans a political leader.

Following Thuku's detention, his supporters retreated and adopted an attitude of 'suspicious watchfulness' on the government and missionaries<sup>25</sup>. They watched missionaries such as Drs. Philp and Jones explore ways of banning female circumcision by preparing pamphlets and articles in both Kiswahili and *Gigikuyu* in 1923. Philp was to write the Kiswahili article for the

Education Department's *Habari* newspaper<sup>26</sup>. Instead of convincing the Agikuyu, however, the missionaries appear to have intensified the pro-Thuku and anti-missionary and anti-government sentiments.

The government noted the negative effect of the missionaries work and advocated gradualism on the circumcision issue. The 1924 Report of Native Affairs Department, for instance, claimed that only a 'few mission educated natives' were against female circumcision. It noted that Gikuyu parents would not be moved against the custom. The only solution, concluded the report, would be the gradual death of the 'present generation of conservative and unteachable elders' who still cling to superstitious customs<sup>27</sup>.

The missionaries did not like this government position of gradualism, but even more disturbing to them was that the educated and christian youth were at the forefront of the anti-missionary and anti-government campaign. In Kiambu, a group calling itself '*Njane*' had sprung up secretly after Thuku's detention. Its members accused government Chiefs Philipo, Njonjo, Koinange and Kinyanjui of having sold Thuku to the Europeans. They vowed to 'have more than one wife and to reestablish 'female circumcision' among Christians<sup>28</sup>. In other areas, such as Githumu and Tumu Tumu, people emphasized the virtues of female circumcision and accused missionaries of being spies.

The heightened anti-missionary movement coincided with the spreading influence of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). KCA became a main political organ that was reportedly 'not amenable to tribal authority'<sup>30</sup>, especially a tribal authority that was subservient to settler and missionary interests. KCA's growing militancy made it difficult for missionaries to acquire more land since, the Agikuyu began to believe, they would simply turn it to white settlement areas. The government was also worried about KCA's militancy. In 1925, it commented that the KCA

'has achieved a notoriety and a prominence out of all proportions to its merits of influence'<sup>21</sup>.

Both the government and the missionaries began to see the KCA and its leader, Joseph Kang'ethe, as the enemy. The government accused the KCA of subverting tribal authorities and ascribing 'sinister motives to all actions of Government'. Some KCA operatives were members of Local Native Councils where, the government believed, they were involved in 'insurrectionary activities'<sup>32</sup>. One such insurrectionary activity was opposition to restricting the extent and practice of female circumcision. Although KCA opposed restrictions, the Kiambu Local Native Council imposed them in 1926.<sup>33</sup>

The restrictions were hard to enforce in part because they were unpopular, which made administrators worry about the missionary zeal. The Kiambu District Commissioner complained that missionaries increased their unpopularity for forbidding even the simple form of circumcision<sup>34</sup>. Reports from Nyeri, Embu, Meru and Fort Hall all indicated that there was little sympathy for restricting female circumcision<sup>35</sup>. Subsequently, government officials were anxious not to rock the political boat by insisting on the enforcement of the restrictions. Such an insistence would have played into the hands of the KCA.

While the administrators wanted to avoid an unnecessary conflict with the KCA which had vowed to use female circumcision politically, the missionaries were confrontational. At Tumu Tumu, the mission forced its followers to denounce KCA or be suspended from Church activities. This did not work as people ignored 'church law' and, as Chief Nderi of Nyeri had advised, individuals decided for themselves what to do<sup>36</sup>. Many of these individuals opted to join the KCA. The KCA and the church were thus bound to clash.

By 1929, the KCA had become the major African political force. It did this by recruiting educated activists, by emphasizing 'anti-authority

propaganda' and by agitating about circumcision. In 1928, KCA recruited Jomo Kenyatta, then a meter reader for the Water Department of Nairobi Town Council. He became secretary-general and editor of KCA's newly founded paper, *Muiguithania* (Reconciler). What was more, KCA increased its stature by sending Kenyatta to London in February 1929 (Roseberg and Nottingham 1966).

