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Writing Gikuyu Christian literacy and ethnic debate in northern central Kenya, 1908-1952

Derek Raymond Peterson

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Writing Gikuyu

Christian literacy & ethnic debate in
Northern Central Kenya 1908-52

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Writing Gikuyu
Christian literacy and ethnic debate in northern central Kenya, 1908-1952

A thesis
submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Minnesota
by

Derek Raymond Peterson

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Advisors
Allen F. Isaacman and Jean M. Allman

August 2000

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and that any and all revisions required by the final
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Glossary

acengi (mucenji)	heathen, barbarians
ahoi (muhoi)	tenants, colleagues
Akorino	prophets, "growlers"
anake	young men
andu ago (mundu mugo)	wise men, medicine men, 'witchdoctors'
arathi (murathi)	prophets
athamaki (muthamaki)	spokesmen, big men, sometimes chiefs
athomi (muthomi)	lit. "readers", Christians
athoni ahoi	in-laws, relations by marriage
atiriri!	"Listen!", "Pay attention!"
cai	tea with milk
comba	foreigner, barbarian
ereriri	selfish people
githaka (ithaka)	land, estate
gitonga (itonga)	wealthy person, rich man
haka	to smear, make boundaries, make sacrifices
hoya	ask for, request, deal with
hinya	strength, virility
iregi	refusers, a generation name
irumi (kirumi)	a father's curse on a delinquent son
irungu	straighteners, a generation name
ituika	lit. "breaking"; generational succession
kiama	council
kipande	govt. registraton badge carried by male workers
kirira	secret matter
kirore	thumbprint, anti-circumscion pledge
kuhorohia	"blow on", cool heated bodily pollution
kuura	pull out, redeem
magongona (igongona)	elders' "sacrifices" at fig trees
mambere	those in front, forerunners
matwini	"heaven", place in the clouds
mbari	sub-clan, landholding unit
mehia	"sins", lies
menya	to know within self
mugumo	fig tree, location of "sacrifices"
muhiriga (mihiriga)	clan, door to homestead, division
muuma	oath
Muthirigu	song of the big uncut girl
ndamathia	river dragon, involved in <i>ituika</i>
Ngai	"God", the divider
ngaragu	famine, hunger
ngondu	powder used in cleansing, made of 'cool'
substances	

ngoro	orig. inclinations, now "soul", "conscience"
nyumba	house
riigi	woven door
tahikio	vomiting, cleansing from contamination
tha	mercy, benevolence, alms
thahu	substantial imbalance, contamination, pollution
thenge	he-goat, used in 'sacrifices'
ugo	"magic", divination, identifying contamination
ugi	elders' knowledge proven in speech, wisdom
uiguano	unity, cooperation
urogi	sorcery, wasting curse
uumu	powder used in cleansing, deeply red
wiathi	self-mastery, moral adulthood, "freedom"
wira	work

Abstract

Historians and theorists of literacy have taken uncritically the legitimating myth of European colonialism: that modern schooling made rational citizens of colonized subjects. This dissertation argues instead that Gikuyu "readers" remade the techniques of schooling for their own moral purposes. Focusing on the rural schools connected with the Presbyterian mission of Tumutumu in Kenya's Nyeri district, the dissertation shows that literacy was never a modern mindset for Gikuyu readers: writing was rather a rhetoric, a way that literates and illiterates alike argued about old ethnic virtues in order to meet the moral challenges of colonialism.

Gikuyu had long called themselves *mbari ya atiriri*, the "clan of I say to you." Political solidarities emerged from oral debate. Missionary texts and materials extended the imaginative language with which young debated with old, offering converts a powerfully compelling stock of stories with which to claim a hearing from their fathers. It was as a rhetoric that the first converts at Tumutumu adopted missionary dress and ideology in the dreadful aftermath of World War I. Youthful converts argued in the translated Bible that the soap they washed with, and the redemption they earned in baptism, amounted to *ituika*, the process of public cleansing in which youth purchased government from elders. Schooling was a vocabulary of generational debate. It became the proving ground for a new polity in the 1930s, when women's wage work and men's landlessness made rural people worry about social decay and sexual strife. In their public writing literate male converts shaded bureaucratic ideas into the vernacular, hoping that new political models would guard families from dissolution. Women also used missionary ideas to redress social disorder. In the vocal confessions of the East African Revival, women blamed men for domestic strife and demanded moral discipline of husbands. Women's talk and men's writing were contending gendered answers to widespread Gikuyu fear of social decay. "Mau Mau" carried Nyeri people's debate over moral order into the forest, where guerillas used bureaucracy give shape to the moral cleansing promised in *ituika*.

Chapter One

Introduction

Jeremiah Waita, one of the first Gikuyu converts at the Scots Presbyterian mission at Tumutumu, remembered his first meeting with the missionary teacher Marion Stevenson in this way:

We went...to welcome her in 1912 near Tumutumu. There was one thing about her that day that I never forgot especially when I am remembering about the Word of God that was coming from her mouth. My eyes found that she had rotten teeth. I remember her when I think about the Word of God that truly God looks into a person's heart.¹

Writing in 1930, Waita rendered his curious astonishment at Stevenson's mouth up to Christian transcendence. The Word spoke with decayed teeth. But in the early 1900s, missionaries' teeth, and diet, spoke louder than words. Stevenson was rumored to have eaten Chief Kariuki, who died in 1918 while under treatment in Tumutumu hospital. There were tears of hunger in her eyes when she preached at his village.² Gikuyu nicknamed her *Nyamacaki*, the "slim animal", or *Nyaruta*, the "one with saliva", and feared that she would devour their children.³ Students ran and hid when she appeared at the tiny village schools that surrounded the mission station.⁴ Parents cursed their daughters when they joined the mission girls' boarding school, and threw their garments into the midden as though they had died.⁵ Converts proudly named the boarding school *Mambele*, "those in front." They were known to sleep in graveyards, bury dead relatives, and drink out of white porcelain cups that looked like human skulls.

¹ SA II/C/47: Jeremiah Waita, "Karirikiania kia Marion Stevenson", n.d. (but 1930).

² Mrs. Henry Scott, *A Saint in Kenya: A Life of Marion Scott Stevenson* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), 207.

³ *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki*, 1982 (unpublished mss. in possession of Cecilia Muthoni, Tumutumu).

⁴ SA I/E/10: Stevenson, "Elementary Education," July 1922.

⁵ Stevenson, "About some Kenia girls," in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915).

What are we to make of this word of mouth, these strangely corporeal readings of missionaries' words and diets? Missionaries thought themselves preachers of the Word, messengers come to Africa to introduce benighted souls to their future. In hundreds of sermons, and more tellingly in tens of catechisms and school primers, they asked Gikuyu to judge themselves against the Word, so as to recognize their sin and repent. What these tales of missionary cannibalism suggest is that Gikuyu men and women found another place from which to confront missionary words, a place tangential to the relationship of subordination prescribed for them. It was as though what was important, what was terrifyingly controversial, was not the Word but clothing, cups, teeth, diet. The materiality of Gikuyu readings of Stevenson's mouth short-circuited the linkages between missionaries' message and its intended effects on listeners. What the cannibal controversy also makes clear is that Gikuyu argued among themselves even as they speculated on the British. Young people saw possibilities in missionary words and cuisine. Parents cursed them, and disposed of their attire. Families divided over mission education. There was more than one colonial encounter at Tumutumu, because Gikuyu could never make up a common mind about missionaries. Gikuyu did not reply to missionaries' words with their own, "authentic" voices of protest and resistance. What is depicted in these stories is a form of Gikuyu engagement with missionaries premised not on sustained confrontation between rulers and ruled, missionary and African, but on argument, speculation, contentious gambles on the substances of missionary culture.

Inspired, then, by Gikuyu arguments over cannibals and clothing, the study begins with questions about rhetoric: when Gikuyu were drawn into a long conversation with the British, who else were they talking to? and what were they talking about? How, in other words, did Gikuyu argue about colonial power?

Modernity, like Christianity, is often taken to be a system: characterized by certain conceptions of the autonomous self, governed by a liberal state, conceiving truth

rationality, the different components of modernity are supposed to work together cohesively, functionally.⁶ British indirect rule in the colonies assumed the creative power of modern education and politics: insofar as Africans spoke the language of rights, lived in cities, talked and wrote English, and dressed well, they were "citizens"; insofar as Africans dressed in skins, spoke the vernacular, and lived in the countryside, then they were "natives", governed by chiefs and customary law. In-betweens, citizen-savages caught in transition between tradition and modernity were dangerous, unstable, likely to cause trouble. The division between citizen and subject, as Mahmood Mamdani has shown, was at the heart of indirect rule, the single face of the bifurcated colonial state.⁷ It corresponded to other categories of domination--white/black; modern/traditional; nation/tribe.

Recent scholarship has marked these dichotomies, demonstrating how assiduously Europeans crafted categories with which to rule their subjects.⁸ We know much about anthropology's role in creating "natives", naturalized objects of colonial rule.⁹ We also know how difficult it was for Europeans to maintain stark divisions between white and not white, self and other. For Africans were never simply passive objects of colonial power, nor were they easily interpolated into its governing dichotomies. We have many fine descriptions of how the colonized resisted, turning aside the domination of European colonists, cooking their cotton seeds, sabotaging machines, or, in some cases, engaging in

⁶For debates over the usefulness of "modernity" as an analytical category, see Peter van der Veer, "The Global History of 'Modernity'," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (3) (1998), 285-94; and David Washbrook, "The Global History of 'Modernity'—A Response to a Reply," *JESHO* 41 (3) (1998), 295-311.

⁷Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁸Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994). For a particularly fruitful application of Said to the study of colonial schooling in India, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁹c.f. Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973); Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

outright violence.¹⁰ We now know that tradition was never traditional, that women continually resisted senior men's efforts to govern them through customary law.¹¹ We have also examples of syncretism, of hybridity, demonstrating how the dialectics of colonialism produced unexpected consequences, fresh combinations of European and African ideas and materials.¹²

We have, in short, ample evidence that the dichotomies produced by colonialism were nowhere given, always contested, always fluid. Yet there are relatively few accounts of this resistance, this pressure on colonial dichotomies, as a theoretical event. We know, in other words, much about the "long conversation" between Africans and Europeans. But what Africans thought of this conversation, and how they argued among themselves about it, largely remains a mystery. We have yet to fully explore colonized people's chronologies of change and theories of politics. We have fine descriptions of "people without history", but their conceptions and internal arguments are frequently treated as 'ethnohistories', left for anthropologists to decode. We have innumerable analyses of colonial domination, but little understanding of how the instruments of domination were recrafted, understood, utilized by colonized people. What we lack, in other words, are histories of non-liberal versions of agency, personhood and politics, histories that theorize colonized people's vigorously argued philosophies of community and self. In the midst of a post-modern age, we have not escaped from the prison into which colonialism has confined historical interpretation.

¹⁰The vast literature on "resistance" and peasant societies in Africa is reviewed in Allen Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," *African Studies Review* 33 (1990), 1-120. Much of this literature is inspired by James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹¹As argued, for example, in Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shone Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992).

¹²I here refer to John and Jean Comaroff, who write of colonialism in South Africa as a process of reciprocal determination that threw up strange hybrids and new identities. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution. vol. 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

The problem is in some senses procedural. For the western academy has adopted into its own structures the divisions first produced by colonial rule. Following Edward Said's pioneering work, literary critics have taken the lead in analyzing the operation of colonial power, the textualizing process of othering that went to the heart of how Europe imagined itself. Social historians, suspicious of theoretism, have responded with detailed accounts of subalterns' history, examining the daily, lived praxis by which colonized people contested their oppression. Disciplinary divisions are also methodological. The analysis of colonial power has often been the analysis of colonial texts. The analysis of African "resistance", in contrast, has usually proceeded through oral history, through the study of voices, life histories, oral traditions. These three dichotomies--power/resistance; literacy criticism/social history; textuality/orality--stake out the interpretive ground over which contemporary debates over Africa's past and future are conducted.

Gikuyu arguments over missionaries shake the dichotomies in which we think about the past loose from their moorings. For more than marking the contradictions between white power and African tradition, more than a simple story of power and resistance, the cannibal controversy demonstrates that colonized people actively engaged with and imagined the technologies of European cultural imperialism. "Modernity" did not hang together at Tumutumu, because Gikuyu creatively appropriated its disparate technologies--writing, soap, the self--for their own discursive and intellectual purposes. It is not enough to show, as social historians have done, that the colonized confronted their colonizers, vigorously defending themselves against oppression. There was nothing as simple as white power and black resistance at Tumutumu. Nor were the polarities of tradition and modernity clearly drawn. As cannibal rumors suggest, Africans drew on a repertoire of practices, both "African" and "European", asserting control over new objects as they forged new relationships for new situations. And as they did so, they argued vigorously among themselves, conducting family arguments about school-going, dress,

food and other practices. It is difficult to identify two "sides" to this encounter in large part because Gikuyu would not agree that they were a side in a structured conversation.

I take divisive Gikuyu political philosophies seriously, as seriously as people at the time took them. My premise, the postulate on which the argument builds, is that the Christian self, record books, soap, and God Himself were for Gikuyu men and women a rhetoric, a means of conducting internal, gendered arguments about inherited theories of politics and moral agency. Modern technologies were a debating language in central Kenya before they were a mindset. Gikuyu had long made themselves in argument: ambitious clearers of the highland forest that carpeted central Kenya, they came together not in obedience to a common tribal mind but as *mbari ya atiriri*, the "clan of I say to you." Argument about a commonly shared stock of stories, conducted among those who could prove themselves worthy of trust, made for public politics. But colonialism made it difficult to know whom to trust. Gikuyu had once made themselves respectable by working the land, converting the wilderness into productive soil. By turning men and women off the land, by making farmers into wage workers and women into prostitutes, rural capitalism and British land expropriation attacked the propertied basis of Gikuyu ontology. Well before Hannah Arendt, Gikuyu knew that wage labor, migration, class formation, the dislocations of modern economies were moral problems, ontological problems.¹³ The dislocations of colonialism demanded that the Gikuyu revisit the logic that had once made them agents, and a people.

This dissertation is about how Gikuyu argued over the pressing, divisive question of agency and citizenship with foreign technologies. I focus on the history of Gikuyu writing, demonstrating how successive generations rewrote their letters in order to meet the personal and political tests of colonialism. Writing is usually taken to be a defining

¹³In the wake of World War II, Arendt noted that "uprootedness and superfluousness...have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions of our time." (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975)), 475.

moment in history, the technological revolution that makes possible the principled, imagined communities that characterize modernity. I argue differently, examining how Gikuyu used writing, argued about record books, pens and paper in order to meet changing discursive and political needs. Writing was a moral project before it was a political one. Driven by the obligating sense that new times demanded new defenses against social disorder, new tests of personhood in the demoralizing wilderness of colonial power, successive generations of Gikuyu thought through Cash Books, English names, and letter writing, hoping that new technologies would articulate standards of personal virtue and public responsibility. Literacy became a way for men and women worried at moral disorder to master themselves, to prove themselves virtuous adults. Writing Gikuyu helped men and women work out their ontology, proving themselves worthy of hearing. A history of Gikuyu writing is therefore a history of agency: not a liberal history of the heroic self, but a history of how Gikuyu argued about what it took to be a self.

Gikuyu argued about ontology by arguing about writing. They also conducted deep philosophical debates over nationalism, over the possibility of associational solidarities among people. Here, too, writing served rhetorical purposes. Gikuyu, the "clan-of-I-say-to-you", had never agreed that they possessed a common mind, or purpose. They were divided by inherited theories of belonging, cross-cut by affinal ties of kin and by generational solidarities. Anthropological divisions made it difficult for anyone, least of all young men, to claim to speak for all Gikuyu. The question of moral authority was the test that young Christian politicians of the 1930s hoped to pass by writing. They used Cash Books and receipts to give shape to *ituika*, generational succession, recording their cash investments in schools and churches as public evidence of responsibility, integrity. Their practice with English allowed them to make claims on the colonial state: Gikuyu writing English demanded that the British pay heed to their requests. But not all politics

were imaginable in writing. Family politics, the divisive politics of kinship and landholding, put limits on what politicians could write. And church women in the 1940s talked, argued vocally in public professions of Christian sin, over the moral dissipation of male wage laborers. There was no path to the future mapped out in pen and paper, no imagined future foretold in books. Gikuyu rather conducted deep arguments about the possibility that writing would shape new political solidarities, intimately conjoined to arguments over how best to rid themselves of the curse of British power. Their creative, contentious, divisive investments in language structured the violence of "Mau Mau", the guerrilla war that, eventually, drove the British from the colony.

Pressed by social disorder, inspired by contending theories of politics, men and women, young and old, landed and landless rewrote the Word. Gikuyu knew they had to get their language right before they could fight the British. Their investments in language were driven by a morally obligating sense that changed times demanded new vocabularies of debate, new words with which to bind the fractious infighters of Gikuyu ethnicity together. Gikuyu arguments over writing were also arguments over citizenship, over the very possibility that people would come together not as kin but as principled people, the rational actors of modern mythology. A history of writing Gikuyu is therefore a history how colonized people in central Kenya worked out new, demanding standards of moral virtue and political responsibility to meet new situations. Bureaucratic procedure, Cash Books, English names, and other marks of associative politics were situational, contextual, contingent answers to pressingly immediate questions of domestic order and political authority. Colonialism did not create rational actors out of Gikuyu. Gikuyu rather reimagined the discrete practices of the state for their own purposes, using Cash Books to give shape to ethnic tales about moral redemption and playing bureaucratic games to catch up British officials in relationships of obligation. By such acts of political

judo they domesticated the state, learned its procedures, and worked out standards of unity with which to engage British power.

* * *

Broadly, the dissertation engages with three literatures. The first concerns the history of writing and politics; the second the history of nationalism in Kenya; and the third the analysis of "colonial encounters" in Africa and elsewhere. I will deal with the first two literatures cursorily here, leaving what I have argued above to speak for itself with reference to the third.

①
②
③

What
not to do

Central to contemporary approaches to the study of writing in Africa and elsewhere is the notion that literacy was characteristic of "modern" politics. This assumption was formally inducted into social theory through the work of Jack Goody and Walter Ong, who considered writing to be the fundamental turning point in human history. For Ong, for example, writing underlies the shift from "magic to science...from the so-called 'pre-logical' to the more and more rational state of consciousness...from Levi-Strauss's 'savage' mind to domesticated thought."¹⁴ Goody similarly argues that writing allows for the self-reflection, for criticism, by laying out discourse before the eye. Oral societies, in contrast, are bound by homeostasis: they tend toward balance, toward uncritical acceptance of cultural values.¹⁵ By fostering associations between people based not on oral exchange but on principle and rational thought, writing makes people into citizens, agents within a knowable world.

Benedict Anderson's influential work elaborates on these assumptions, highlighting the linkages between print capitalism, state bureaucracies, and the imagination of nationalism.¹⁶ Anderson demonstrates that modern nations are nowhere natural: rather, he shows how a common, popularly-known language invited Europeans to

¹⁴Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: 1982), 29.

¹⁵Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), 14.

¹⁶Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1995).

imagine themselves a nation, a people sharing a history and culture with others whom they had never before seen as compatriots. Print capitalism, as Anderson puts it, invented nationalism in the nineteenth century by standardizing a common stock of words and phrases with which people could imagine their common future.¹⁷ Anderson goes on to demonstrate how shared experiences in state bureaucracies and in schooling led twentieth century intellectuals in the colonized world to think of themselves as nationalists, sharing a common purpose with other functionaries. Bound together by a standardized language, united in their common pilgrimages to colonial capitals and secondary schools, indigenous intellectuals imagined an independent nation already mapped out and divided up for them by Europeans. Out of a skein of personal pilgrimages and shared conversations, the colonial state gave way to the independent nation-state. Where sub-nationalisms emerged, Anderson demonstrates, they emerged because of contradictions with the colonial education and bureaucratic system, which invited sub-groups to imagine themselves differently than others sharing colonial boundaries.¹⁸

Partha Chatterjee asked the question of Anderson from which my discussion departs: if nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, "what do they have left to imagine?"¹⁹ Chatterjee's point is that there were in colonial India non-liberal alternatives to the nation: intellectuals had imagined for themselves a political community, what Chatterjee calls the "spiritual sphere", in which they were already sovereign. This spiritual community's failure to envision a political alternative to the nation-state was ultimately its undoing. For Indian nationalists adopted the procedures of the modern, liberal state at independence, overruling alternative, more

¹⁷Terrence Ranger has applied Anderson's argument to the study of African ethnicities in his important "Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe," in Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 118-150.

¹⁸Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 130.

¹⁹Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

authentic visions of the nation.²⁰ African historians such as Basil Davidson have argued similarly, seeing in nationalist movements' acceptance of the liberal language and bureaucratic procedures of the colonial state the seeds of post-colonial disaster.²¹ For both Davidson and Chatterjee, the victory of the nation-state was a tragedy, a curse imposed on post-colonial societies at the expense of more socially and politically authentic modes of government.

I adopt Chatterjee's question for different purposes here. Rather than seeing the victory of the nation-state as a curse laid on African or Indian communities, I reconstruct what Gikuyu imagined in and through the procedures of the state. What did the practices of state bureaucracy mean for Gikuyu divided by their own theories of politics? What else did the pilgrims of colonial school systems imagine as they traveled the upward stair to the capital city? My argument is that Gikuyu made their own intellectual investments in schooling, writing, and other bureaucratic procedures, forging imagined communities not simply as a copy of something already imagined abroad but as a distinctively Gikuyu project. Language standardization and print-capitalism did not as Anderson predicts invent new communities for Gikuyu. Gikuyu rather re-wrote their print language, reshaping orthography, letters, and words for service in their own, internally divisive debates over morality and political leadership. Writing Gikuyu was a means of conducting argument over generation and family interests before it was a foundation for national citizenship. Indeed, Gikuyu united by their language could never make up their minds whether they were part of a common community. The 'nation', the demand of associational politics, was always a question, always an idea in contention, never imposed from above but creatively argued about from below. Neither were the pilgrims in Gikuyu

→ Moral project before it was a political one

²⁰Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 11. Gyan Prakash has criticised Chatterjee's formulation for its failure to recognize how the nation-state was immanent in the pre-political community of Indian nationalists, for which see Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Ch. 7.

²¹Basil Davison, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Times Books, 1992).

schools single-mindedly ascending the colonial stair, imagining themselves together as they moved higher in missionary educational systems. Schooling was rather the testing-ground of ethnic argument over generational redemption and family progress. Gikuyu brought their own arguments to colonial schools, and used print vernaculars to conduct divisive debates about public authority, gender relations, and moral agency.

All of which suggests that the most serious shortcoming in Anderson's theory is its failure to take seriously non-liberal forms of political identity, alternative discourses of citizenship, imagined in and through bureaucratic procedures. National politics in Gikuyuland was not the final expression of a made-up, modern mind, adopting modularly the philosophies of politics imagined abroad. Associational politics were always a question, always a subject to be argued about, always tested against local politics of kinship and land tenure. This brings me to the second literature with which this study is engaged: the genealogy of nationalism in Kenya. Like Anderson, Kenya's own historians have assumed that colonialism built nations. Labor markets, colonial education systems, social development programs, all are supposed to have ushered in an era of modern politics, severing tribalist natives from their traditional moorings and making them into rational actors. The yeast of European colonialism was the leaven of African nationalism. Modern politics is supposed to have begun with political parties, with Harry Thuku's East African Association, founded in 1921 by literate workers in Nairobi.²² Fueled by cultural pride, offended at missionary insensitivity during the "female circumcision" crisis in 1929, the nationalists of the Kikuyu Central Association agitated for recognition from the British, for the rights of modern citizenship. The Kenya African Union later adopted the KCA's modern politics, advocating for African liberty in impeccable English with the Queen. The British, however, were unhearing: they refused to recognize legitimate

²²c.f. Chapter Two of Rosberg and Nottingham's *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Kenya* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1966), titled "The Beginnings of Modern Politics", about Thuku and the Kikuyu Association in Kiambu.

African leaders, and frustrated the liberal nationalism of the KAU. Mau Mau, the embarrassing "tribal" war that enveloped the central highlands in 1952, looks like the failure of modernization. Its oaths, contracted with blood, look atavistic, anti-national; its recruiting, carried out almost exclusively among Gikuyu, was the antithesis of liberal politics.

Historians, then, agreed about the general outlines of Kenya's history: the nation-building potential of colonialism; the frustration of African attempts to gain recognition from the British; the loss of control that led to Mau Mau. They differed in their analysis of the social composition of the forest fighters, arguing at length over whether Mau Mau was class-based,²³ a movement of dispossessed squatters,²⁴ or a failure, a tribal reversion to the past.²⁵ John Lonsdale has asked the most searching questions of this scholarly consensus. Lonsdale asks that historians inquire more fully into the moral languages of politics, into the rich stock of political ideas with which Gikuyu argued about the agonies of class formation under British colonialism. What Lonsdale has shown, contrary to the claims of modernization theorists of all kinds, is that Africans did not need to adopt the liberal language of rights and wrongs in order to argue effectively about colonialism. Lonsdale terms the interior field of ethnic argument, the disputes among "us" about behavior, moral conduct, and selfhood, "moral ethnicity". Moral ethnicity, Lonsdale demonstrates, was a language with which to make claims on others, a vocabulary of expectation in which Gikuyu conducted interior arguments over class formation, the problem of inequality. Lonsdale contrasts moral ethnicity with political tribalism, the outer, hard shell of colonial politics. Tribalism is the relationship of "us" to "them", the relational, dichotomizing politics of difference. The British governed by making Gikuyu,

²³c.f. radical historiography, notably Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (London: James Currey, 1989).

²⁴c.f. Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (London: James Currey, 1987).

²⁵B.A. Ogot, "Politics, culture and music in central Kenya: a study of Mau Mau hymns", in *Kenya Historical Review* 5 (2) (1977), 275-86; and B. Kipkorir, "Mau Mau and the politics of the transfer of power in Kenya", in *ibid.*, 313-28.

as other African people, into tribes, and encouraged them to compete for entitlement. Contemporary "tribalism" in Africa, then, is the bastard child of colonial politics, the self-interested, confrontational inheritance of the past.

Lonsdale's most significant contribution is to illuminate discourses of personal virtue and political citizenship alternative to the colonial dichotomy of liberalism and tribalism, citizen and subject. Ethnic thought, Lonsdale shows, addresses issues of rights and duties with more passion, with more vigor, than the externally-produced, modularly adopted languages of territorial nationalism ever could. Moral ethnicity is an indigenous grammar of citizenship and democracy. I have adopted Lonsdale's project as my own. Like him, I am interested in probing the interior vocabularies of "moral ethnicity", the terms by which Gikuyu argued among themselves over deep questions of rights and obligations. Like him, I look for the creative process by which Gikuyu refurbished old theories of politics to do duty in new circumstances. Using both oral evidence and the private archival records, I move Lonsdale's analysis closer to the ground, illuminating how Gikuyu argued about morality and politics within households, in classrooms. By doing so, I attempt a popular history of Gikuyu debate, attuned to how literates and non, men and women, old and young argued using old grammars of virtue and new technologies of politics.

Inspired by Lonsdale's work, this study looks for colonial conversations conducted outside the "long conversation", for alternative theories of self and world, for what was not inducted into the liberal grammar of citizen and subject. English-language debates about citizenship and rights, argued out between colonizers and colonized, was not the only political argument in which Gikuyu were engaged. Nor were claims on "custom" and tribal unity ever accepted uncritically. Gikuyu debated citizenship vigorously in the vernacular, working up the energy to argue with the British by first contending among themselves about personal integrity and moral authority of leadership.

They did so, I show, by arguing about writing, adopting new technologies in order to legitimate new political configurations and to argue about old moral questions.

* * *

This project began in 1994 with a series of wondering conversations with my language teacher, conducted at the Anglican Church's school in Nairobi. I was at the time learning to speak Gikuyu, I thought, to conduct oral interviews with old men and women about the history and politics of Mau Mau. Learning the language was a means to an end, a way for me to earn trust from the subjects of my research. Our texts were Arthur Barlow's *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom*, published in 1914, Leonard Beecher's 1938 dictionary, and various exercises and primers, all authored by colonial missionaries. I was working the same linguistic terrain over which tens or hundreds of missionaries had once anguished. But the ground was uneven, the linguistic markers obscure. Annoying contradictions continually cropped up, differences between Barlow's Nyeri grammar and my teacher's Murang'a gloss, words about which Barlow was startlingly imprecise. Besides, I discovered, missionary linguists rarely agreed among themselves about the terms in which I was most interested: words about sin and self, politics and society, patriotism and class. Marshaled up before my eyes in missionary texts, divided into nouns and verbs, mapped and rendered up to Latinate grammar, Gikuyu nonetheless refused to provide me with the keys to unlocking the past.

I have since engaged in a running battle with Gikuyu, exploring the past with words that were and are constantly changing, constantly being remade. My strategy in this dissertation is to read language not as a key to past social practices but as a rhetoric, giving clues to how Gikuyu argued among themselves and with the English. I read for the flux in words' meanings, the ways that definitions change in dictionaries, catechisms, Bible translations, and primers. These texts, published on missionary presses, are often taken to be the instrumental tools of cultural imperialism. I read them for how Gikuyu

argued in and through them. Change in definitions, shifts in meanings, reveal the pressure that Gikuyu readers and writers exerted on their words. Language in central Kenya was never simply a closed system, never an assemblage of terms that differed and played only among themselves.²⁶ Missionaries thought it so, and used elaborate grammatical rules to make language into a machine. But Gikuyu made and rewrote their words to serve within the internally divisive ontological, philosophical, and political debates they conducted. I read dictionaries and other primers, then, for evidence of how they argued, for the leftover reverberations of the guerrilla war-of-words that I think was taking place in colonial Nyeri.²⁷

Reading missionary texts for Gikuyu meanings, I also read what Gikuyu wrote. African history is often taken to be the history of voices. Oral history is radical history, scholars' noble effort to demonstrate to a skeptical academic audience that Africa, too, has a long and proud history. Writing is tainted: taught in missionary schools, used by colonial officials to pin down Africans with censuses and maps, tax receipts and labor registers, writing is an inheritance of colonialism. The dichotomy between writing and orality structures the way we think about historiography: histories of writing must by necessity be histories of elite culture; oral history is popular history, history from below.

I argue for a new methodological and historical understanding of both writing and orality. Writing, letters and record books, were not simply technologies of rule, means by which colonial and African elites exercised their power. Writing was rather one of many ways that men and women, readers and non, landed and landless argued about old questions of public authority and private virtue. I learned this lesson in the archives of the Tumutumu church. The archives themselves are in a set of trunks, thick-sided, the kind that the Scots used to carry their clothing, soap and household utensils to their far-

²⁶*Contra* Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966).

²⁷I advance further justification for my use of dictionaries in Peterson, "Translating the Word: Discourse and dialogism in two Gikuyu dictionaries," *Journal of Religious History* 23 (1) (1999), 31-50.

off bastion in the north. The trunks now carry the weight of Tumutumu's history: in them are the records of the Kirk Session, the court that disciplined and argued about Christian virtue in the vernacular; correspondence between teachers and students over fees, sexual misconduct, and family obligations; marriage licenses; cash books; reading primers, exams, and other pedagogical material. If Gikuyu readers imagined themselves a nation of words, then Tumutumu's trunks are their memory bank. But today, just as (I argue) in colonial days, written texts are instruments of debate. While I read through the accumulated debris in 1998, elders at Tumutumu were writing the church's history into a 90 year Jubilee celebration booklet.²⁸ I helped them write it. It is a history of names and dates, a proud record of when Tumutumu men were first ordained, who Arthur Barlow's first students were, when Tumutumu's outstations became autonomous Presbyteries. It amounts to a call for discipline, as its searching title, "Where Are You?", implies. Bureaucracy in the 1990s no less than in the 1930s makes claims on personal duty. But so too do Tumutumu people today argue out their own, private matters in writing. Men and women from around Nyeri and farther abroad regularly consult the Tumutumu archives, digging through the marriage books and church court records to find stories about relatives long past, or more materially, to marshal up evidence for land cases. Writing serves more than one purpose at Tumutumu.

Taking my cue from the contemporary culture of print in Nyeri, I read written sources backward for what they reveal about the past and, at the same time, for how they were used. Writing Gikuyu was never a socially innocent exercise, a technique to be mastered by a few good politicians. It was also a rhetoric, a means of arguing about marriage and public authority, land and the morality of familial redefinition. Record books therefore offer historians both evidence about the past and clues about how Gikuyu argued. In the first sense, then, I read texts for evidence of past events and processes.

²⁸*Wi Ha?* (Where are you?) *PCEA Tumutumu Presbytery, 90 Years* (Karatina: Excellente Computer Bureau, 1998).

Church court records offer invaluable insight into marital strife in the 1930s and 40s. Recorded in Gikuyu are men's and women's arguments over Christian discipline, sexual morality, marriage, beer, and prostitution. By reading church court records I am able to access in some way the vocabularies of marital strife in the interwar period, the languages in which the moral chaos of the time was argued out. Record books allow me to listen in on past debates. But written sources, like African voices, belong in history. Writing was a rhetoric, an argumentative strategy. This is the second sense in which I read record books. Looking for evidence of how writing was used in oral debate, I examine the records of the Kikuyu Traders Association, the Progressive Kikuyu Party, the Kikuyu Central Association, and other political parties. Some of these records are held privately, by politicians' children or grandchildren; others are kept in official vaults in Nairobi. They are collections of minutes, record books, receipts painstakingly recorded, cash disbursed, fees collected. The archives of Gikuyu political parties offer an interior view of bureaucracy in formation, the painstakingly detailed ways that earnest politicians worked to stitch together common purpose with pen and paper. These archives, the debris of bureaucracy, also reveal where writing broke down, where associational politics ran thin. I read arguments over receipts ill-directed, typewriters stolen, and minutes wrongly written as evidence of disputes over bureaucratic procedure itself. For bureaucracy, as we shall see, had its doubters. Its archives, leftovers of past battles over writing, bear the marks of how heatedly, how vigorously, writing was argued about in schools, churches and homes.

Literacy, contrary to contemporary theoretical models, was in central Kenya never autonomous, never heroically above history, never simply a technique to be learned. Gikuyu, even the non-literate, argued in and about records. Because they did so we can listen to, and read in on, their arguments. Voices were no less contentious, and no less situated. I learned this lesson while conducting oral interviews in Mahiga location, in

Nyeri's Othaya division. I talked at length with over thirty old men and women in Mahiga itself, all of them former students at one of the three schools in which I was interested. All the interviews were conducted in the Gikuyu language, with the assistance of a research associate. I quickly learned how deeply the past was tied to the present in Mahiga. During the year that I conducted interviews at the location, the elders' court at the Presbyterian church determined to build a girls' secondary school on a plot of land adjoining the old mission plot. It was disputed turf, part of the 40 acres that, as I show in later chapters, Arthur Barlow and local landholders argued over in the late 1920s. In 1998 the church's relationship with local landholders was, again, the subject of public debate. Men and women argued over the new school in meetings called by the local chief; more vigorously, they argued in their homes over Presbyterian perfidy and missionary greed. The past came back, loudly, at Mahiga in 1998. I listened to local people's arguments, recorded what they said, and learned to read oral testimony not only for what it said but for what it meant, how it resonated in debates long past yet startlingly present.

I therefore treat the over 120 total interviews that I conducted as rhetoric, listening to my informants' voices for evidence about how they argued in the past. I look for the generic aspects of oral testimony, for the tropes that appear and reappear, structuring the ways that people tell their history. And I use these tropes, this generic structure, as clues helping me sketch out the lines along which men and women argued in the past. I do not look for African voices to tell me what history meant, to offer authentic evidence of past consciousness, to unlock the secrets of the African mind. This is not an effort to speak for long-silenced historical actors. As I show in the following text, the "voice" has always been an ontological question for Gikuyu, always something to be created, never an *a priori* expression of personhood. Voices in central Kenya came with moral agency; speaking was the achievement of adulthood. To speak for oneself was provisional,

contingent on evidence of property and reputation, proofs of integrity. Arguing about the possibility of meaningful speech was a matter of public concern in Gikuyuland long before social historians made it an academic enterprise. I therefore read people's voices in relation to others', both for what they say and for what they might mean, how they resonate, how they claim authority for themselves. By doing so I look for clues as to how people spoke in the past.

* * *

This is a history of the ways that Gikuyu localized Christian technologies and ideas. As it must, it focuses on a specific region--Nyeri, the northernmost Gikuyu district--and on a specific set of institutions--rural churches and schools connected with the Church of Scotland mission at Tumutumu. There are good historiographic reasons for centering this study in the north. Historians have most often focused on the southernmost Kiambu district, close in to Nairobi, and made conclusions about Gikuyu politics based on Kiambu evidence. The most prominent of Gikuyu nationalists, not least Jomo Kenyatta, were from Kiambu; the most obviously contentious and widely-published political parties, the Loyal Kikuyu Patriots, the East African Association, and the Kikuyu Central Association were centered in the south. Gikuyu nationalism looks like a Kiambu project, the fruit of long-term interaction between southerners and the political melting-pot of Nairobi. Nyeri, in contrast, was a labor reserve, sending its men and, in the 1930s, its women south for labor in the city or north for work on settler plantations in Laikipia. Nyeri seems a backwater, the passive recipient of dynamic political ideas generated in Kiambu.

By centering my study on Nyeri, I hope to correct this internal historiographic bias. More than filling in the gaps in a Kiambu-centered narrative, the study of politics in Nyeri proposes an inversion of Gikuyu history. Southern political parties and educational associations, it turns out, had little sway in Nyeri. Gikuyu nationalism, in Nyeri perhaps

more than elsewhere, was a question, not a mindset. Nationalism in Nyeri took argument, in large part because local people were suspicious of the idea that outsiders could ever speak for them. The study of Nyeri, then, offers a bottom-up history of Gikuyu nationalism, a means to investigate how associational politics were perceived, resisted, and worked into.

The burden of this dissertation is to show how Gikuyu localized writing and other foreign technologies, translating them for service in interior arguments over personal virtue and public politics. This history must, as a consequence, be dynamic, attending to how economic and social changes made it imperative for Gikuyu to rewrite their language, and rethink their words. As I show in Chapter One, Gikuyu confronted the first Tumutumu missionaries not as authentic spokespeople for "traditional culture" but as gamblers, speculatively playing with missionary materials and incorporating them into the older routines by which they brought civilization from the wilderness. Their creative investments in European clothing and tea upset the object lessons that missionaries taught, disturbing the firm divisions between subject and object, self and world so central to post-Enlightenment Protestantism. Gikuyu made investments in missionary culture because they were driven by the morally obligating sense that desperate times demanded creativity of young men and women. As I show in Chapters Two and Three, World War I brought disaster on Nyeri families, killing thousands of women and children with famine and influenza. Faced with social disaster, young men hoped for *ituika*, generational succession. *Ituika* was a tale promising that, if young men invested their wealth to buy government from their elders, they would cleanse the land of the contamination of death. *Ituika* was a home-grown idiom of moral and political redemption. Young men and women argued that the soap they used in missionary schools, and the redemption they read about in the Christian Bible, made for the cleanliness and fertility of *ituika*. Converts translated Christian redemption into Gikuyu politics. Their fathers thought

them insane, prostitutes to a foreign order. Debate between the generational politics of *ituika* and the "deep" politics of kinship structured Gikuyu division during the "female circumcision" crisis of 1929, the subject of Chapter Four. The crisis has often been described as a clash between two cultures, a struggle between missionary cultural imperialism and Gikuyu cultural nationalism. I argue differently, that the crisis must be understood as part of a continuing Gikuyu argument over the possibility that anyone could dictate to families about matters of private moral conduct.

Challenged, then, by the "deep", divisive politics of kinship, young readers used writing to weld Gikuyu together. As I show in Chapters Five and Six, Cash Books, registers, receipts and carefully typed minutes were means for readers to claim authority in oral debates with their fathers over the moral economy of public authority. Writing earned trust, just as surely as hard work had proved respectability in the past. Readers melded English terms and disciplines into vernacular writing, using foreign ideas to capture Gikuyu virtues. And in doing so, they also practiced English, corralling colonial bureaucratic procedures into ethnic arguments and making the British look Gikuyu. Readers provincialized British power in writing.

But the contentious politics of land put limits on what readers could write. As I show in Chapters Six and Seven, commodity production in the 1930s led landholders to expand cultivation, consolidating land fragments at the expense of junior family members and tenants. The terror of class formation and rural landlessness made all Gikuyu worry about moral disorder: Tumutumu's courts were flooded with accusations of sexual delinquency in the mid-1930s. Wives argued in church courts and, more polemically, in the Women's Guild that male delinquency was to blame. They used the evidence of their domestic work to shame men, calling them to marital commitment. Worried men thought that English would resolve intimate moral strife. Chapter Eight demonstrates how men and women terrified at moral disorder invested in independent, Gikuyu-run schools,

4

writing

5/16

6/17
1930s
terror

8

hoping that education in colonial disciplines would mark out tests of personal discipline in a morally disabling wilderness. English committed Gikuyu to ethnic citizenship, to disciplined labor for the future. English was also a means to make demands on British bureaucrats, a way to prepare for a future after colonialism.

Terrified at rural capitalism's redefinitions of family ties, men and women argued in the 1940s about sorcery. This is the subject of Chapter Nine. Sorcery rumors, stories about needles that killed kin and fences that wasted property, were material ways of mapping out the wilderness of social disorder. Faced with evidence that landlords' wealth emasculated poor men and drove women to prostitution, Nyeri people elaborated contending strategies to restore order. Women joined the East African Revival in the late 1940s, and called publicly, orally, for repentance from men. This is the subject of Chapter Ten. Men thought them lunatics: their many words uprooted the palisades around the nation-of-words that readers had long sought to build. In Chapter Eleven I show how the young men of Mau Mau elaborated writing and bureaucracy into a vocabulary of *ituika*, now translated into an ideology of moral redemption. Emasculated by rural capitalism, terrified by women's prostitution, Mau Mau committed Gikuyu to the future in books, stamps, pens and pencils. Writing gave shape to a new moral polity, a nation-of-books, in which forest fighters could invest their sweat and blood. Mau Mau's war of words was one of many continuing Gikuyu attempts to imagine new politics in writing.

* * *

Let us turn to the first years of Tumutumu mission. 1908 was a time of mythical beginnings, now remembered in church pamphlets as the foundation of Gikuyu Christianity. But if the first missionaries mapped out a future now realized in Tumutumu's churches, schools and hospital, missionaries' first hearers were reluctant visionaries. They laughed at Barlow, argued about Stevenson's teeth, and slept through

sermons. None, not even the Gikuyu “priests” for whom missionaries looked, were willing to engage in theological discussions. The Word gained few converts in the earliest years. I reconstruct this strange encounter in the next chapter, looking for evidence of how Gikuyu made their first speculative investments, their first gambles, on the substance of missionary culture.

Chapter Two

Gambling on God “Religion” in early colonial encounters at Tumutumu

How does power create religion?¹ In his work on discipline and power in medieval Christianity, Talal Asad shows how modern notions of religion disguise their origins, inviting scholars to define “religion” as a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon. Asad’s work details how belief came to be a purely inner, private state of mind, a particular state of being having no direct bearing on or relation to forms of embodied practices. But as religion was internalized, so too did it become a systematic doctrine, such that statements about belief are now held to be the essence of religion, a construction that makes it possible to evaluate other religions. Religion, Asad shows, is an artifact of modernity, a particular construct that positions individuals and their beliefs over and above the world. Seeking to distance his scholarship from the evacuative pull of “religion”, Asad argues that academics should take performances described as “religious” seriously, as vital, constitutive players in real social and political relations.²

This chapter will illuminate the ways that the notion of “religion” was crafted and contested in the earliest years of evangelical labor at Tumutumu. Presbyterian evangelism, I show, played out not as a struggle between two competing religious systems but as a debate over precisely the possibility of religion. Missionaries sought to induct Gikuyu listeners into a long conversation structured by foreign assumptions about being in the world. They worked to secure firm distinctions between self and world, subject and object by mapping out space and time for their early converts, creating a scripted, storied world that worked mechanically. They asked their hearers to confront this world of texts by naming themselves, voicing wordy statements of faith that could be

¹A question framed in Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 45.

²This in Asad, “Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions”, in *Stanford History Review* 5 (1) (February 1996). I have found Rodney Needham helpful in thinking about the particular history of “belief”, in his *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

compared to the Truth. Christian evangelism, as Asad would suggest, worked by inducting the world into words.

But early Gikuyu hearers actively subverted missionary words, laughed at the Gospel, and mimicked European speech. In reply to the missionary demand that they speak the modern language of religious belief, Gikuyu replied with random talk and speculatively material readings of Christian culture. They gambled on the substance of missionaries, incorporating tea, medicines and clothing into the older balancing act by which men and women protected households from sorcery and proved personal virtue. Their creative gambles on missionary materials upset the lessons about objects and truths that missionaries sought to teach, and marked out a deconstructive, and profoundly insurgent, form of "resistance" to colonial power. I call this form of resistance "mimicry", a term that helpfully highlights its resemblance to the "sly civility" with which Homi Bhabha and other post-colonial theorists are concerned. But, importantly, mimicry was not simply imitation, never merely a satirical, deconstructive game. "Mimicry" was precisely what missionaries called intensely serious Gikuyu efforts to make European writing, medicine, and clothing work within real relationships of substantial fertility. A history of mimicry in Gikuyuland is thus a history the creative ways that colonized Africans invested European substances with vernacular meanings. More, it is a history of struggle over the very possibility of "religion."

* * *

Presbyterian evangelism at Tumutumu inducted Gikuyu into a story, a hierarchy of history that enlisted pre-Christian social practices to point toward the final revelation of the Truth. Tumutumu was founded in July 1908 when John Arthur and H.E. Scott, missionaries from the older Church of Scotland mission in Thogoto, journeyed some 120 kilometers north in hopes of establishing the mission among the previously unevangelised Gikuyu to the north of the Tana river. Arthur thought himself acting out a familiar tale:

At last we reached the banks of the Tana...where at last we were about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land...as we crossed the stream and set foot on this until now unentered land, we instinctively, as in the first missions of the Cross, bowed our heads and silently claimed it for Christ and his Kingdom.³

Thinking themselves protagonists in an old Story, Arthur and H.E. Scott wasted no time before teaching Gikuyu lessons about their Christian future. Standing on the bank of the Tana, Arthur held up a book and proclaimed "This is the book of God!"⁴ Presbyterian evangelism began by introducing Gikuyu to the Word. The missionaries camped at the top of the highest hill in the region. Tumutumu Hill "offered a commanding view of this lovely country," wrote Arthur, from which the missionaries surveyed more than fifty villages dotting the countryside. It was "a wonderfully thick populated country, virgin soil, waiting to be cultivated and harvested by the servants of Christ." Scott thought there were 50,000 souls within easy walking distance.⁵ Meeting with elders to ask for land on which to establish the mission, Arthur and Scott hastened to till untaught native intellects with the Word:

We got back to camp about five; (the chief) had sent out word calling his people together. When we arrived, a band of young men had already occupied the ground, and were performing one of their dances...when they were finished we began our service. Assisted by our teachers, houseboys, and carriers, we sang several hymns, and it must have sounded strange to these men to hear the praise of God sung in their own tongue and by their own people. Dr. Scott then spoke to them about where we had come from, what we had come for, and afterwards I told them the old, old story. What a privilege to tell those who never had heard it before. But fancy trying to tell the Gospel story in ten minutes! Where to begin, where to middle, and where to end is a real difficulty when one stands up on such occasions.⁶

³Arthur, "Kenia's call", in *Kikuyu News* 6 (Sept. 1908).

⁴Christopher Waruhiu, "The Female Initiation Controversy at CSM Tumutumu, 1912-1937" (Univ. of Nairobi: BA thesis, 31 March 1971).

⁵SA I/A/1: Scott to Robertson, 30 July 1908.

⁶Arthur, "Kenia's call", in *Kikuyu News* 6 (Sept. 1908).

The Christian story literally took place in midst of Gikuyu. Or so the missionaries hoped. Carefully framed within time (ten minutes at most!), the tales that Arthur and Scott told their hearers on Tumutumu Hill were supposed to induct Gikuyu into history, into the story that began with Creation and ended with salvation. Young men's dances were to give way to hymn-singing, just as Christian worship was to take the place elders' ineffectual "sacrifices". For Presbyterian missionaries were liberals: they sought to turn pre-Christian social and religious practices toward Christian revelation. As I shall show at length below, it was the storied promise of the Christian telos, the narrative flow of an abstracted past into a redeemed future, on which missionaries would construct their evangelistic praxis.

But their hearers failed to recognize their future in missionary words. In the earliest evangelical exchanges at Tumtumu, Gikuyu heard the Gospel story with laughter and sleepy refusals to listen. One service, conducted soon after the founding of the mission in 1909, proceeded as follows:

Mr. Barlow began the service by making the people repeat the words to the hymn "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus". This caused great amusement among the people, and especially among the girls. The idea of their repeating words was wholly new to them, and at first they looked upon it as a great joke. Gradually they settled down to the task, and very soon they realized they were learning something. In due time they made an effort to sing it, but no great progress was made in that direction. When they were asked to shut their eyes in order to join in prayer, they again found it difficult to restrain themselves, the closing of their eyes being so novel a proceeding.⁷

Gikuyu around Tumutumu were laughable "soldiers of the cross." They were rarely interested in sermons: many dozed off during the evening services held in the homesteads surrounding the mission.⁸ Some ran and hid when missionaries appeared. Hoping to catch reluctant hearers unawares, missionaries stole silently into villages and

⁷H.E. Scott, Letter no. 15 and 16, in *Kikuyu News* 14 (Oct. 1909).

⁸Barlow, "Evangelistic work at Kenia", in *Kikuyu News* 35 (May 1912).

beat the bushes surrounding Gikuyu homesteads to flush out congregants.⁹ The Word generated little enthusiasm. When they did listen, Gikuyu seemed indifferent to the meanings missionaries sought to convey. Arthur Barlow reported in 1908 that eight young men had asked him why he sang hymns so frequently. He replied "because there is joy in my heart when I think of God's goodness". When the young men convulsed with laughter during prayers, they explained that it was because of the joy in their hearts.¹⁰ The joy of mocking laughter worried missionaries and disrupted their services to God. A lantern slide show depicting the crucifixion of Christ in 1914 was nearly ruined when villagers invaded the church and laughed uproariously at the pictures.¹¹ Missionaries lectured them sternly about their sin that had killed Christ. But privately, they lamented that the Gospel seemed like a "kind of diversion, and not a matter needing serious attention" to most of their listeners.¹²

What did this hilarious deconstruction, this grinning riposte in the face of God mean? Missionaries thought it marked the newness of the Gospel, the strangeness of new words articulating previously unthought ideas in African minds. But there was something more than incomprehension, simple naiveté, in the laughter that greeted the Gospel at Tumutumu. The laughter of early listeners voiced a mode of engagement predicated not on sustained confrontation between two cultural systems but on evasion, or comedy. Arthur, like other missionaries, looked for a long conversation, a dialogue of religion that would induct Africans into the idioms of modern Christianity. Gikuyu laughter interrupted the flow of meaning that missionary words set in train, making the play of words themselves visible, vital, somehow laughable. Gikuyu refusals to listen, laughing responses to the Word, articulated a mode of resistance profoundly disruptive to the tale of the future that missionaries sought to weave. For in their refusal to engage in a

⁹Barlow, "Evangelistic Work at Kenia", in *Kikuyu News* 35 (May 1912).

¹⁰Stevenson. Letter no. 4. in *Kikuyu News* 7 (Oct. 1908).

¹¹H. Philp, "The evening service", in *Kikuyu News* 47 (Feb. 1914).

¹²Barlow, "Tumutumu notes", in *Kikuyu News* 17 (March 1910).

dialogue about self and other, in their refusal to set up an authentic antithesis to missionary culture, early Gikuyu hearers upset the dialectics around which History was to be made.

Historians and anthropologists, searching for suitably antagonistic modes of “resistance” to colonial power, have found themselves similarly upset by these curiously tangential ripostes to missionary words. Laughter stands somewhere outside the dialectics in which we think about colonial history: it mocks our efforts to locate an authentic African voice, a voice speaking for African culture. Theories of hybridity, or celebrations of syncretism, are attempts to make sense of the heterogeneous complexities arising out of colonial conversations, the unexpected cultural forms that emerge on colonial frontiers. But hybridity, and syncretism, themselves depend upon the prior assumption that history was driven by, and amounted to, conflict between two opposed systems.¹³ Theories of syncretism belong to the determining, binary play of power and resistance, self and other, European culture and African culture. “Syncretism” fails to account for the creativity, the insurgency, implied in African laughter at the Word.

Homi Bhabha productively writes about laughter as a third space, a space separated from the dialectical history for which both colonialists and anticolonialists look.¹⁴ Bhabha’s third space attends to camouflage, laughter, sly civility as marks of a curious kind of resistance, a resistance ultimately more disturbing to colonial authority in its refusal to resolve itself into a suitably antagonistic Voice. “Mimicry” is the term that Bhabha puts to this third space. I find Bhabha’s formulation useful in thinking about the highly material ways that early Gikuyu hearers engaged with the Word at Tumutumu. But in his attempt to theorize what remains eccentric to and outside of the dialectics of

¹³John and Jean Comaroff have structured their history of missionary enterprise in Southern Africa around the dialectical play of *sekgoa* (white ways) and *setswana* (Tswana ways) in their *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, volume two (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁴Bhabha, “Signs taken for Wonders”; “Of Mimicry and Man”.

history, Bhabha's third space risks making "mimicry" timeless, self-referential, an inward-looking satire.¹⁵ What is needed is an account of mimicry's possibilities, an account that highlights the changing ways that miming opened new vistas of engagement and critique for colonized people. Such a history would attend to the ways that mimicry freed some colonial signifiers from their origins, allowing them to play in new, vernacular economies of meaning.¹⁶ It would also account for the limits of mimicry, to the specific circumstances that permitted colonial power to secure the meanings of its substances.

I want to modulate Bhabha's "mimicry" below, particularly by highlighting the ways that mimicry upset the carefully enframed hierarchy of signs and stories so central to missionary evangelism in Tumutumu. *Laughter at the Word*, like other examples I shall illustrate below, marked Gikuyu refusal to be drawn into a debate about theology, into the history around which missionaries structured their evangelical praxis. In response to the missionary demand that they name their world, articulating their beliefs in propositional order, Gikuyu hearers responded with random talk, laughter, and strikingly material readings of schoolbooks and pencils. There was no anguished dialogue about self and other, no debate over cultural norms in these early evangelical exchanges. As I shall show below, the Gikuyu world was too fluid, too kinetic, to be reified into such abstract categories. Gikuyu confronted missionaries not with authentic statements about their culture but with gambles, speculative readings of missionary material culture. They hoped to work these new substances into the vitally material play by which they knew and balanced out the world. Missionary tea, like other foreign substances, became a creatively vernacular language of personal identity and public order, an experimental language with which also to talk back to the whites. Within the third space opened up in

¹⁵Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Ch. 2.

¹⁶Vincente Rafael attempts such a history in his fascinating *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

mimicry, early hearers worked into their most creative claims on the substance of colonialism.

Missionary scripts, Gikuyu gambles

Missionary evangelism worked to create a world of scripts, a storybook world structured by time and space. Through reading lessons, in passing time, carefully fenced-in plots, and square-walled homes, missionaries divided up Gikuyu life, making the world appear inert, structured, mechanical. They asked their converts to take up a deliberative posture to this map-world, heroically naming themselves as subjects. The earliest lessons taught by missionaries were about subjectivity, about the relation of the self to the world.

But as I show in this section, Gikuyu life was not easily interpolated into this enframed world of maps. Gikuyu did not confront the world as a subjects but as gamblers, speculatively balancing out substances and materials to work civilization from a threatening wilderness. Gikuyu social order was a kinetic process, not a functional whole. There was no script, no predetermined narrative that Gikuyu men and women acted out. The order that Gikuyu worked to maintain was a highly material balancing act, in which substances—leaves, blood, millet—acted in vital ways to constitute fertile households. The vitality of practice, the materiality of their social thought, was too fluid, too processual, to be governed by abstract laws. Or, I suggest in the conclusion to the section, by God.

* * *

Gikuyu around Tumutumu knew about the violence of the text well before literary critics made it a matter of scholarly discussion. They remembered the bloody history that lay behind Arthur's romance of salvation. Only four years before Arthur arrived at the banks of the Tana, a British force of Masai levies and Swahili soldiers under the command of Captain Meinertzhagen had attacked the trading center at Iria-ini and killed

some 1,500 men, women and children.¹⁷ They burned hundreds of Gikuyu villages in Tetu and Mathira, feeding warriors' shields and spears into an inferno that could be seen for miles.¹⁸ Sporadic military expeditions were directed to the east of Tumutumu as late as 1906, as officials sought to turn interruptive military punishment into regularized colonial domination. British officials in Nyeri town, fearing new violence, had kept the district "closed" to white travelers until 1908. When Scott and Arthur crossed the Tana to found a site for new mission, the District Commissioner accompanied them, together with a force of police.¹⁹ British force of arms underwrote missionaries' fabled entry into the Promised Land.

Arthur and Scott thought themselves entering into a storybook land, virgin soil waiting to be tilled with the Word. But Gikuyu feared violence. One old woman remembered that men and women ran and hid on seeing the missionaries cross the Tana. A few bravely addressed the two missionaries in Swahili, the language of the British administration. Arthur was quick to tell them, in the Gikuyu language, that "we are not the government."²⁰ Missionaries were careful to set up distinctions between secular and sacred power. But Gikuyu did not make such distinctions. Fearful of uncontrolled British violence, they hastened to incorporate the missionaries into relationships of reciprocity. One elderly woman recounted the negotiations by which Arthur and Scott were given land in this way:

The elders (of three clans) were brought, and they came quickly. And they stood there, everyone on their side...so they (the missionaries) said where they wanted, and they wanted a place that was flat. So Arthur wanted more flatland, and they took more of the Mbari ya Thiina land. So he told them build there. So Arthur asked (Gacece, the spokesman), "What shall we give you?" "Me, there is nothing

¹⁷KVA PC/CP/1/1/1: "A Political History of Kenya Province", n.d.; Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 162-63.

¹⁸For a description of the *Mwaki wa Icakahanya*, see Christopher Waruhiu, "The Female Initiation Controversy at CSM Tumutumu, 1912-1937" (Univ. of Nairobi: BA thesis. 31 March 1971).

¹⁹SA I:A/1: Scott to Robertson, 30 July 1908.

²⁰Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

I want from you, because people who border one another, we don't sell to each other." So the reasoning he gave was--"if I sell that place to you, and you plant crops, if my cows will stray, you will say didn't you sell this land? Pay for the damage. So when you do that--and I will also plant that food, and you will get cows, and they will stray, I will say 'pay for what yours have done'. So we prefer that people who border one another should stay in a loving relationship. So when my cow strays to your place you will run and lead it back to my compound, and when yours comes, I will also guide it, but there will be no counting of damage. Because one time it will be my field, the next it will be yours."²¹

The Scots were initially given some five acres of land on the northeastern slope of Tumutumu Hill by three clans: Njora, Thiina and Murakaru.²² It was uncultivated land which had been cleared of its trees by cooperative work some years before.²³ Wealthy men grazed their cattle and goats on one part of the hillside. Another part of the hill was used to lay out those dead who did not merit a wealthy burial. One of the names by which Gikuyu referred to the hill was *Kirimai-ini*, the place of the skulls.²⁴ Arthur Barlow, the first missionary resident at Tumutumu, recounted that some feared cultivating the land farther up the slope.²⁵ Barlow scorned them as "superstitious". But then, wealthy men had earned the right to scorn the stink of death.

For missionaries were wealthy men, potentially useful allies whose productivity promised reward to local land-holding clans. Wealthy elders, heads of prosperous and populous households around Tumutumu, hoped to turn the danger of white violence into productive reciprocity by offering up land for missionaries' use. It was a pragmatic Gikuyu strategy learned from the hard lessons of forest clearing. Farmers in search of new land had pushed north into Nyeri from older settlements in the mid-1800s, marrying Masai wives from the northern plains of Laikipia and clearing land around Tumutumu for

²¹Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

²²SA I/A/1: Scott to Land Office, 22 July 1908.

²³Oral interview: Kariuki Muturi and Joseph Muthee Muriuki.

²⁴Oral interview: Nelius Githae.

²⁵SA I/A/9: Barlow to Arthur, 29 November 1911.

cultivation.²⁶ Clearing the equatorial forest was hard work: it took two man days to fell a single tree, and up to 150 man days to clear an area of land suitable to feed a family. The work of clearing demanded incorporative kin relationships, cultivating sociability that protected pioneers from the dangerous animals of the forest and helped with the work of clearing. Men banded together to form *mbari*, clans, and married polygamously to multiply their labor and guarantee descendants in whom they would in some way live again. Women broke down the soil after men dug up the trees, and provided the beer and food needed to attract others for communal labor. Their labor underwrote men's prosperity.²⁷ Forest-clearing *mbari* earned first rights to the land through their direct investment of labor. But *mbari* lacking sufficient labor sought out tenants, *ahoi*, who helped with the hard work of forest clearing in return for access to land. At least around Tumutumu, *ahoi* were not so much dependents as allies: their sweat added to *mbari* productivity. Many were "born again" into landholding *mbari*, earning inheritance rights to land.²⁸ Early dictionaries highlight the reciprocal nature of *ahoi* relationships: one 1914 dictionary composed in Tumutumu had "ask for" and "pray" for *hoya*, the verb form of *muhoi*.²⁹ Other dictionaries, composed in the southern Gikuyu regions, had "to consult", "request", "demand", and "ask for" for *hoya*.³⁰ *Hoya* ties among wealthy men were relationships of consultation, pragmatic promises of mutual support in the face of a demanding forest.

²⁶Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, Ch. 3. For Masai wives, SA I/A/11: Barlow to Arthur, 20 March 1912.

²⁷Carolyn Clark, "Land and Food, Women and Power, in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu", *Africa* 50 (4) (1980): 357-69.

²⁸For *ahoi* as 'born again' in Nyeri, see oral interview: Edwin Baro; SA I/F/9: Kenya Land Tenure Commission, South Nyeri evidence, 25 September 1929; c.f. M.P. Cowen, "Notes on Agricultural Wage Labour in a Kenya Location", in *Development Trends in Kenya* (Edinburgh: African Studies Program, 1972), 39-59.

²⁹A.R. Barlow, *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom* (London: Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland, 1931 (first published 1914)). 207

³⁰A. Hemery, *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: Roman Catholic Mission Press, 1903), 18, 26, 29, 59.

Gacece and others hoped to turn the missionaries into *ahoi* by loaning land in return for a "loving relationship." They planted lilies on the boundaries of their land with the mission. Lilies were a limen of productivity: they smelled sweet, were deep-rooted and long-lasting, and enabled fertile interaction between landholders and their clients.³¹ Lilies, promises of loving cordiality, marked wealthy landholders' attempt to incorporate missionaries within an economy of obligation. The clan elders who offered land to the Scots were prosperous, particularly those of Thiina and Murakaru. Murakaru were blacksmiths: they owned extensive herds of cattle and were regarded with some awe by their neighbors. The land around the hill was heavily cultivated: the first missionaries reported that every ridge held "tidy little hamlets of 6 or 7 huts."³² Wealthy elders hoped that missionaries' wealth would add to the prosperity of their own homes. Some periodically demanded gifts from missionaries: medicines, clothing or household furniture.³³ Missionaries had hoped that the Word would till native intellects. Gikuyu elders, it seems, had their own hopes for the productive soil promised in missionary evangelism.

Wealthy elders at Tumutumu understood Scots missionaries as *ahoi* whose productive labor added to landholding clans' fertility. The initial months of missionary endeavor at Tumutumu did little to refute their speculation. The first inhabitants of the mission were Gikuyu teachers from the old Scots station near Nairobi. Petro Mugo and Danieli Waciira built rounded mud-and-grass houses for themselves, much like the homes of their neighbors.³⁴ They kept their huts free of chiggers, and regularly swept out the mission compound.³⁵ Clean houses were a Christian virtue: but wealthy Gikuyu men were similarly conscientious about dirt. Mugo ran a school for local children, sometimes

³¹For lillies (*itoka*), see F. Gachathi, *Kikuyu Botanical Dictionary* (Nairobi: AMREF, 1989), 31.

³²SA I/A/1: Scott to Lieutenant Governor, 3 June 1908.

³³c.f. Philp, "Medical work at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 22 (Sept. 1910).

³⁴SA I/A/1: Scott to MacLachlan, 21 August 1908.

³⁵SA I/A/4: Barlow to Scott, 28 June 1909.

drawing as many as 80. Children, especially young boys, were attracted by the singing of hymns, reported Danieli. But during the rainy season in 1909 attendance dropped from 15 to 20 per day.³⁶ Missionaries thought their enthusiasm slackened because of coldness of the rain. It seems more likely that the boys were needed to help plant their families' gardens. When Arthur Barlow, the first white missionary at the station, took up residence in June 1909 he found that scholars were likely to attend for stretches of days and then, unpredictably, abscond back to their homes to go to work.³⁷ Older boys in 1909 disappeared for stretches of months after the harvest, attending the dances and feasts that made up the initiation rites of male circumcision.³⁸ In the earliest months of mission labor at Tumutumu it is clear that Gikuyu families mixed schooling with the cyclical demands of agricultural work, a strategy that allowed younger boys with relatively little work to do during the dry season to seek out the new attractions of reading. Schooling took shape within the wider rhythms of agricultural production.

White missionaries hoped for a more radical departure. Episodic farmer/scholars were unlikely to take their lessons to heart. The Christianity of the Presbyterians demanded careful introspection, lengthy contact with the chastening Word. As I show below, the missionary Barlow sought to make reflective students of episodic school-goers by teaching compelling lessons about labor, time, and space. In distinction to the rhythmic passage of agricultural time, Barlow hoped to create a world of clocks and bugles, a world mechanically divided into minutes, hours and months. Clocks, fences and partitioned rooms mapped out time and space, making the world appear objective, structured. Converts were urged to confront this map-world as subjects, taking up a deliberative posture toward it and lending it significance. At the heart of early evangelical endeavor at Tumutumu, then, were compelling lessons about self and world,

³⁶Barlow, "Kenia Notes", in *Kikuyu News* 12 (June 1909).

³⁷Barlow, "The School at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 15 (Nov. 1909).

³⁸SA I/A/5: Barlow to Scott, 30 June 1909.

about subject and object. By making the world into a map, a machine, Barlow and others hoped to create subjects, individuals who could be disciplined, converted, and governed.

Barlow hoped that cash wages, the reward of disciplined labor, would turn sporadic school-goers into diligently industrious students. Christian evangelism amounted to hard manual work, especially in the first years of missionary endeavor. Tree cutting was a line item on the station budget in 1910, costing more than teachers' wages.³⁹ Many of the words between missionaries and students had to do with the work of bush-clearing. "I want six trees felled, barked and brought here," ordered Barlow in the language exams he wrote for other missionaries.⁴⁰ "Now you people arrange the sticks correctly to make the walls of the house," went another sentence.⁴¹ Missionaries' words enlisted Gikuyu wage-earners in the hard labor of land clearing. But out of earshot, it seems that mission workers were likely to lay down on the job: in 1911 Barlow lamented that few would work hard without his direct supervision.⁴² The limits of missionary supervision made it imperative that Gikuyu be made to work for themselves. Cash wages--and moral 'conscience' that missionaries sought to create, about which more below--promised to obligate mission workers, making them bear within themselves the discipline necessary for prolonged labor. Within months of his arrival at Tumutumu, Barlow began paying wages to induce young men and boys to work on the station. Older boys were paid Rs. 3 1/2 per month; younger boys received Rs. 2 1/2.⁴³ Cash bound Gikuyu youth to diligent work. The first Christian lessons at Tumutumu were about labor discipline, about the possibility that human effort could be bought and sold.

The yardstick of salable "labor" was the passing of time. The value of human sweat at Tumutumu was parsed out by the clock. Barlow carried two clocks with him

³⁹TT Estimates file: Tumutumu estimate, 1910.

⁴⁰SA I/K/6: Barlow, "Two years paper", 27 December 1910.

⁴¹SA I/K/6: Barlow, "Two years paper", September 1910.

⁴²SA I/A/9: Barlow to Arthur, 29 November 1911.

⁴³SA I/A/5: Barlow to Scott, 2 September 1909.

when he arrived at Tumutumu in 1909, and requested another soon afterward.⁴⁴ Soon after his arrival he began sounding a bugle at 9 am, the time when workers and students were to arrive at the mission to assist in the work of clearing and construction.⁴⁵ He divided the school day into a timetable, partitioning activities--reading, work, washing, sleep--into allotted periods. Passing in its mechanical clocks, time was supposed to be a structure, an implacably inanimate process, which lay behind and organized activities at the mission. Clocks regulated human activity. Students went to class for 2 1/2 hours per day in 1909 and 1910. They paid Rs. 1/2 per day. Workers were paid monthly wages for their labor in bush clearing. Time gave shape to wage labor.

Clocks and loudly blown bugles made time mechanical, separated from and formative of human endeavor. Time could be bought and sold, offered up in bush clearing at the mission or (missionaries lamented) wasted in dancing. And just as time was made into something inert, a structure standing behind human activity, so too was space supposed to map out and divide up human habitation. Barlow's first activity on arriving at Tumutumu Hill was to mark the boundaries of the mission station with beacons provided by government.⁴⁶ His next activity was to lay out paths and gardens and plant flowers and trees.⁴⁷ His patrons in Mbari ya Njora would have expected this: they cleared the land of its biggest trees some years beforehand.⁴⁸ As a *muhoi*, Barlow was supposed to render unproductive fallow land up to cultivation. What was unique were the fences which Barlow put up around the plot, and the straight paths by which he bisected the Hill. Footpaths and carefully tended fences assigned a distinct function to spaces, dividing and containing territory according to its instrumental use. The hospital, which in its first four years amounted to a single mud and wattle hut, was carefully fenced

⁴⁴SA I/A/4: Barlow to Scott, 28 June 1909.

⁴⁵Barlow, "Beginnings at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 14 (Oct. 1909).

⁴⁶SA I/A/5: Barlow to Scott, 15 July 1909.

⁴⁷Arthur, "A Visit to Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 19 (May 1910).

⁴⁸Oral interview: Kariuki Muturi and Joseph Muthee Muriuki.

off from the rest of the mission.⁴⁹ Its fence contained disease and guarded schoolgoers from unpleasant sights and smells. Fences disciplined and contained human activity, just as clocks marked out the implacable passage of time.

The fencing of the mission, its carefully maintained divisions of space, rendered down human existence into discrete functions. So did mission building. Missionaries built with an expectant eye on their converts. Gikuyu houses testified to missionaries of the alterity of African souls. Virtually every Scots missionary commented on their impressions of the hut: it was cramped, inhabited with animals, a dark, smoky place that dangerously mixed humanity with animal filth.⁵⁰ Christianity required square houses, carefully divided rooms with windows and doors, that screened off human life from domestic animals and allowed the fresh air and light of the Gospel to come in. Barlow lived in a tent during the first months of his tenure at Tumutumu. Within a year, he with his charges had built a three-roomed house, with sitting room, bedroom, and storage room.⁵¹ It was built with Gikuyu labor: Barlow paid local men to carry bamboo poles from the forest five miles away.⁵² Positioned at the center of the five-acre mission compound, the house was to be a model for properly contained domestic life. The house's high ceilings, its whitewashed "airy and fresh" feel, its rooms divided into the special functions of sleeping, eating, and socializing, spoke volumes about missionaries' vision of proper domestic order. But Barlow worried that the house offered a poor example to watching Gikuyu: its mud floors made leather rot and made it difficult to keep clothing properly clean.⁵³ When Mrs. Horace Philp, wife of the mission doctor, moved to the mission station in 1912 the mission was careful to provide a stone house, with an iron roof, for their residence. Local workers carried the iron sheets on poles from Nairobi;

⁴⁹SA I/A/13: Arthur to DC Fort Hall, 3 January 1912.

⁵⁰Mure, "Impressions", in *Kikuyu News* 38 (Oct. 1912).

⁵¹Arthur, "A visit to Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 19 (May 1910).

⁵²SA I/A/5: Barlow to Scott, 12 July 1909.

⁵³SA I/A/9: Barlow to Arthur, 22 August 1911.

some nearly drowned when crossing the Tana river.⁵⁴ Building was for the missionaries a deadly serious business.

Presbyterian missionaries introduced more than a new relationship of power at Tumutumu. In these early, formative exchanges, they sought to establish a different means of conceiving of the link between self and world. Properly partitioned houses, clocks, and fences were part of a process by which Tumutumu missionaries sought to map out Gikuyu social life, to render real relationships down to mechanical categories-- minutes, rooms, yards. The effect of this mapping of terrain and time was to make the world inert, manageable, objective. Gikuyu were invited to confront this objective world as subjects, acting to name the world, to master it through words. Naming and mastering were, in Protestant thought, intimately related. Every convert at Tumutumu was encouraged to re-enact the originary story of Adam, the story by which animate objects were identified and caught up in the hierarchy of Creation. Reading lessons were the schoolhouse of Christian mastery. Missionaries taught their charges to read by connecting discrete letters and phrases with particular objects. Barlow sometimes carried flashcards to young men's dances, calling out syllables while jumping in time with music.⁵⁵ The cards were his favored method of teaching reading.⁵⁶ Charles Muhoro, who began schooling at Tumutumu around 1910, described his reading lessons in this way:

There were some well printed papers which were pasted onto two very broad boards which would become the first or the second of the eleven pieces. Like this: the first one: i n a b, then the capital letters would be written this: I N A B. This would continue by joining other letters like this: na ni ba bi. Then: bi-bi (morsel) ma-ma (uncle) i-na (sing) ba-ba (father) mw-a-na (child) ni-na (finish) a-ni-ni (few). This is what was in the second board or what was called the first lesson. One would rise up from one board to another and by the time he would be getting to the tenth board he would be able to read a little bit...as one continued to study, they would be taught: "God has given the Kikuyu people a nice country,

⁵⁴Dennis. "Industrial Work at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

⁵⁵Oral interview: Kariuki Muturi and Joseph Muthee Muriuki.

⁵⁶SA I/A/11: Barlow to Arthur, 8 February 1912.

which lacks neither food nor water or forests, it is therefore good for the Kikuyu people to be praising God because it has been so generous to them."⁵⁷

Writing parsed out social relationships, catching fathers, mothers, children, and morsels in script. As students learned to read, they progressively mastered the world: by the end of their instruction they came to Genesis, the moment at which God gave the world to humanity. Reading reenacted the story of human mastery. Converts at Tumutumu and elsewhere were encouraged to re-name themselves on baptism: the "taking of new name marks a new period in the life of a man", explained Barlow.⁵⁸ The first catechumens, baptized in January 1913, took names such as Joshua, William, Samson, Samuel, Paul and Lazarus.⁵⁹ They had spent months studying *Acts of the Apostles*, the story of the first missionary church.⁶⁰ Their names brought converts back to the Bible, positioning Gikuyu within the powerfully purposive story of Christian redemption.

In reading lessons, through labor, baptismal names, clocks and fences, missionaries encouraged converts to take up a deliberate posture toward the world and lend it significance. As I will show below, it was precisely on this division between self and world that missionaries would found their comparative claims about Gikuyu "religion". For it was in the radical separation of knower and known that religious belief was supposed to take shape. Religion, missionaries thought, was a subjective belief system, a matter to be believed in by an internal act of will and articulated through propositional faith statements, "beliefs."⁶¹ Missionaries asked pagans and Christians

⁵⁷Charles Muhoro Kareri, *Muoyo wa Charles Muhoro Kareri* (unpublished ms. in possession of Muthoni Mwhaki, Tumutumu).

⁵⁸SA I/A/17: Barlow to Knapp, 21 November 1914.

⁵⁹TT Ministers to 1955 file: First Tumutumu baptisms, 26 January 1913.

⁶⁰SA I/A/12: Barlow to Arthur, 2 December 1912.

⁶¹For the history of this formulation of "religion", see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), Chs. 1-4.

alike to give voice to their belief systems, to talk about their theology. In evoking such faith statements, missionaries sought to engage Gikuyu in a battle of words, a battle of theologies. They graded those who "believed" according to their verbalized statements about the inert world. