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The Sound of Silence: The 1929–30 Gikuyu ‘Female Circumcision Controversy’ and the Discursive Suppression of African Women’s Voices

Anna Adima

Abstract

In 1929–30, British missionaries active in central Kenya sought the help of the British colonial government in banning and eventually eradicating the Gikuyu tradition of female circumcision. This was met with an uproar amongst the Gikuyu population, many of whom protested in the form of the *Muthirigu* dance song, giving rise to what is known as the ‘female circumcision controversy’. Contemporary sources demonstrate the numerous contributions to the debate on the issue that have come from missionary societies, colonial officials, British women, and Kenyan men, all of whom incorporated the controversy into their various agendas, be it concern for women’s health on the missionaries’ part, the anxiety of colonial officials over the impact of circumcision on Kenya’s long-term population growth, worry for their ‘sisters’ by British women Members of Parliament, or concern about Western infringement on Gikuyu traditions on the part of Kenyan men. What is most noticeable is the absence of Kenyan women’s voices in the sources on the matter, despite the fact that this is an issue that concerns their bodies. This article examines the different ways in which Kenyan women’s voices have been silenced on the issue and attempts to retrieve their voices from the sources available. In doing so, the article seeks to demonstrate the general tendency that exists to silence African women in history and in historical epistemology.

Keywords: history, female circumcision, women, Kenya, anti-colonial movement, decolonial studies

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The field of African colonial history is one that is still largely dominated by elite actors within and outside of Africa, as both the subjects and the producers of history. A variety of such actors – whose statuses have shifted and evolved over time – can be observed. Among the subjects of African history who dominate primary sources there are: white men, in the form of colonial officers or missionaries; African men, often ‘big men’ politicians, renowned for either opposing or upholding the colonial status quo; and white women, depicted most often as benevolent and devout missionaries. More than half a century after the end of formal colonialism, a similar set of elite actors can be observed evaluating sources and producing subsequent histories. In all these stages, however, there is the glaring absence of African women: in historical sources they tend to be nameless, faceless subjects, used as props in the male political sphere, and in contemporary historical knowledge production they are still largely marginalised compared to their male – and white female – counterparts.¹

An episode in history that best brings this issue to light is the 1929-30 female circumcision ‘controversy’ in central Kenya, an area traditionally inhabited by the Gikuyu people. Female circumcision, or clitoridectomy, formed an important custom in traditional Gikuyu societies – and, indeed, in many other African communities. The ritual symbolises the progression from girlhood to womanhood, complete acceptance into the ethnic group, and the solidification of Gikuyu identity (Shell-Duncan, Hernlund 2000: 3; Natsoulas 1998: 138). Missionary societies active in colonial Kenya were repelled by the practice: as some of the earliest Western medical practitioners in the region since their first arrival in Kenya in the late 19th century, they were privy to the negative effects of clitoridectomy, ranging from poor maternal health to increased infant mortality (Maathai 2007: 5-6; Luongo 2000: 116-7). They were highly critical of the practice, and the most active in attempts to eradicate it was the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), led by Dr John William Arthur.² At its stations throughout central Kenya, the mission actively taught against clitoridectomy in its schools, seeking to change their African followers’ attitudes towards the practice (Boulanger 2008: 61; Thomas 2003: 22).

In March 1929, the CSM called on its adherents to swear a loyalty oath to the Mission, symbolising their repudiation of female circumcision. With tensions between Africans and missionary societies already high, this demand led to protests from the Gikuyu population in the form of a dance-song called *Muthirigu*, which had spread to most parts of central Kenya by September 1929. The lyrics decried the

¹ Thank you to Dr Ismay Milford, Dr Tom Cunningham, Dr Gerard McCann, and the two anonymous reviewers of *Gender and Research* for comments on earlier drafts.

² Other Protestant missionary societies active in colonial Kenya included the Africa Inland Mission, the Gospel Missionary Society, and the Church Missionary Society.



colonial government, missionaries, and the African Christians who were loyal to them, and the *Muthirigu* was incorporated by many Gikuyu nationalists into their anti-colonial activism. The controversy culminated with the murder of an American woman missionary, Hilda Stumpf, on 3 January 1930 (Strayer 1978: 139; Thomas 1998: 130; Sandgren 1989: 139; Boulanger 2008: 67-8; *Memorandum* 1931: 45, Appendix V; Anderson 2018: 1515).

The British colonial government, much to the disappointment of the missionary societies, never imposed an official ban on the practice of female circumcision (Kanogo 2005: 91). Fed by missionary reports of higher infant mortality among children of circumcised women, the colonial government's primary concern was population growth, which was linked to British Kenya's long-term economic output, as a smaller population would mean fewer labour reserves to draw upon. The colonial government decided to regulate – rather than officially ban – the practice by limiting the extent to which a girl's genitalia were cut. It was hoped that the practice would die out slowly through education, and that Africans would begin to recognise what the British viewed as the barbarity of the act (Boulanger 2008: 71; *Memorandum* 1931: 19, 22).