*Muiguithania* became an important KCA propaganda organ. It reportedly influenced students at the Government Training Depot at Kabete. In it, the students read that churches had decided to suspend those who refused to abandon female circumcision. As a result, in July 1929, according to the CSM memorandum, 'a lewd song emanated from this school, was widely sung in a sporadic fashion, and augmented very considerably the prevailing unrest among the younger element'<sup>37</sup>. The stage was thus set for a confrontation between the churches and the KCA.

### The Crisis: 1929-1932

The period 1929-1931 was one of confrontation between the missionaries, on the one hand, and the KCA, on the other, over female circumcision. This confrontation attracted attention beyond Kenya's borders. There were frantic efforts to find a solution. The government sought to diffuse the issue by adopting a policy of moderation and had by 1932 managed to remove female circumcision from public debate. In the process it had to disappoint missionary hard liners.

In 1929 confrontation between the missionaries, led by John Arthur of the CSM, and the KCA, led by Joseph Kang'ethe, started with a court decision. In April 1929, a court fined two women 30 shillings each for performing a major circumcision operation instead of a minor one to a 15 year old converttee. Arthur, supported by the Attorney-General, wanted the supreme court to reverse the decision and convict the women of causing 'grievous hurt'. The court issued its opinion on August 5, 1929

through Justice Thomas who compared the deeper incision to a mishap in barber's shop. An incensed Arthur, in a letter to the *The East African Standard* of August 10, 1929, accused Thomas of being ignorant and insensitive to the missionary cause. Editorially, *The East African Standard* endorsed Arthur (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966).

In response to Arthur, Kang'ethe sent a circular to each of the 74 Gikuyu chiefs warning them against Arthur's machinations. This circular, according to the Fort Hall District Commissioner, showed KCA's influence at the expense of Local Native Councils. In the circular, Kang'ethe advised Chiefs to be on:

guard against the order ... (which) will cause much trouble ... And now it is well that you send us a reply speedily... subject to your approval, and that of all chiefs, we might call a big meeting of all the Kikuyu people, that may ascertain the source of this order, who are the people who made the decision and whether it is a law laid down for all Kikuyu people ... We object to the prevention of circumcision and the agreement to it. 38

Kang'ethe also wrote to Arthur and to the Senior Commissioner in Nyeri. He accused Arthur of double standards and wondered why he was not concerned with evil and new immoralities in Nairobi. 'When you came to this country', he reminded Arthur, 'you told us that a church matter was not to be judged in the High Court, and now we have begun to see that the teaching we received was not much of consequences<sup>39</sup>. Neither Arthur nor the Commissioner replied directly to Kang'ethe.

Arthur's reply came through proxies and indirectly through a memorandum. The proxies were Nyeri based chiefs known as Progressive Kikuyu Party (PKP) and Kiambu based chiefs termed Kikuyu Association. Through a letter to *The East African Standard* of 7th September, 1929, (PKP) asked the government to interfere with 'barbarous customs'. The Kikuyu Association, led by chiefs Koinange Mbiu, Josia Njonjo, Waruhiu and Philip Karanja claimed that

Arthur was like a father to them<sup>40</sup>. Behind the scenes, Arthur used his position in the Kenya Executive Council, representing native interests, to promote what came to be labelled the Arthur memorandum.

Supported by the Kikuyu Association, which contemplated changing its name to avoid confusion with the KCA, the Arthur memorandum wanted the KCA's anti-European, anti-government and anti-mission propaganda stopped'. He was emphatic that the KCA was to blame for resistance to the abolition of female circumcision. 'Further the Kikuyu Central Association ought to be... made to understand if they are going to oppose it', stated the memorandum, 'Government will take steps to deal with their organizations ... if it had not been for this Association and its attitude by this time, we would have been within reasonable hope for abolition'<sup>41</sup>. The KA not only endorsed this memorandum, it also held meetings with missionaries on how to obtain signatures of all those who were opposed to female circumcision.

The KCA reacted quickly to obstruct the collection of signatures. The Chiefs and the missionaries, a rumour spread, conspired with other Europeans so as to enable those Europeans to marry *irigu* (uncircumcised girls) as an indirect way of grabbing Gikuyu land. This then explained why they opposed female circumcision. In addition, it was claimed, the petition was meant to stop Kenyatta from returning from England and probably kill him<sup>42</sup>. As a result of such beliefs, few people signed the petition.

