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THE *IRUA* CEREMONY AMONG THE KIKUYU OF  
KIAMBU DISTRICT, KENYA

## THE *IRUA*<sup>1</sup> CEREMONY AMONG THE KIKUYU OF KIAMBU DISTRICT, KENYA<sup>2</sup>

The Kikuyu are one of the three most important tribes of Kenya, British East Africa, along with the Masai and Kavirondo. They are an industrious, sociable people,—typical peasantry, and in large measure, of Bantu stock. They have had relatively brief contact with the European and his ways—only about forty years in all—but their advance and rate of cultural change have been rapid.

Indeed, the Kikuyu themselves, in their present districts, are quite recent immigrants. They began to filter into the Kiambu area something less than three centuries ago, coming in a succession of waves. When they first arrived, the country was densely forested and inhabited by a pygmy tribe of hunters known as *Gumba*, and the wa-Ndorobo people. The *Gumba* were too primitive to bargain with, and so they were soon squeezed out, but the Kikuyu were able to buy hunting rights from the wa-Ndorobo. These early hunting rights were known as *githakas* (*ithaka*); they have been handed down by inheritance to the descendants of the original owner and constitute the basis for the land tenure system adhered to by the Kikuyu of today. ✓

The Kikuyu soon began clearing bush and planting crops, and the practice spread until the tribe became almost wholly agricultural. Though new conditions developed, the *githakas* (*ithaka*) remained the basis of land tenure. A *githaka* may vary in size from several acres to several square miles. It remains the property of a group-unit, and is divided up among numerous individual “share-owners” who remain in personal possession of their individual holdings as long as they cultivate them. Part of each *githaka*

<sup>1</sup> Circumcision.

<sup>2</sup> Materials for this paper were gathered while on a field trip to Africa as a post-doctoral fellow (1936-38) of the Social Science Research Council.

constitutes common grazing ground for the owning group.

The first Kikuyu Reserve<sup>3</sup> was established in 1906, but this did not preclude further alienation of native lands to the white settlers. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915, declaring all native lands to be Crown Lands, still further increased the insecurity of the natives, and created much discontent, in that all natives on the land became "tenants at will." The first settlers had been given such tracts of land in the Kikuyu country as were not occupied by natives. Since these early settlers were scattered among the larger native population, no question of reserves arose at first. But by 1903-4 all the available unused land was taken up, and serious encroachments on native land began.

With the development of modern conditions in Kenya, land has become increasingly an object of value in itself, and in the Kikuyu country a strong movement has developed for the introduction of a system of individual tenure of land by natives, as a means of real security. This is due to the following factors: (1) establishment of Native Reserve boundaries, thus tending to prevent native migrations in quest of new land; (2) the natural increase in population; (3) improved cultivation; and (4) the introduction of currency, which encourages individualism in ownership and disposal of property, as against clan control and communal rights.

The new conditions have exerted greatest pressure in the Kiambu district, where the native population is most dense, and where the pinch of land-hunger is most severe, due to the alienation of land to white settlers in the highlands, leaving whole clan sections and family groups without any *githakas* (*ithaka*). It was only in February of 1938 that the Governor of Kenya announced to the assembled Kikuyu chiefs and headmen at a *baraza*<sup>4</sup> held at Githunguri Court that the highlands area would be permanently reserved for

<sup>3</sup> Land set aside by the government as exclusively for native use.

<sup>4</sup> Conclave of chiefs.

white settlers, and that new lands elsewhere would be found for the natives. This decision, issued through Orders in Council, would be backed, he warned, by the full force of the Crown.

The Kikuyu have other grievances, of course. They resent the fact that their chiefs are appointed by and responsible to the British Administration. They are piqued because they have no direct representation in the Legislative Council of the country, and feel that the two Europeans appointed to the Legislative Council by the Governor as "native representatives," do not safeguard their interests. They regard the taxes, especially the hut taxes imposed on their women, as oppressive. They are humiliated because they are required to carry the hated "*kipandi*," the registration certificates issued under the Native Registration Ordinance of 1921. And they bitterly complain that they are prohibited from growing the favorite coffee crop in order to protect the white coffee grower.