The controversy was also incorporated by many Gikuyu men into their anti-colonial nationalist activism, and they viewed missionary activity as a deliberate attempt to eradicate Gikuyu traditions (Natsoulas 1998). The most famous nationalist collective was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), the secretary of which was Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become the first president of an independent Kenya.³ Kenyatta was a strong advocate for the retention of female circumcision and lobbied in both Kenya and Britain for keeping Gikuyu traditions (Kenyatta 1938: 126-7). The KCA was known for its strong anti-mission stance, and it used the circumcision controversy, along with Gikuyu grievances about land, in its nationalist activism (Luongo 2000: 11).

Existing under the umbrella of the British colonial government were the Local Native Councils (LNCs) of the different districts in the Gikuyu-inhabited areas. Consisting of both African and British men, these councils were colonial-created institutions designed to implement and exercise British indirect rule – government through local authorities, which was implemented in all British colonies. The LNCs worked with missionaries and the colonial government to limit, if not eradicate, female circumcision in certain areas of central Kenya (Thomas 2003: 24; Kanogo 2005: 85; Boulanger 2008: 66).

Western women also contributed to the debate on the female circumcision controversy. British female Members of Parliament at the time – notably the Duchess

³ The English spelling 'Kikuyu' (rather than 'Gikuyu') is used here, as the 'Kikuyu Central Association' is abbreviated as 'KCA' in most official documents.

of Atholl and Eleanor Rathbone – were very vocal on the matter, specifically regarding the effect of the practice on women's health (UK Parliament 1929; Luongo 2000: 124; Thomas 1998: 130). One Western academic, an American scholar known as Jean Davison, travelled to Kenya decades after the crisis and interviewed a woman who had been circumcised at the time of the controversy (Davison 1989). Through the latter's voice being brought to the forefront with the aid of a Western researcher, Davison's work in this way provides useful insight into the power relations of knowledge production about women in Africa.

Within the historiography on the female circumcision 'controversy' is the glaring lack, if not complete absence, of Gikuyu – and other African – women's voices in the primary and secondary sources, both of which are dominated by the elite actors discussed above. It must be emphasised that the category of 'Gikuyu women' itself is far from homogeneous, consisting of the girls who were cut, the women performing the cutting, Christian and non-Christian women, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and daughters. These are all women of various walks of life, and their diversity fails to be adequately represented in the sources, which reduce them to passive, voiceless subjects. In examining the religious, political, and gendered discourses surrounding the 'controversy', this article analyses the extent to which Gikuyu women's voices can be retrieved from the textual sources available, aiming to illuminate the issue of African women's marginalisation in history, with actors of the hegemony contributing to reinforcing various hierarchies of oppression.⁴ In challenging existing historiography through a gender analysis of historical sources, more humbly, this article calls for a change in the way history is read and produced, to give discursive space to the voices of previously marginalised actors.

Methodological background

The research for this topic was conducted by examining archival materials in the British National Archives, the University of Edinburgh Centre for Research Collections, the University of Oxford Bodleian Libraries, and the University of Birmingham Cadbury Research Library. The limitations of using archives solely based in the UK are discussed further below. Sources consulted included colonial papers, mission

⁴ That said, even with the limitations placed upon them, Gikuyu – and Kenyan – women did have agency and autonomy within the patriarchal cultures that existed before the arrival of Christianity. In the 19th century, women played an active role in the Gikuyu political economy through their involvement in trade; they collectively organised themselves in various ways throughout the 20th century to form women's groups, and some took to arguing in the public sphere about issues affecting them, such as marital discord. For further discussions on Gikuyu women's agency, see, for instance Clark 1980; Robertson 1996; Peterson 2001.



accounts, as well as documents produced by Jomo Kenyatta and the KCA, which are useful in highlighting contemporary colonial and patriarchal attitudes towards Africa and African women. Using a decolonial perspective, a gender analysis of the primary sources at hand was conducted, drawing on feminist decolonial theorists, including Spivak, Alcoff and Minh-ha, to find the voices – or absence thereof – of African women on the debate surrounding the female circumcision controversy (Spivak 2000; Alcoff 1991-2; Minh-ha 1989).

This article builds on the work of other scholars – both African and non-African – who have highlighted African women’s agency and resistance to colonialism and the injustices they faced. These range from Kanogo’s discussions of Kenyan women’s mobility and agency as a result of travel to Mutongi’s analysis of how western Kenyan widows have successfully navigated patriarchal systems for socio-economic security. Onsando examines the multifaceted nature of the culture surrounding female circumcision, in its creation of community and womanhood for many women, and how colonial interventions in the tradition resemble those of modern human rights. (Kanogo 2005; Mutongi 1999; Onsando 2016). In an analysis of the female circumcision controversy, Luongo rightly states that ‘... while clitoridectomy was an issue *about* women, it was not an issue *of* women’ and that the ‘... controversy was not a debate that publicly engaged women in contesting the control of their own bodies’. Her argument, however, does not analyse how such non-engagement has been sustained over the decades and reproduced in historical knowledge production (Luongo 2000: 105).

The issue of female circumcision is tackled by some in creative writing, such as Charity Waciuma’s memoirs *Daughter of Mumbi*, in which the author describes her experiences as an uncircumcised girl from a Kenyan Christian family, and the tensions present when she is with circumcised girls in school (Waciuma 1969). Similarly, in her play *The Scar*, as well as in her memoirs *Mirrors of My Life: A Memoir*, Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau condemns the tradition of female circumcision (Njau 1965, 2019). Though not academic writing, both texts are useful sources with which to examine changing attitudes towards the practice in Kenya throughout the 20th century, and to capture the humanity of historical experience, something that may not be gleaned as easily from colonial or missionary documents.

A small caveat with regard to terminology must be added: throughout this article, the term ‘female circumcision’ will be used, though it is an inaccurate translation of the Gikuyu word *irua*, which refers to initiation, a range of ceremonies that prepared boys and girls for adulthood, of which circumcision was a part (Robertson 1996: 620). There are a variety of terms used in the literature on the subject, including ‘excision’, ‘female genital cutting’, or ‘female genital mutilation’. In the awareness that, as Boddy states, ‘all terminologies are political’, in the interest of clarity, and to fall in line

with existing historiography, this article employs the terms 'female circumcision' and 'clitoridectomy' interchangeably in the following discussions on the religious and political discourse surrounding the controversy and the women's voices present in this (Boddy 2007: 47).

Religious discourse

Initial missionary work in central Kenya began upon the first missionary's arrival in 1898, with the first Gikuyu person's conversion to Christianity happening in 1907. As part of the colonial project, missionary societies worked to teach Gikuyu people, to impart a Christian message to them and to gradually turn them away from their religious and traditional beliefs, demonstrating the 'cultural arrogance' that defined most colonial attitudes at the time (Maathai 2007: 5-6; Arthur c. 1945; Voice of Kenya c. 1953: 2; Natsoulas 1998: 139; Sandgren 1989: 2). From 1906 onwards, the Church of Scotland Mission actively preached against the practice of female circumcision, together with its associated dances and other initiation rites, as the Mission had been, according to Dr Arthur, witness to 'the evil effects' of the practice (Arthur c. 1945; Thomas 2003: 22). The details of their work and their experiences are recorded across various documents produced in the decades following the female circumcision crisis – and which were examined for this article – including lectures and memoranda by Dr Arthur, newspaper articles, and letters written by missionaries (Arthur c. 1945; *Memorandum* 1931; *Mrs J. W. Arthur* 1937; Mombasa 1931).

The primary reason for the missionary societies' stance against clitoridectomy was, ironically, a humane one: mission doctors, when treating women who had undergone the operation, were privy to its worst effects. They observed the risk of sepsis, the immense pain caused by the operation, and the dangers when performed by a non-medical expert (*Record* 1930; *Memorandum* 1931: Appendix 1). Mission doctors identified both a minor and a major form in the way clitoridectomy was practised by the Gikuyu: the former entailed only the partial removal of the clitoris, while the latter involved the removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, and the labia majora (*Memorandum* 1931: 1-2). According to mission doctors' observations, it was the major form that resulted in the scar tissue that affected childbirth and infant health (Kanogo 2005: 79; Thomas 2003: 23; Leakey 1931: 4).

Certainly, there were numerous cases of circumcised women in mission hospitals experiencing difficulty in childbirth; however, given the fact that the sources that state this are of missionary origin, it is difficult to gauge their objectivity, as they would mainly have been privy to the worst cases. Writing in his memoirs, Kenyatta emphasised that mission doctors rarely experienced healthy cases of circumcised women giving birth – women would only come to them in situations of great



emergency. In addition, most of the missionaries' sources of information were recent Gikuyu Christian converts who were the products of missionaries' teaching against the practice, and thus viewed clitoridectomy as a backward practice (Kenyatta 1938: 147). The reliability of the missionary sources must thus be called into question.

As more Gikuyu people converted to Christianity, the CSM had by the early 1920s passed a rule that any baptised church members that underwent the operation of clitoridectomy, or encouraged their daughters to do so, would be punished with suspension from the church (Natsoulas 1998: 139; Strayer 1978: 137; Boulanger 2008: 61, 66; Mombasa 1931). The missionaries also continuously sought the help of the colonial government to ban the practice; though complete legislation against this was not enforced, and in some districts in the Gikuyu-inhabited areas clitoridectomy was limited to the 'minor' form (*Memorandum* 1931: 22; Maxwell 1926).

By 1929, events came to a head when in March the Protestant missionaries required Gikuyu Christians to sign the *kirore* pledge that was also a loyalty oath to the mission and a renunciation of female circumcision. Such was the infuriation of many Gikuyu people that, in protest a few months later, the *Muthirigu* dance-song broke out. The song's focus was not only on female circumcision but also incorporated grievances with colonial politics and land issues, the latter of which were also a very contentious topic in Kenya at the time.⁵ With lyrics that called for a 'fight with the Church', they declared 'you elders of the church / you are fools' and threatened that those who signed the vow against circumcision 'shall be crucified'. Beginning in Kiambu district, it quickly spread through the Gikuyu-inhabited areas, reaching Nairobi and the European-owned farms, causing what Dr Arthur described as 'a state of lawlessness' (Boulanger 2008: 67-8; Natsoulas 1998: 141-2; *Memorandum* 1931: 45, Appendix V; Arthur c.1945: 4).

There was a growing rift within Gikuyu society, brought about by the *Muthirigu* protests, which split between Gikuyu missionary supporters and those who were against missionary policy. Many Christian Gikuyus found themselves in a position in which they had to choose between the Church and their own customs and traditions. Those that chose the former became increasingly critical of their customs and culture and were slowly ostracised from their communities (Strayer 1978: 95; Kanogo 2005: 81-2). Those Gikuyu that opposed mission policy did so for various reasons: some, such as KCA members, did so on political grounds, whilst others, often newer mission adherents, did not view Gikuyu traditions and Christianity as

⁵ *Muthirigu* as a musical genre has a long history in Gikuyu oral and musical culture. It was used to record and pass down history (comparable to the Western form of textual documentation of the past), and often also in protest against British colonial injustice and repression of African traditions. In a similar way to the 1929 controversy, *Muthirigu* was also used in protest during the uprising of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army in the 1950s. See also Muhoro 2002; Ndīgīrīgī 2017.

incompatible, and sought to combine the two (Sandgren 1982: 199). It was members of the group against mission policy that left the missions and removed their children from mission schools, sending them instead to the newly created independent schools, created by Kenyans themselves. These were locally-run without financial aid from the government and were born out of the need for alternative types of educational institutions where children could learn without missionary indoctrination (Kenyatta 1938: 142; Arthur c.1945: 5; Dutton 1929: 2-3; Koinange 1955: 25; Voice of Kenya c. 1953: 4; Bunche 1941: 52). Joshua argues that, in an exacerbation of the controversy, ultimately neither the missionaries nor African men demonstrated a clear concern for the women's bodies, as the practice of clitoridectomy became the location of a power struggle, and this resulted in a failure to manage the problem effectively and only served to entrench the practice even further (Joshua 2009).

Many of the primary sources on the religious discourse of the female circumcision controversy examined have an androcentric focus: they are either produced by men – either colonial missionaries or Gikuyu men – or recount aspects of Gikuyu culture from a male point of view, with the voices of women almost entirely absent. The sources of the Church Mission Society are primarily about Dr Arthur and his activities in central Kenya, and when female circumcision is mentioned, it is in a pejorative way, emphasising its 'cruel and harmful nature' resulting in 'the death of mother and of child' (Arthur c. 1945). Apart from an explanation that circumcision is a rite of passage for both Gikuyu boys and girls, there is no mention of its importance to girls, and how, as a marker of Gikuyu identity, it symbolises progression to womanhood (Natsoulas 1998: 138).

When the sources do discuss Gikuyu people, this is often only done with reference to 'big men', such as Kenyatta, Harry Thuku, or Jesse Kariuki, leading figures in the KCA, who focused 'on the recovery of [Gikuyu] land' and on 'righting other grievances' (Arthur c. 1945: 2, 4). There is little discussion of Gikuyu women in the sources, who are often treated as objects defined by their reproductive capacities (*Mrs J. W. Arthur* 1937). There are instances when their experiences are accounted for, such as in the CSM's memorandum on female circumcision, which, when discussing the limitation of clitoridectomy to its minor form in Kenya's Embu district in 1926 states that 'the young girls themselves favour it because it involves less suffering' (*Memorandum* 1931: 22). However, despite the fact that this features the voices of women, they are filtered through the perspective of the CSM, and thus remain spoken for, if not silenced.

This silencing of Gikuyu women's voices in historical sources is far from accidental; it is deliberately done by hegemonic actors in their own interests and reflects contemporary attitudes towards African women. Thus, 'inequalities experienced by actors lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces', and various events



experienced by certain actors become narratives prioritised in the creation of history (Trouillot 2015: 48). As this carries into the stages of writing and producing history, these silences become further entrenched, highlighting an 'androcentric bias in the written record' (Geiger 1998: 9). An actor's discursive location does not determine the truth and meaning of the discourse; therefore, a hegemonic position does not necessarily infer the production of truthful and accurate discourse surrounding the 'other'. For this reason, it is too simple to unquestioningly accept the missionary's version of events, and to blindly believe that Gikuyu women remained silent on the matter – their absent voices are a construction that erased them from the missionary's version of history (Alcoff 1991-92: 17).

This section examined the religious debates on the female circumcision controversy and how the issue was framed in the religious discourse. The sources examined for this were primarily produced by missionary societies active in central Kenya at the time. An attempt was made, with difficulty, to retrieve the voices of Gikuyu women from the sources, demonstrating how, as the subaltern, they were often spoken for and thus had no voice discursively.