The opposition to the petition was fanned by a song and dance known as '*Muthirigu*' from October 1929 to January 1930. The song attacked government officials, described chiefs as traitors, and labelled missionaries as liars. The song claimed that the District Commissioner;

is bribed with uncircumcised girls so that the land may go.

There was reference to African church elders as fools, an accusation that Chiefs Philip Karanja and Koinange had sold Thuku and were attempting



to sell Kenyatta, and a warning to anyone who signed'

You elders of the Church  
 You are fools  
 Would you sell your lives for money  
 Ten thousand shillings  
 Were given for Harry;  
 Now the same amount  
 Is offered for John.

.....

He who signs  
 Shall be crucified.

The missionaries also received verbal attacks. They were called liars or Jesus was described as an Indian or simply a picture. The reference to Jesus as an Indian was because of his purported beard and moustache shown in pictures that resembled an Indian of the Sikh faith.

Little knives  
 In their sheaths  
 That they may fight with the church  
 The time has come

.....

I used to think Jesus was the Son of God;  
 I have now found out  
 That he was an Indian.

.....

I live by my prayers;  
 (Arthur) and (Knapp)  
 Live by lies<sup>43</sup>.

The spread of *Muthirigu* worried the administration, which became sceptical of Arthur's fanaticism. The administration noted Arthur's memorandum was opposed by what the DC for South Nyeri described as the 'more progressive and educated members of the community' in Fort Hall. Among these were Joseph Kang'ethe, Henry Mwangi and Job Muchuchu, who had severed relations with the missionaries and were leaders of KCA. They also favoured secular education, female circumcision, beer drinking and polygamy<sup>44</sup>. Such views were repeated by District Commissioners from other areas and forced the

administration to avoid a confrontational posture.

Reacting to reports from various districts, E.B. Horne, on behalf of the Senior Commissioner, Kikuyu Province, recommended a government policy of 'masterly inactivity' in October 1929. Horne's strategy was to avoid driving 'loyal and contented Kikuyu into the arms of the Kikuyu Central Association'. Arthur's recommendations were thus rejected since they could have led to 'friction and probably bloodshed'<sup>45</sup>.

There were indications of serious problems arising from Arthur's campaign. The Church of Scotland Mission lost pupils in its schools with the number of pupils dropping from 1445 in December 1928 to 647 in December 1929. The Department of Education report for 1929 blamed the CSM for the closure of many schools because teachers refused to denounce both the KCA and female circumcision. The report questioned CSM's claim to the 'right to control the political and spiritual beliefs of those whom it employs in its schools even though the government pays a part of their salaries'. Similarly, the Native Affairs Department noted that Arthur's attacks on Gikuyu customs aroused Gikuyu hostility which, in turn, made administrative work difficult<sup>46</sup>.

Administrative work became more difficult because of attention that the issue of female circumcision attracted in England and Europe. In London, a 'Joint Select Committee' whose members included the Duchess of Atholl, C.R. Buxton and Colonel Josiah Wedgood, heard hearings on female circumcision. Among those who testified was KCA's Jomo Kenyatta, in defense of the custom, after which Wedgood remarked that he had never heard 'the nigger ... in an English colony say that he is proud of being an Englishman'<sup>47</sup>. The Duchess of Atholl demanded the abolition of the custom in the House of Commons and thereby forced the government to defend itself (Altrincham 1955).

The man who had to answer was Governor Edward Griggs whose views on the issue were

expressed in a 1926 joint statement with the governors of Tanganyika and Uganda. The governors stated: 'The practice of female circumcision, which was of very ancient origin, should not be interfered with, but respective governments concerned should endeavour to persuade such tribes as practised the more brutal forms of it to return to the ancient and less brutal form'<sup>48</sup>. Griggs, therefore, did not agree with those who demanded immediate abolition. He agreed with his administrative juniors on the need to avoid friction with the Africans over the issue.