Yet, for the Kikuyu, no problem is more pressing than that of land, and it is because of their land conflicts with the Government and the European settlers that the Kikuyu are regarded as the most worrisome "native problem" in Kenya, and are least liked by the whites. Land tenure is the most important single factor in the social, political, religious and economic life of the tribe. For the chief occupations among the Kikuyu are agriculture and the rearing of livestock,—cattle, sheep and goats. They depend upon the land for their material and spiritual needs. The soil is sacred to them because their ancestors lie buried there. They herd large flocks of sheep and goats, and in lesser degree, cattle, since their social organization demands a constant supply of stock for such purposes as "bride-price" or marriage dowry, payments for land, sacrifices, ceremonial feasts, purification ceremonies, magical rites and clothing (as many of them still wear skins).

There has been much unrest among the Kikuyu because

of their mistreatment on the land, and some settlers have even feared their ultimate insurrection. Powerful protest movements, such as that led by the Kikuyu Central Association, have developed, and even now the Kikuyu maintain their official native lobbyist in London. They have become extremely suspicious of the intentions of the European, and are turning, in self-defense, to an intense nationalism which finds reflection in an increasing devotion to many of their traditional customs, such as the initiation rite.

The social organization of the Kikuyu comprises three groupings: (1) the family group (*mbari*), which includes all those who are directly related by blood,—a man, his wife or wives, and children, and his grand and great-grandchildren; (2) the clan (*moherega*), which brings together several family units having the same clan name and descended from one family group in the distant past, thus associating distant relatives; (3) the system of age-grading or age-groups (*riika*). This latter is the means whereby the entire tribe is united and solidified.

Each year, thousands of Kikuyu girls and boys undergo the circumcision ceremony, and become members of one age-group (*riika rimwe*), without regard to the family or clan to which they may belong. These individuals consider themselves bound by a strong bond of brotherhood or sisterhood, thus giving stabilization to the tribal organization.

Many changes inevitably have crept over the life of the Kikuyu since their first contact with the European. Their tribal wars and feuds have been suppressed, they have been subjected to a gradual process of western education and Christianization; they have adopted improved methods of agriculture and higher standards of comfort. The imposition of the hut-tax has enforced periodical migrations to white towns and farms upon all able-bodied males, where they must work for wages as house-boys or laborers.

Yet these changes have been relatively slow, and not the

result of an abrupt cultural ultimatum. There are many pitfalls inherent in any effort to close quickly the gap between two disparate cultures. And there is grave danger involved in any radical interference with particular native customs, when they are deeply imbedded, no matter how necessary it may seem to change them. For these customs quite often turn out to be indispensable parts of the very warp and woof of the native social structure. So it is with the Kikuyu circumcision rite.

In Kenya, as in many parts of Africa, circumcision is practiced in connection with the initiation ceremony, a *rite de passage* from childhood to adulthood. All those initiated during the same year, belong to the same "age group." In East Africa, circumcision of both boys and girls is a vital part of this initiatory rite, among not only the Kikuyu, but also the wa-Gogo, the wa-Ikizu, the wa-Nyamwezi. These initiation ceremonies change continuously in their details, varying from clan to clan, and from tribe to tribe, though they retain profound traditional value throughout. Among such tribes, girls between the ages of nine and fifteen undergo clitoridectomy, and the belief is deep that the practice improves the process of childbirth. This ceremonial and physical preparation for matrimony and motherhood is deeply rooted, and is tenaciously adhered to. For example, according to Mrs. Thurnwald,<sup>5</sup> even Christian boys of the wa-Gogo would not today marry a girl who is uncircumcised, and the missions working among the wa-Gogo are resigned to this stubborn native resistance to the abandonment of their tribal customs.