Political discourse

One of the primary reasons why the British colonial government became involved in the female circumcision controversy was because of their concern about population decline in Kenya, as this would ultimately mean fewer cheap labour reserves to draw upon (Boulanger 2008: 71). Chief Native Commissioner G. V. Maxwell wrote that 'in the interest of humanity, native eugenics, and increase of population', the milder form of clitoridectomy required enforcing (Maxwell 1926). The colonial government – informed by missionary reports – believed that circumcised Kenyan women gave birth to weaker children, if they survived at all, which also hindered the supposed humanitarian project of strengthening and developing the African population, a pillar of contemporary missionary and colonial political activity and discourse (Kanogo 2005: 85; Luongo 2000: 118; Thomas 2003: 24).

For this reason, the government worked with the LNCs to regulate the practice of female circumcision. Consisting of colonial-appointed Kenyan men and a British district commissioner, the LNCs were institutions designed to implement indirect rule. In the years leading up to the female circumcision controversy, clitoridectomy was limited to the minor form by 1926 in all districts except Nyeri, and from 1927 onwards circumcision in Meru without the consent of the girl in question was banned. The British colonial government was reluctant to enforce a full ban on female circumcision and take a direct position on the practice; given the growing political consciousness of the KCA and support for the organisation, the government was worried about

rebellion and increased opposition to colonial rule. It was eventually decided that the best way to respond to the issue was through education, rather than legislation, on female circumcision. Government representatives hoped that through sufficient pro-colonial propaganda and a Western mission education, Gikuyu people would come to see for themselves the brutality of female circumcision (Maxwell 1926; Kenyatta 1938: 126; Thomas 1998: 131; Boulanger 2008: 67; Thomas 2003: 26; Kanogo 2005: 85).

The nationalist KCA was a staunch opponent of the colonial government and anti-European in its policies, and it worked to counter the effects of colonial and missionary activity. They were very vocal about defending Gikuyu traditions, especially when official regulations on clitoridectomy were introduced, '[urging] resistance against attempts to control the custom of female circumcision' (Grigg 1929b). A number of the KCA's members were part of *Muthirigu*, incorporating the controversy into existing Gikuyu grievances about their poor land rights and forced labour on European-owned farms. As circumcision was important to almost every Gikuyu, the KCA were thus able to bring together a fragmented society under the umbrella of the anti-colonial movement. *Muthirigu* and the female circumcision controversy thus became a form of Kenyan nationalism, which would later on develop into the uprising of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army – also known as Mau Mau – and the fight for the country's independence (Luongo 2000: 111; Pedersen 1991: 651; Kikuyu Central Association 1929; Natsoulas 1998: 144).⁶ The KCA expressed its grievances and anger with the European colonial yoke in its Gikuyu-language newspaper *Muigwithania*, which Kenyatta also edited and contributed to. The publications in the paper worried the colonial government, who feared that KCA propaganda during the controversy would spread quickly and incite further unrest and colonial resistance. Unsurprisingly, the government looked with much disfavour upon the Association, and the Governor of Kenya at the time, Sir Edward Grigg, deemed its 'policy ... anti-Government, anti-Missionary and anti-Settler' (Kanogo 2005: 90; Boulanger 2008: 67-8; Grigg 1926; Grigg 1929a).

As Secretary of the KCA, Kenyatta spent the latter half of the 1920s promoting the KCA's position and ideas in England, where he was living at the time (Boulanger 2008: 67). At a parliamentary session at the House of Commons in 1930, where the issue of clitoridectomy in central Kenya was discussed, he was invited to represent the Gikuyu people and emphasised the importance of clitoridectomy to Gikuyu girls in becoming women (Kenyatta 1938: 126; Strobel, Bingham 2004: 36). Kenyatta's antipathy towards colonial imposition on Gikuyu – and African – customs pushed

⁶ It is important, however, not to conflate the ideals of central Kenyans with Kenyans as a whole, many of who experienced colonialism differently, and who may have had different national aims. The problematics of this are discussed in Onsando 2016.



him to the side of traditionalism, which is evident in the language he used in his autobiography *Facing Mt Kenya*: he wrote that ‘no proper [Gikuyu]’ would marry an uncircumcised girl, and intercourse with an uncircumcised man or woman for a Gikuyu was ‘taboo’. Additionally, he described the Gikuyu men who married uncircumcised women from other Kenyan ethnic groups as ‘detrribalised’ (Kenyatta 1938: 127).