This fear of friction is what lay at the centre of dispute between Griggs and Arthur and led to the dismissal of Arthur from the Executive Council. Griggs was angered by Arthur's insistence on abolishing the custom, especially when it attracted attention from London. Following demands from the Duchess of Atholl, Griggs consulted his Provincial Commissioners who advised against abolition of female circumcision. He then informed his superiors at Downing Street that the opinion of those 'who best knew the tribes' was against the abolition; London accepted the advice. The governor's distrust of Arthur intensified and led to the firing of the missionary from the Executive Council; Arthur resigned on November 9, 1929<sup>49</sup>. On female circumcision, Griggs would later write that 'suppression would have provoked a violent reaction' (Altrincham 1955).

While the administration tried to avoid friction, it was still dragged into the conflict between the KCA and the missionaries which, in turn, attracted attention from London. The KCA and the missionaries had closely followed Kenyatta's testimony in London. The KCA supported Kenyatta but chiefs in Kiambu refused to endorse Kenyatta's testimony. As a result, there was a lot of tension between KCA and the chiefs such that, in February 1930, Senior Chief Koinange asked Governor Griggs for help against the KCA. The governor promised to make life difficult for the KCA (Altrincham 1955). This promise was

criticised by Mr. McIwee in the House of Commons who demanded to know why Griggs wanted to suppress a political organisation. The government denied it was doing such a thing<sup>50</sup>. While the government was denying repression, Arthur was fuelling tension with his declaration that 'Joseph Kang'ethe and Johnstone Kenyatta deserve to be hanged' (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966:120).

Kang'ethe and Kenyatta were not hanged and their organisation, the KCA, had become a force to reckon with on religious, educational, cultural and political matters. KCA, the Church of Scotland Mission officials believed, was responsible for the emergence of *arathi* (or prophets) who were also termed as *watu wa Mungu* (or the people of God). The *arathi* regularly clashed with the colonial government. They preached the wrath of God on Europeans who, being in league with the missionaries, schemed to cheat the Africans.

The *arathi* were a religious alternative to the missionaries' faith and also developed an education alternative to missionary education. As outschools closed due to the refusal by teachers to denounce female circumcision and the KCA, the KCA asked the Director of Education to open government schools. When the Director refused its request, the KCA started establishing its own Karing'a and Kikuyu Independent schools for pupils<sup>51</sup>. These schools provided an alternative to missionary education and as a result more pupils left mission schools.

When Kenyatta returned in September 1930, he found that the circumcision crisis had led to an education crisis and he tried to put 'matters right'. He collected statistics on outschools and tried to enlist the support of the District Commissioner for Kiambu, a Mr. Fazan. Fazan, a believer in strengthening Local Native Councils and African Tribunals, turned Kenyatta down<sup>52</sup>. Rebuked, Kenyatta then petitioned the Director of Education.

In December 1930, Kenyatta and the Director of education met and reached some understanding after Kenyatta presented four points. First, Kenyatta

noted the Church of Scotland Mission outschools were practically closed. Second he pointed out, the original costs of these schools had been met by the local people. Third, Dr. Arthur had made it a condition that no child, who had not 'signed', would be allowed to read. Fourth, he complained that a heavy cess was levied by the mission for education. They both agreed that Kenyatta should help return children to school on condition that Arthur would give assurance that there would be no teaching against female circumcision<sup>53</sup>.

Kenyatta and Arthur met on December 22, 1930 and tried to outwit each other. To Arthur, Kenyatta was an ungrateful heretic whose life he had saved in 1909. It was unlikely that any Christianity was left in this heretic who had visited Russia, that seminary of international atheism with Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin as the patron saints and Joseph Stalin as the high priest. Arthur might still save this lost soul.

In turn Kenyatta had his thoughts about the Scotsman whose drive made him a fanatic of whatever he set his mind on. A good doctor, yes, but one who is out of tune with what makes a Mugikuyu. Yet this fanatic was supposed to be an authority on the Agikuyu and other peoples of Kenya. To Kenyatta, Arthur was simply wrong.

The heretic and the fanatic's discussion reached a stalemate since they could not find an acceptable middle ground. Kenyatta had suggested that there be two teachers in the outschools, one who had signed and the other who had not. Arthur rejected the idea because he felt his views were being contradicted. It was like asking God to cooperate with the devil in a common endeavour. There would be no compromise and therefore the fanatic and the heretic parted company permanently without changing their respective views.