With the Kikuyu, after initiation, the boys and girls do not marry for several years, but are permitted a modified form of sex play while still unmarried, though physical virginity is unimpaired, and conception rendered impossible. It seems to be a rather advanced version of the quaint old New England custom of "bundling."

<sup>5</sup> Richard C. Thurnwald, *Black and White In East Africa*, 1935, p. 144

Among the Kikuyu, the circumcision of girls has been vigorously attacked by a number of influential European groups, missionary, government, educational, medical and emotional pro-African. The missions especially, and notably the Church of Scotland Mission, have vigorously condemned the practice and have attempted to apply sanctions in order to compel its discontinuance. They have contended that female circumcision and Christianity are incompatible. They have emphasized also the unhygienic nature of the process, and the fact that it is potentially dangerous to the life of the girls, in that this mutilation of the female genitals, if not very skillfully done, forms considerable masses of scar tissue, which may subsequently endanger the life of the mother and new-born at the first child-birth. After numerous unsuccessful efforts to get the custom abolished, the Church of Scotland Mission in 1929 began to refuse Holy Communion to all Kikuyu Christians who would not declare open opposition to the rite, and ordered all of their followers and all of those who desired their children to attend the mission schools, to pledge themselves not to support this custom in any form and to refuse permission for their children to undergo the initiation rite. Children of those not obeying this order were to be debarred from the missionary schools.

This was clearly a serious challenge for the Kikuyu, who are extremely anxious that their children be educated. Yet in Kenya, as in most parts of British Africa, the schools have been left largely under the control of the missions, aided by government subsidy. The native people petitioned the government, and many of the schools remained deserted pending settlement of the dispute. Finally a compromise agreement was worked out between the missions and the government, under which the ban on children attending the schools was lifted, but the missions reserved the right to insist that all the native schoolmasters in the mission schools must sign a pledge to denounce and work against the



custom. The Kikuyu continued indignant; there was a resultant great dearth of native communicants, and most of the mission out-schools were closed. The native people then demanded the right to establish their own schools, where their children could be taught without interference with tribal customs. Finally the natives founded two groups of native controlled schools—the Kikuyu Independent schools and the *Karenga* schools. These are completely free of missionary control, receive no governmental subsidies, and are supported by small pupil fees and local native contributions. There were sixty-two of them in existence in 1938, and they are monuments to the initiative of the Kikuyu, their group patriotism, and their stubborn determination not to submit to the arbitrary decisions of the European concerning their culture.

The net results of this blind and intolerant attempt of the missions to abolish the female circumcision have been to increase the attitudes of resentment and suspicion of the natives toward all whites. They regard the whole effort as unwarrantable interference, and it crystallized in opposition all of the reactionary traditionalism of the tribe. They see a plot against their liberties and traditions. And the rite itself has become the central symbol of tribal chauvinism and the rallying cry of their cultural loyalty. It is certain that the vigor of this resistance is intimately associated with native reaction to the attempts of the government to alienate their lands and shift their settlements. They fear a broad effort on the part of the whites to break up their tribal institutions and customs, disintegrate their social organization, uproot them from the soil, and leave them completely at the mercy of their white masters. Thus the circumcision rites become accentuated as an emblem of their national self-assertion, and a recompense for lost power. It is significant that on most other issues the younger generations of the Kikuyu are quite willing to accept modern ideas, yet take a strongly reactionary stand on circumcision.

The experiences of the Kikuyu with the Kenya European tend to induce them to exaggerate their declamations of tribal individuality and nationalism to a greater extent than other East African tribes which apparently have less occasion for assuming a defensive role.

The Kikuyu term *irua* connotes female as well as male initiation. The initiation itself involves several procedures: (1) an extended though loosely organized and sporadic course of education with regard to the phenomena of nature; (2) practical instruction in matters of sex; (3) inculcation of numerous social and individual virtues, including respect for tribal elders, custom and authority; (4) the surgical operation or mutilation of the genitals, which is the external evidence of the passage from childhood to adulthood, and which, if endured with fortitude, is symbolic of the end of childhood.