As with the missionary sources, those produced by political actors at the time of the controversy are largely dominated by male voices. There are virtually no Gikuyu women’s voices in the sources available produced by British colonial officials on the issue of clitoridectomy or with regard to the related crisis. The topic is kept broad and largely political in the sources, and it is identified as a problem only in terms of how it will affect the colonial project and missionary activity: writing about the controversy in a letter, Dr Arthur stated that the ‘situation has arisen ... from the fact that the political body known as the [KCA] has been and is working to undermine the authority of Government’ (Arthur 1929). During the crisis, government officials worriedly watched as many Gikuyu people boycotted the mission schools in favour of independent schools, but insisted – in language indicative of colonial arrogance – that if the issue was handled ‘with good humour and restraint ... these sillies [would] give up their conspiracies and ... be content to go back and work on their [farms]’ (Dutton 1929). The only reference made to women is when maternal health is discussed, and how the resulting ‘scar tissue ... offers resistance to the passage of the baby at child-birth and makes labour slow and difficult’ (*Record* 1930). Colonial government officials relied on mission doctors for this information, the reliability of which, as stated previously, is debatable, given the fact that they rarely experienced healthy childbirths, which would have happened at the mother’s home, away from mission hospitals (Kenyatta 1938: 147). The paucity of Gikuyu women’s voices in the sources is testimony to their perceived irrelevance to colonial officials, who became interested in female circumcision and the related controversy, mainly due to a combination of missionary pressure and worries about unrest due to KCA activity. In order to maintain stability in the colony, they tried to find a middle ground to appease both the missionaries and the KCA, marginalising Gikuyu women in the process.

An examination of the sources produced by Kenyan male political actors reveals a similar ignoring and silencing of women’s voices, as many of these assume their right to ‘speak for’ Gikuyu women. This is particularly evident in Kenyatta’s memoirs, in which he writes about circumcision for both boys and girls in great detail. Having undergone the ritual himself, he claims this gives him the right to ‘speak as a representative of [his] people’, which he did in the House of Commons in 1930, as mentioned above. In addition, his aunt was one of the women who operated on girls; Kenyatta wrote that, by talking to her and listening to conversations between

her and other women, he had sufficient knowledge of female circumcision to be able to comment on the issue (Kenyatta 1938: xix-xx, 126). This Spivakian type of representation (*vertreten*) is not only highly problematic but also discursively dangerous, as it renders the 'subaltern' mute in the face of patriarchal hegemony. In this way, Kenyatta's words contributed to the suppression of Gikuyu women's voices, as he used his privilege to speak for them, rather than create a discursive space for them to speak and be heard.

For all its flaws, however, Kenyatta's *Facing Mt Kenya* is one of the few textual sources that even discusses the importance of clitoridectomy to women. The rest of the KCA-centred political sources largely incorporate the circumcision controversy into its political, anti-colonial agenda. When the KCA representatives discussed their grievances pertaining to land and higher education for men in a letter to the Secretary of State to the Colonies, their discussions solely revolved around Gikuyu men. The only mention of women is in the request that they 'should be exempted from hut and poll-tax' by colonial authorities (Kikuyu Central Association 1929). Though the letter was not about the female circumcision controversy itself, it is nevertheless indicative of the perceived irrelevance of women's issues to the KCA. The association's desire to retain female circumcision seemed more part of its nationalist anti-European movement, and less because it was an important tradition to Gikuyu women. It is important to remember that many members of the KCA, including Kenyatta, formed part of the Kenyan political and intellectual elite, who were in this position because they had benefitted from a Western missionary education. As mentioned above, a missionary education taught Western values, which at the time included conservative Edwardian norms that were taken up by African students. This would have influenced the way African women were seen by men: as subservient creatures that required speaking for, which is evident in the discursive silence of Gikuyu women in the historical sources. Kenyatta and the KCA are guilty of largely ignoring what women had to say about circumcision and instead exploiting the issue to further their nationalist agenda.

The silencing in the textual sources of Gikuyu women by both colonial government forces and male Gikuyu political actors is testimony to the women's double subjugation. Colonial hegemony produced the polarising positions of oppressor – the cultural-political hegemon – and the oppressed. Within the latter group is the subaltern – an individual 'with no history and [who] cannot speak', and as a woman, according to Spivak, is rendered mute in the face of patriarchy and imperialism. This is certainly the case with the representation – or *vertreten* – of Gikuyu women in the political sources: the combination of imperial British male voices, and those of Gikuyu men rendered them almost silent and unheard by the hegemony. Trapped between African patriarchy and Western imperialism, Gikuyu women '[disappeared] into a violent



shuttling ... caught between tradition and modernisation' (Spivak 2000: 1468). In this way, they were even further removed from hegemony, as their bodies became the location of a struggle for power between two opposing forces.

The political discourse presented in this section highlights the contributions of male British colonial officials and Kenyan political figures to the debate during the female circumcision controversy. Though the two camps opposed each other in ideology, they both contributed to marginalising Gikuyu women and silenced their voices in the sources they contributed to producing.