Arthur's restrictions on teachers and pupils, continued to drive people from the church and pupils from school and also attracted attention from England. In the House of Commons in February 1931, a Mr. Horrabin questioned the

CSM condition 'that no teacher in its employment shall belong to certain political associations'. He wanted the government to give orders 'that no grants from public funds shall be made to that mission until it withdraws its claims to influence the political affiliations of such employees' who were paid, in part or total, by public money. The government rejected the proposal claiming it was dangerous<sup>54</sup>.

The KCA was the political organisation that Horrabin referred to and in 1931, it decided to send two delegates to England to give evidence before a Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on closer union. The two delegates were to be Kenyatta and Harry Thuku who had been released from detention in January 1931. Thuku refused because he considered the whole exercise futile since, he later wrote, they 'would not be allowed to talk about anything else in London except this closer union between the three countries of East Africa'. (Thuku 1970) In Thuku's place, the KCA picked Parmenas Githendu Mukeri from Kahuhia, then a student at Makerere University College. Kenyatta and Mukeri left in April 1931 (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966).

As Kenyatta and Mukeri took off to England, there were two efforts by administrators and some missionaries to find compromises to diffuse the circumcision issue. The Embu District Commissioner, H.E Lambert, came up with suggestions that seemed acceptable to both sides. He stated that the elders in Embu favoured limiting the depth of the incision. This limit, Lambert recommended, should be brought about through instructions and the force of law<sup>55</sup>. This was supported by S.H LaFontaine, the acting P.C for Kikuyu Province, who commended the Embu Native Council for 'giving the lead' to other Local Native Councils. Lambert's views were similarly endorsed by the Medical Officers of Fort Hall and Kerugoya. Chief Native Commissioner A.de V.Wade also supported the proposal and placed it before the Governor-in-Council for consideration<sup>56</sup>.

Lambert's proposal also appeared like a way

of stopping a growing split within the churches. Most of the churches, it was noted, were opposed to Arthur's extremist ideas of an all-out suppression of female circumcision. To LaFontaine, Lambert's proposal offered an opportunity for churches to reconcile and 're-establish their position in the native mind'. Subsequently, he hoped, the demand for independent schools would end<sup>57</sup>.

La Fontaine's praise for Lambert's proposal was not shared by J.C. Harkins, the Meru District Commissioner, or Reverend J. Comely of CMS, Kigari in Embu. Harkins claimed he had evidence that contradicted Lambert's assertions that Embu elders had limited the incision. Comely accused Lambert of being responsible for anti-Christian feelings in Embu. When he was challenged on this accusation, however, he changed position and blamed the KCA. Any anti-Christian activity, he stated, was due 'to some Chiefs and members of the Kikuyu Central Association'<sup>58</sup>.

Lambert subsequently had little regard for Comely, whom he considered a liar, and was more comfortable with Rev. W.J. Rampley at Kabare. According to Lambert, Rampley was the kind of missionary who should be supported because of understanding what LaFontaine termed as 'Native feelings by sanctioning a modified form of circumcision purged of any previous objectionable features'. Rampley's Church Pastorate Committee tried to end the 'unhappy controversy' by agreeing to some compromises.

There were four compromises that were worked out. First, women communicants would perform a minor incision to the girls at the age of puberty. Second, the customary goat would be paid to the uncle before the circumcision. Third, the circumcision would be done hygienically, without publicity and in the presence of church communicants only. Fourth, repugnant customs such as songs and dances would not be allowed whether before or after the circumcision. These compromises were endorsed by Lambert and LaFontaine<sup>59</sup>.

With the support of the administration, Rampley then issued a memorandum analysing the conflict, stating that although the abolition of the custom was 'perfectly justified', the methods of doing it were not clear. He lamented the 'cloud of suspicion' hanging over 'those responsible for the spiritual oversight of the Kikuyu natives'. Arguing that Africans do not think like Europeans and that Europeans do not 'think black', he asserted that the Europeans had made the mistake of attempting to isolate a custom woven in the 'whole social fabric'. As a result, there had been stiff resistance 'aggravated by section of people who have made it a political issue'. Rampley did not want legislative action but called for 'some form of initiation from one stage into another which will satisfy all parties'. This would lead to eventual abolition of the custom. Africans, he concluded, 'are not difficult to lead, but stubborn to drive'<sup>60</sup>.