For the Kikuyu the *irua* signifies the commencement of the participation in the governing groups of the tribe, since the age groups date from the day of the circumcision. In the tribal psychology of the Kikuyu, the operation is regarded as the vital core of a cultural institution which has tremendous educational, social, moral and religious importance. The average Kikuyu of today simply cannot visualize the one without the other. One of the younger Kikuyu leaders informed me that "a circumcised person is like a man having a higher degree of education." In another group with which I was discussing Kikuyu customs, an oldish elder, barefoot, with feathered head-dress and great earrings, arose majestically and exclaimed: "Amongst the Kikuyu if a man who is circumcised marries an uncircumcised girl, their children will be under a curse and destroyed."

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a rather summary description of an *irua* ceremony which I had the privilege to witness at Githiga Market, in the Kiambu District of Kenya, in February, 1938. It was only with diffi-

culty that I gained permission to take pictures of it, despite the fact that I had been inducted into the tribe and given the name of *Karioki*.<sup>6</sup> Since there were twelve girls and only one boy in this group, I will confine myself mainly to an account of the activities of the girls, while mentioning that the boy's activities follow the same general pattern. It is to be noted that the ceremonies vary in detail from one locality to another. In the Nyeri district, for example, I was told that the boys and girls are kept apart during the running off of the ceremony. At Githiga however, the lone boy and the girls were together throughout.

My informants and interpreters were Josaphat Kamau, editor of a Kikuyu paper, and George Ndegwa, secretary of the Kikuyu Central Association.

The preparation for the circumcision begins some two weeks prior to the day of initiation. At this time the girls are put on a special diet, (*njahi* and *ngima ya ogembe*), consisting of a particular Kikuyu bean (*njahe*) and a heavy porridge made from the mixture of the flour ground from the grain *ogembe* and water and oil. It is claimed that this diet serves the purposes of preventing undue loss of blood from the cutting, aids in the quick healing of the wounds, and insures against blood poisoning.

Each girl has a sponsor (*motiiri*), who acts as an instructor and examiner. The girl must not yet be mature, and menstruation should not begin until at least one month after *irua*. She must not have had sexual intercourse nor have indulged in masturbation. If she has broken the tribal code in either of these respects, her sponsor is required to report this fact to the girl's parents. A special "purification" rite must then be gone through with in order to purify (*koruta mogiro*) the girl and qualify her for participation in the *irua*. A special "family purifier" (*motahekania*) is employed for this purpose.

About four days prior to the initiation the girl is moved

<sup>6</sup> Meaning "he who has returned from the dead."

from her home compound to the compound where the ceremony is to take place, and she then meets her fellow initiates. The elder of the compound and his wife greet the initiates and "adopt" them as their "children of the *irua*."

The last day before the cutting was devoted to final preparation of the initiates, and there was much dancing, singing, blowing of whistles, and many rites performed very solemnly by the elders. There were a dozen little girls and one boy. The initiates came marching up to the market in small groups, two or three to a group, escorted by a throng of attendants. They were attired in short sweaters and dresses and wore many beads, bracelets and other ornaments. They sang, danced, and blew their whistles lustily, the gist of the songs being that they were seeking the place where the circumcision would take place. In the meantime the elders informed my host that I was to take no pictures. This threw him into a frenzy—a rather easy accomplishment, since he was already under the influence of *njohi*, the potent sugar cane liquor the natives brew. My host finally got a reversal of the edict by threatening to withdraw his two daughters from the ceremony.

Finally the entire group broke away and madly dashed across the fields to the neighboring compound where the ceremony was to take place. I was informed that in the pre-European days none of the initiates would have been clothed in anything save the ornaments.

This compound in which the ceremony was being held had never entertained one before, and criticisms were very strident that the man was not adept in his role of host to such a solemn affair.

An arch of banana leaves and sugar cane was erected at the entrance to the compound, and was decorated with sacred flowers. No unauthorized person could pass through this arch, which was to appease the ancestral spirits and assure good fortune for the ceremony. Sugar cane was

piled up on the ground outside the arch, from which *njohi* was later to be made.

Dancing of the *matuumo*, the ceremonial dance, continued outside the arch for some time, while the elders remained squatting inside the compound. Then large girls hoisted the initiates onto their shoulders and triumphantly carried them under the arch into the compound. After more dancing,—the dancing by the spectators was becoming quite abandoned, since they were continuously swigging *njohi* from calabashes that were freely passed around—all of the candidates of both sexes were lined up before the elders and their “treatment” began. A brownish powder (*rothu-ko*) was sprinkled on the ground by the elders to drive away evil spirits, and also *njohi*, to appease the ancestral spirits. Small bands were tied about the ankles of the initiates, twigs covered with a black-looking concoction (*mothaiga wa umu*), said to have medical qualities, were waved over each initiate’s head, and they were each made to eat a spoonful of a forbidding-looking, greyish-black paste (*ngima*) containing castor oil, that had been prepared for them by the elders. I noted that one boy spit his out with a grimace and threw it back over his shoulder after the elders passed.

More spirited dancing followed and then, suddenly, the entire group of young people, led by the boys, broke and ran pell-mell across the fields and down into a deep valley, up the opposite hill and down the other side, into another valley, in search of the sacred *mogumo* tree,<sup>7</sup> from which leaves were to be plucked for the ceremony of the following day. The boys climbed the rather small tree and broke off the top branches, while the girls assembled below singing and gathering up the leaves and twigs.

I was informed that in former days the advance on the *mogumo* tree was in the form of a formal race by the boys, who would start off at a blast from a ceremonial horn. The

<sup>7</sup> A parasitic wild fig tree, under which sacrifices are traditionally offered to *Ngai*, the Kikuyu god, who is the creator and giver of all things.

girls would not run in the race, but, escorted by a group of senior warriors and women singing ritual and heroic songs, would walk to the tree in advance of the race. The boys' race was considered as a struggle between the spirit of childhood and that of adulthood. The boys carried wooden spears as they ran, as if going to battle, and the one who reached the *mogumo* tree first and threw his spear over it, was regarded as the permanent leader of that particular age-group.

But both boys and girls ran at Githiga and there was no racing formality about it. The girls tied the *mogumo* leaves into branches and carried them back to the compound to keep the sacred fire burning throughout the night, to make the beds of leaves on which the girl initiates were to sit the following day while being circumcised, and to make the initiates' beds. The breaking of the sacred tree is known as *kuuna mogumo*.

En route back from the *mogumo* tree, our group met a group of Christian boys, who were also to be circumcised the next day, but who were dancing quietly in a circle and singing songs of protest against "all this wild dancing and racing after the *mogumo* tree."

The songs sung by all members of the party at the foot of the *mogumo* tree were strongly flavored with sex. During the return, groups of young women formed private dancing parties and sang obscene songs with vigor and good humor. The little Kikuyu boy scout from the mission, Douglass, who had accompanied me, was properly shocked and tried vainly to keep me from learning what "these bad women are saying." But it was explained to me that on these occasions only all restraint is thrown aside.

On returning from the *kuuna mogumo*, the initiates were all lined up outside of the compound and each took a few turns at pounding the sugar cane in the hollow-log mortar, from which *njohi* was to be made.

Then they were ready to come inside the compound again. But a slight hitch developed—the elder daughter of the owner of the huts had raised a shrill protest. She was married and living in another compound; however, when she had been living at home she had been circumcised, but in a foreign compound. Now she demanded a fat ram as compensation for the humiliation that others were to be the first to be honored by circumcision in her home compound. After a long delay during which the elders conferred, she walked off happily with a fat ram, which her father had had to contribute for “appeasement.”