Women's voices

Within the framework of a gendered discourse surrounding the female circumcision controversy, Kenyan women's voices are more prominent – although still a minority – than within other discourses. For instance, in a contribution to *Muigwithania* in 1929, a Gikuyu woman named Tabitha Wangui explained the link between uncircumcised women and prostitution: women who were not circumcised were unable to find husbands, leading them to seek employment in Nairobi, where many would work as prostitutes (Muigwithania ii, no. 1 1929 qtd. in Ward 1976: 175). In a secondary source published in 2007, Njambi argues that *irua*, and the accompanying circumcision, was far from a symbol of Gikuyu women's oppression: it symbolised 'boldness and courage that provide a socio-historical platform for women to engage in militant anti-colonial activity in ways that were perceived as coequal with men' (Njambi 2007: 691). Though two very different women, who lived in different eras, they are examples of the diversity of Kenyan women's voices on the issue of clitoridectomy and the accompanying 1929-31 controversy, and they demonstrate the richness inherent in alternative and more inclusive readings of mainstream history.

A further example of a Gikuyu woman's voice can be found in an interview with Wanjiku by American scholar Jean Davison published in 1989 in *Women of Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*. Born in 1910, Wanjiku was circumcised in the 1920s, in the years leading up to the female circumcision controversy. Although she does not directly refer to the crisis in the interview, Wanjiku does emphasise the importance of circumcision for both boys and girls, as it was the only way for young people to attain adulthood, in spite of the pain involved in the operation. Wanjiku continues to stress the need to 'buy maturity with pain', as the ability to endure the pain of clitoridectomy demonstrated a woman's willingness to accept the pain of childbirth. In avoiding circumcision, Wanjiku states that a girl misses an important life event – one that not only makes her a woman, but also teaches her about social stratification and interaction with elders and other age-sets within Gikuyu society (Davison 1989: 23).

Davison's interview with Wanjiku demonstrates the views of a Gikuyu woman to whom circumcision was necessary for herself and other young women. However, as a source, though valuable, it is not without its flaws: it contains merely one woman's experiences of the controversy, and it is therefore difficult to gauge to what extent it is reflective of her contemporaries at the time. Additionally, the voice of Wanjiku is presented via the perspective of a white American woman, which is problematic in itself and raises as many questions – that are inherent to any ethnographic research – as it answers: What kind of questions did Davison ask? Who translated the questions and answers during the interview, and how much was lost in the process? How was the interview later edited to appease the publishers of the final manuscript? Davison's own views may have influenced her research approach, the way her questions were framed, and, consequently, Wanjiku's responses to them. It is evident in this case that '... "them" is only admitted among "us", the discussing subjects, when accompanied by or introduced by an 'us' member, hence the dependency on "them"' (Minh-ha 1989: 67). Under different circumstances, it is doubtful whether Wanjiku would independently have been able to voice her opinions – to the extent that she would, for example, be published by London-based publishers, like Davison was – due to the lack of socio-economic capital and the structural barriers based on racism and sexism. Even though *Women of Mutira* was published in 1989, sixty years after the circumcision controversy, the fact that these women's perspectives are presented with the 'aid' of a Western woman is indicative of the legacies of colonial power-structures in discursive hierarchies in historical knowledge production.

Other Western women contributing to the debate – more directly – on the female circumcision controversy contemporarily included British women Members of Parliament, who viewed the practice of clitoridectomy as symbolic of the submissive position of Gikuyu women in their societies (Luongo 2000: 124). In a 1929 sitting in the House of Commons, MP Eleanor Rathbone declared Gikuyu women as slaves 'to men of their own race', the equivalent of property to their husbands and fathers. At the same time, these women MPs, like missionary societies, demonstrated concern for Gikuyu women's health and the effect female circumcision had on their bodies. During a parliamentary session, the Duchess of Atholl discussed the consequences of the practice on childbirth and risks it posed to the first born child, decrying female circumcision as 'nothing short of mutilation', and cited a public letter appearing in an East African newspaper that reported on Gikuyu women demonstrating in protest against female circumcision. However, the racist colonial overtones are evident, as the Duchess reminded the House of 'how little native races may be able to express themselves' and stressed 'how backward they may be in respect of many of their customs' (UK Parliament 1929).



Such sweeping statements about Gikuyu women and female circumcision, though masked with concern, were ingrained in racist colonial discourse and contributed to entrenching the privileged positions of British women MPs and maintaining racial power structures. Through sole emphasis on Gikuyu women's oppression by Gikuyu men, the MPs overlooked the fact that Gikuyu women were equally subjugated by Western colonial hegemony on account of their race. In this way, in highlighting their concern in terms of 'sisterhood', these British women decentred themselves from their whiteness and their role as MPs in a colonial empire that oppressed African women. This relatively powerful position within the hegemony, therefore, made the discursive location of the women MPs biased: in their narrative of 'us' versus 'them', they characterised African women as primitive and themselves as enlightened, perpetuating binaries of 'western' versus 'non-western', which reinforced hierarchical discursive oppression (Hinterberger 2007: 77; Alcoff 1991-92: 7, 15).

There were a variety of women's voices who contributed to the debate on the circumcision crisis, both during the controversy and decades later. These were investigated by examining an article written by a Gikuyu woman at the time of the crisis, secondary sources produced on the matter by Kenyan women, an interview conducted by Davison – a Western woman – with the Gikuyu woman Wanjiku, who was circumcised in the years prior to the controversy, and the discussions of British women MPs. In analysing these contributions, it was highlighted how the statements of Western women contributed to the continued oppression of African women.

Discussion and conclusion

The 1929-31 female circumcision controversy in Kenya is an incident in history that serves to demonstrate racial and gendered power relations and the variety of ways the colonial institution worked to oppress Gikuyu – and other African – women. This article analysed the debates – both in primary and secondary sources – on the controversy, from religious, political, and gendered perspectives, in an attempt to illuminate the silencing of African women's voices in history.

The religious discourse was largely dominated by missionary societies – notably the CSM – who were active in colonial Kenya at the time, and who were wholly against the practice of clitoridectomy. Ostensibly out of concern about the effect it would have on the women's bodies and its negative impact on childbirth, missionaries actively taught against clitoridectomy in their schools. When they demanded that African teachers at the mission sign a pledge against the practice, the *Muthirigu* dance-song erupted in protest, spreading quickly throughout Gikuyu-inhabited areas of central Kenya. Many Gikuyu parents removed their children from mission schools

and instead sent them to locally-run independent schools, where they felt they would not be subjected to mission propaganda.

Consisting primarily of the voices of the British colonial government and the KCA, the political discourse presented different views on female circumcision. After initial indifference to the practice, the colonial government later condemned it because of their concern about long-term population growth in the colony. In collaboration with the LNCs, partial legislation against female circumcision was implemented. The KCA, on the other hand, with Jomo Kenyatta as secretary, were very vocal about the retention of clitoridectomy, equating its abolition with Western infringement upon Gikuyu traditions. They integrated this into their existing grievances and their nationalist, anti-colonial activism, without seeming to exhibit clear consideration for Gikuyu women themselves.

There were also some women's voices involved in the debate around the female circumcision controversy, including the voices of a few Kenyan women in both primary and secondary sources, who discuss the importance of female circumcision to their communities. Western women's voices also featured in the debate: an interview conducted by Davison with Wanjiku, a Gikuyu woman who experienced the controversy, sheds light on an under-represented viewpoint in the debate. However, the discussion was dominated by women MPs in Britain, who advocated for the abolition of clitoridectomy in the House of Commons on the grounds of their concern for Gikuyu women's health and what they viewed as the latter's degraded position in Gikuyu society.

The various debates on the female circumcision controversy are of course not mutually exclusive; they were chosen as lenses to examine Gikuyu women's voices in the historical sources available on the matter. With a few exceptions mentioned previously, their voices are, by and large, almost completely absent from the debates surrounding an issue that concerns their own bodies, as they are silenced in both the primary and secondary sources examined here, the creators of which chose to exclude them from their readings of history. Little is known about their experiences of and thoughts on the matter, and considering them changes the overall narrative of the historiography, which generally frames the debate as 'tradition versus modernity' or 'colonialism versus ethno-nationalism' (Robertson 1996: 623-4). The example of the controversy serves to illustrate a much broader issue in the field of history – that of the general marginalisation of African women in historical production. This silence is perpetuated in each stage of historical production: the creation of sources, archives, narratives, and, ultimately, history (Trouillot 2015: 26).

The silencing of women's voices only contributes to a distorted creation and reading of history, one that favours the views and narratives of certain hegemonic actors over those of more marginalised figures. Ultimately, what is required is a shift in historical



practice in all above-mentioned stages in the creation of history, in order to account for other voices and experiences and to present a more accurate narrative. This could be achieved using alternative approaches to the study and reading of history. Admittedly, not all of these proposed modes were possible in the research for this article for financial reasons; however, it is hoped that they can serve as suggestions for future scholars of African women's histories. In the case of the Gikuyu female circumcision controversy, this can include, for instance, genealogical oral history interviews with Gikuyu women themselves, rather than a sole focus on textual sources, such as those housed in traditional archives, which largely privilege Western, androcentric viewpoints. This can be accompanied by studying sources in Gikuyu – such as the newspaper *Muigwithania* – and secondary sources produced by Kenyan – and other African – historians, who because of their cultural proximity may consider aspects of history overlooked by Western historians. Non-traditional textual sources can also be studied, including works of creative writing, such as those by Waciuma and Njau mentioned above. Though some may be fictional, or may not necessarily be historically accurate, the context in which such works are produced may shed light on the subject and provide a more intimate perspective on historical events. In this way, Gikuyu – and other African – women will no longer be relegated to the footnotes of history and will be treated as three-dimensional individuals with agency who contributed to the making of history.

Through an analysis of the female circumcision controversy in Gikuyu-inhabited areas of central Kenya, this article illuminated the various strategies of silencing African women in creation and readings of history as the 'subaltern'. The sources – both primary and secondary – demonstrate the variety of actors who either silence or speak for Gikuyu women, a habit that is reflected throughout history in relations between oppressor and oppressed. Different modes to end this perpetuation of silence were proposed, which largely call for broader readings of history, and it is hoped that this can add value to the creation of historical epistemologies. The inclusion of African women's voices in these processes is vital in order to contribute to efforts towards decolonising modes of knowledge production.

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