Rampley's views had an effect on participants at a conference held at Kahuhia in August 1931. African members agreed on the ultimate abolition of the custom to be done gradually. First, however, Christians would abandon all 'heathen practices' connected with circumcision. Circumcision, they agreed, would not be public. In addition, they were to condemn 'any operation causing physical injury to the individual'<sup>61</sup>. Essentially, then, most of the conference participants accepted the Kabare compromises.

The government support for Lambert's initiative and Rampley's ideas aimed at negating African demands for independent schools and in the hope that political agitation would decline; the strategy began to work at the end of 1931. LaFontaine, in his 1931 Handing Over Report to H.B. Horne, noted that there was wide acceptance of the modified form of operation in Meru as a result of extensive campaign by the District Commissioner. He also noted that the CMS had decided not to punish Christians who accepted the Kabare compromises. He added that this was accomplished 'without any resulting agitation

whatsoever' and in compliance with the policy of gradual abolition of the custom<sup>62</sup>.

Compared to 1930, 1931 was relatively quiet and reconciliation appeared possible. Churches began to get some of their followers back. A few outschools were reopened and pupils accepted. The KCA and female circumcision were de-emphasized as major areas of concern. The moderate missionaries, Rampley being the best example, could find common ground with Africans.

The government did its best to downplay the issue of female circumcision as Kenya, along with other parts of the world, tried to grapple with the depression. Similarly, the KCA also downplayed the issue and concentrated on the question of land. A philosophy of live and let live appears to have taken root and a cultural misunderstanding thereby ceased to be a source of conflict.

### Conclusions

The issue of female circumcision subsided after 1931 but remained a symbol of cultural confrontation between whites and blacks. It affected the colony's political, economic, educational and administrative activities. Two levels of differences between the Africans, on the one hand, and the Europeans, on the other existed. At another level there were differences within the African community and also within the European community over the issue of female circumcision.

Within the African community, followers of John Arthur differed with those who wanted to maintain tradition. While some chiefs argued that Arthur was like a father to them, others, especially members of the KCA, considered him a liar and an agent of settler interests. The KCA acquired a special status as the political and cultural spokesman of the Africans. There were also those who wanted a compromise with the missionaries and the administrators, and a number of KCA members were among them, but would not entertain Arthur's extremist ideas.

The white missionaries were also divided. While Arthur's Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) was in the forefront of fighting for abolishing of circumcision, others kept relatively aloof. They avoided demanding immediate abolition. Some tried to inject medical arguments into the issue but even then there was no medical agreement. Dr. Boedeker, for instance, argued that he could not find adequate medical grounds for abolishing a tradition that instilled cultural and social values to the youth.

The administrators were similarly divided. Some considered missionaries a nuisance who simply made their work more difficult. Others, like Tate, considered the missionaries' drive to abolish African customs good for imperialism and capitalistic progress. This drive, however, could lead to bloodshed and unwarranted attention from London, a fact which worried Governor Griggs, who favoured moderation. He, therefore, found Arthur's extremism unacceptable and so he fired the missionary from the Executive Council.

The administration decided to work with and assist moderate missionaries who were willing to compromise with the Africans. One such missionary was Rampley of the CMS. Rampley's compromises which worked out at Kabare Mission, became gradually acceptable to a number of Africans. At least, they did not call for outright abolition. This helped to cool the political and cultural temperatures on both sides. As a result, people began to return to the various churches and some of the outschools were reopened by 1932. Subsequently female circumcision ceased to be a source of conflict between the whites and the blacks.

### End Notes

1. P.R. Booh 'How peace came to Kikuyu'. Extracts of letters from Francis George Hall (Kenya National Archives KNA, Political Record Book, Fort Hall District). Hereafter, Fort Hall Political Record Book.