On this same morning the initiates had had their heads closely shaved, except for one small, round tuft of short hair, about as large as a quarter, at the top-rear of the head.

Finally the initiates were marched back into the compound under the ceremonial arch. Many adult members of the party were quite strongly under the influence of the *njohi* they had consumed by this time, and the dancing grew frenzied. The men and boys whose duty it was to make room for the dancers became violent with their grass whips and reed sticks, and were actually hitting people now, whereas previously they had only threatened.

Now the initiates were lined up before the elders, with their heads bowed, and the elders stripped the decorations from the heads of the girls. Then followed the ceremony of blessing the children (*korathima ciana*). The faces of the initiates were powdered with a white, chalk-like substance called “snow” (*ira*), which, it is claimed, is obtained only from Mount Kenya (*Kere-Nyaga*), the abode of the gods. Then symbolic markings were made with the *ira* on the forehead, cheeks, nose, throat and navel, and around the eyes of the initiates. Long, broad marks were made down the forehead and nose of the boy, large white dots were placed on the ankles and buttocks of the girls. The elder holding the senior office in the ceremonial council (*athuri a kerera*) performed the markings. He placed the *ira* in the palm of

his left hand, dipped his right thumb into it, and carefully branded each initiate.

Following this, an elderly woman, also a member of the ceremonial council, anointed the heads of each initiate with oil which she carried in a bottle-shaped calabash (*kinando*). Finally, the elders took into their mouths some fluid from horns and walked along spewing and spraying it over the bodies and into the faces of the initiates. This liquid was a mixture of honey, milk and a special "medicine" called *oomo*, which is alleged to stimulate bravery and fortitude. Another fluid called *gethambio*, which is supposed to protect the initiates against fear and temptation was similarly sprayed over them.

About dusk, after more dancing, the initiates were released and allowed to go to their homes until early the next morning. They were to be carefully protected during that night against wounds (since the shedding of blood would be regarded as an ill-omen), against witchcraft and any temptation to sexual intercourse.

The lone boy initiate went away singing a song to the effect that he would be ushered into manhood on the following day, and would be able to wear a knife.

It poured rain all that night, and it was only after a dangerous ride that we slithered into Githiga on the next morning, February 13th, to witness the circumcision. It was about 6 o'clock when we arrived, but a great crowd was already on hand. The Christian boys had been circumcised at 5 o'clock and were gone. But the pagan boy and the girls were even then at the Kamiti river, a little winding mountain stream in the bottom of a deep valley, and when we reached it we found the initiates being prepared for immersion in the cold water. They were divided into two groups. They were all stripped naked and rushed into the water, where they sat squatting, while the women, dancing up and down and singing, threw water over them. The boy was off to one side alone. They squatted in the cold stream for



half an hour, while their relatives and friends milled about the bank and waded in the water singing ritual songs of encouragement. The immersion serves a double purpose; it cleanses, (*gwithambia*) and the cold water numbs the limbs (*kugandia*) and deadens the pain from the operation. However, since it was at least forty-five minutes later that the operation was performed, the effect of the cold water must have been lost.

Then they were led out of the water and lined up in single file, the lone boy in front. It was extremely chilly in the early mountain air, and knitted sweaters were slipped over the upper bodies of some of the girl initiates. The long march back up the high hill commenced. Guards dashed about to keep the path clear for them. Each of the girl initiates held a small whistle between her teeth and blew shrill notes on it as the march progressed. Midway, the procession was halted, and decorations were attached to the heads, breasts and legs of the girls. The boy remained completely nude, as were the lower bodies of the girls except for beads and bells on the legs.

It appeared to me that they all began to look frightened now, since the actual cutting was imminent. When we reached the market place, a huge throng had assembled, and a human semi-circle was formed, inside of which the sponsors (*motiiri*) of the girl initiates sat on bundles of *mogumo* and *mathakwa* leaves.

The girls entered this human enclosure and danced around in a sort of follow-the-leader fashion, blowing their whistles incessantly. The boy was taken to one side of the enclosure, and sat on a small bunch of *mogumo* leaves. Promptly the male operator (*moruithia wa ihii*) began the circumcision, with a knife resembling an ordinary Kikuyu hunting knife, called *kahinga kuruithia*. The operation took about five minutes and was rather crudely done. But the boy, with his legs spread and knees bent, sat immobile while the foreskin was slit and removed; the only indication

of the pain he suffered was the rolling of his eyes. Not a sound did he utter. The operator stood back, surveyed his work, and then knelt down and performed some final trimmings. Once, I noticed, the sharp point of the knife stuck the boy in his inner thigh.

By this time the girls had all taken seats in front of their sponsors on the bundles of *mogumo* leaves—all in a row. The sponsors, sitting behind, held their legs interwoven with those of the initiates, so as to brace the initiates' legs and keep them separated. The initiates leaned back against their sponsors, who held them by the shoulders. The faces of the girls were turned to the sky, and their whistles were grimly held in their mouths.

Then the female operator, the *moruithia wa irigu*, an old haggish looking woman, with one tooth prominently showing, and armed with a small Kikuyu razor (*rwenji*), resembling somewhat in size and shape our safety razor blade, began her work. With a deft stroke she hacked off the tip of the clitoris (*rong'otho*), and a bright patch of red immediately appeared, as the sponsors held the girls more tightly. The *labia minora* of each girl was also trimmed, though it is said that formerly the operation was confined to the amputation of the clitoris. Immediately after being cut, each girl began to blow lustily on the whistle shoved into her mouth by her *motiiri*.

All went well, and the bright red patches on the leaves grew, until the last girl was reached. Here a complication arose. The *moruithia* bent down, examined the girl carefully, muttered to herself and shook her head. It seemed that there was some abnormality about the girl. The sponsor of the girl burst into tears and after a short conference, the *moruithia* proceeded with the operation. The usual fee charged by the *moruithia* is 3/- for girls and 4/- for boys; the boys and girls of the owner of the compound where the ceremony is held receive the service free. But the parents of the girl with the abnormality were required to pay 20/- or one fat ram.

As soon as the last girl was cut the crowd surged forward and wild dancing and shouting ensued. Then the girl initiates, still naked from the waist down, acquired long sticks, and joined by the lone boy, began running about recklessly, chasing the older, circumcised boys and girls who had earlier taunted the initiates about fear, and who had threatened to beat them if they showed cowardice. Now that the initiates had been through the ceremony, and had exhibited no weakness, they were entitled to run after and beat their tormentors with sticks. Blood poured down their legs as they ran, and some seemed quite vicious about it all, probably due to the excruciating pain they must have experienced.

This latter practice—the running and beating—was said not to conform with the traditional ceremony, in which the initiates were led by their sponsors to huts where they were immediately placed on special beds made of three kinds of leaves (*marerecwa*, *mataathi* and *maturanguru*), which are supposed to keep away insects and purify the air. The running and beating has begun only since the coming of the Europeans, it was said.

No medicine of any kind was applied to the wounds of the initiates immediately after the cutting. However the initiates are not permitted to return home, but must remain under the care of the elders at the compound in which the ceremony occurred for a period of eight days. During this period the wounds are washed and treated with leaves and herbs (*mahoithia*, *kagutwi*), which are said to have antiseptic and healing qualities. Special food is prepared for them, which the girl initiates must eat from banana leaves since they are not allowed to touch food with their bare hands during this period. The sponsors entertain with songs, and on the sixth day they make a report on the condition of the initiates to the ceremonial council. If all are well and can walk, the ceremony of *gotonyio* is arranged for the eighth day. On this day the parents come to the compound of the *irua*, and a sheep is killed. The skin of this sheep is

cut into ribbons which are placed on the wrists of each initiate, and following further ceremonial, the initiates are said to be born again as children of the tribe.

For several months following the ceremony the initiates do no work, but wander around the districts in groups singing the *waine*, the special "stick" song of the initiates, which is sung while they stand in a circle holding sticks (*micee*) in their hands which are used to beat out the rhythm of the song.

The ways and attitudes of the Christian white man are often understandably puzzling to the Kikuyu. Sage old senior Chief Koinange once told me that he could not understand why the church would refuse him conversion because of his plural wives, yet baptize his wives. Similarly, the Kikuyu word *irua* involves the circumcision of both sexes, and is used without qualification in the Kikuyu language version of the New Testament; the Kikuyu have noted the support given to the practice of circumcision in that document. Also, since *irua* means not merely the circumcision but the entire process of initiation and teaching, and is the basis of the important age-groups, the Kikuyu regard any effort to modify the custom as a vital attack upon the foundations of their society. It would be true that the abolition of the circumcision ceremony without provision for an acceptable substitute, would bring about the collapse of the age-group structure and hence of the social stability of the tribe.

But it should be reiterated that the determination of the Kikuyu not to permit any modification of this sacred ritual is largely the product of their bitter reaction to the English land policy. The Kikuyu Central Association was organized to protect land rights, but it has become almost fanatical in its devotion to the symbolic ritual of circumcision, and especially female circumcision. This is the barricade over which they must battle the invading European.

The fact is that the white influences have made the

operation more severe and dangerous than formerly. It has already been noted that the cutting is more severe than in earlier times. Initiations are no longer easily held at central places, because native squatters are now often found off the reserves on white men's estates; because girls move into the towns with their parents; and as a result of the increased mobility of the population due to cars, buses, and railroads. Thus, instead of the operations being performed by a select group of skilled operators, they are now frequently crudely done by bungling hands, with harmful results to the initiates.

Perhaps the final word in this discussion should be permitted the native himself, and I quote from my notes the views expressed by Senior Chief Koinange of the Kiambu Kikuyu, who remembers when the first white man visited Kikuyu country and who is one of the wisest philosophers I have ever met:

"I do not approve of the circumcision of girls, since I do not believe that it does the girl any good to be circumcised. On the other hand I dislike the methods employed by the Europeans in trying to force us to abolish the custom. Most of our people used to have very large holes in their ears into which large wooden rings were placed, as my fifth wife had. But when she joined the mission, she had, of her own accord, her ears cut and sewn up again to close the holes. The same would apply to the circumcision of girls if the girls are properly educated; the more education they will get the more they will find that circumcision has no bearing on their lives, and they will stop it voluntarily. The circumcision among us Kikuyu is our method of giving the individual the right to become a full member of the group. When a boy or girl is circumcised, he is considered as fully grown. Moreover, the *moruithia* told the people that the cutting will make child bearing easier for the woman, through enlargement of the opening. But this was deceit and there is no truth in it. The pride in their community which the men and women have, and the belief that a circumcised woman would have easier child-birth, strengthened the people's belief in circumcision."

"The circumcised girl was more careful about going around with men, because she knew that one day she would be subject to severe examination by a *moruithia* and by other women, and even the woman at whose hut the ceremony is being performed would

drive away any uncircumcised girl who had been known to have had sexual relations—for fear that if such a girl were to be circumcised in her place, she might displease the spirits and die from it.”

“Yet the Jalou girls are *not* circumcised, and are very good girls. The Nandi girls *are* circumcised and are very licentious, as are the Masai girls. So I do not think that circumcision of girls makes any difference, one way or the other, in regard to sexual activities and morality. Most people accept circumcision blindly as an old custom. Three of my own daughters are circumcised, but the two younger ones are not. One who was not circumcised is already married and is bearing children.”

“I believe that it should be left to the girls themselves to decide. I do not want any of my daughters forced into either circumcision or marriage or forced to forego them, against their desires.”

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