2. 'History of Fort Hall Station' and 'Prolegomena', in Fort Hall Political Record Book.
3. District Commissioner's Memorandum to Senior Commissioner, Nyeri, 15 October, 1929 (KNA Miscellaneous Correspondence, in Section 4, Reel 9). Hereafter, Miscellaneous Correspondence.
4. Memorandum of CSM on Female Circumcision (KNA, Miscellaneous Correspondence, in Section 4, Reel 7). Hereafter, Memorandum of CSM.
5. Ibid
6. Kikuyu District Annual Report for 1911-1912 (KNA, Section 1 Reel 9).
7. Memorandum of CSM
8. For correspondence, see G.A.S. Northcote's Kiambu District Annual Report, 1914 - 1915.
9. 'General Native Attitude', Kikuyu Annual Report, 1914-1915.
10. 'The War' and 'Effect of the War in District', 'Labour', Fort Hall Political Record Book.
11. Ibid
12. Ainsworth Memorandum 'Regarding Education of Natives in Reserves', 12 November, 1918 (KNA, Section 1, Reel 9).
13. Ibid
14. Memorandum of CSM.
15. A.E. Chemier, Meru DC to H.R. Tate, PC, 'Circumcision of Boys and Girls', 26th September 1919 and Rev. R.T. Worthington to Chemier, September 24, 1919, Miscellaneous correspondence.
16. H.R. Tate to Chemier, 28th October 1919. *Ibid.*
17. Ibid
18. L.L.A F. Jones to Tate, 21st November 1919, Fort Hall Political Record Book.
19. 'Post-war and Harry Thuku'. Fort Hall Political Record Book .
20. D.R. Crampton Memorandum to Ainsworth, 27 May, 1920; Miscellaneous Correspondence.
21. D.R. Crampton to D.C. Nyeri, 28, May, 1920. *Ibid.*
22. F.M. Lamb to Ag. P.C Nyeri, 8 September 1920 and D.C. Nyeri to Ag. P.C. 13 September, 1920, *ibid.*
23. 'Post-war and Harry Thuku', *op. Cit.*
24. Ibid.
25. Memorandum of CSM.
26. 'Appendix 2, iii, iii, Memorandum of CSM.
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. Ibid
31. Ibid
32. Ibid.

33. D.C. Kiambu to Senior Commissioner Nyeri, 21st December, 1928, Miscellaneous Correspondence.
34. Ibid
35. D.C. Nyeri to Senior Commissioner, 21 December, 1928 and D.C. Embu to Senior Commissioner, 27 December 1928, Miscellaneous Correspondence.
36. Memorandum of CSM
37. Ibid
38. KCA Circular to Chiefs as translated by DC Fort Hall, 17th August 1929.
39. Memorandum of CSM ft. 1, pp 41.
40. Appendix iv No. 2, Memorandum of CSM.
41. Arthur Memorandum, op. cit.
42. Memorandum of CSM.
43. Appendix v, Memorandum of CSM.
44. D.C. South Nyeri to Senior Commissioner, Kikuyu Province, 5 October, 1929, Miscellaneous Correspondence.
45. E.B. Horne to Colonial Secretary, 12 October, 1929, Miscellaneous Correspondence.
46. Memorandum of CSM.
47. Coloured Races; 11 December 1929, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons.
48. Memorandum of CSM.
49. Appendix VIII, 1 and 2, Ibid.
50. 'Oral Answers', Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 1930 vol. 2, p. 311.
51. Memorandum of CSM.
52. Ibid
53. Ibid
54. *Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons*, February 18, 1931, pp. 1235-1236.
55. H. Lambert to H.B. Horne, 14th May 1931, Miscellaneous correspondence.
56. S.H. LaFontane to A. de V. Wade, June 23, 1931; Medical Officer in Fort Hall to PC Nyeri, June 19, 1931; E.W.C. Johnson, Medical Officer, Kerugoya to PC, June 20, 1931; Wade's note of July 15, 1931 - Miscellaneous correspondence.
57. LaFontane to Wade, July 18, 1931; Miscellaneous correspondence.
58. J.C. Harkins to PC, October 13, 1931; DC Embu to Rev. W.J. Ramplay, July 9, 1931, Miscellaneous correspondence.
59. W.J. Rampley to DC South Nyeri, July 31, 1931 and Ag PC Nyeri to Chief Native Commissioner, August 4, 1931, Miscellaneous correspondence.
60. Rampley Memorandum, Miscellaneous correspondence.
61. Bishop of Mombasa to Clergy, October 12, 1931, miscellaneous correspondence; Appendix VI, Memorandum of CSM.
62. La Fontane Handing Over Report to H.B. Horne, November 21, 1931, miscellaneous correspondence.

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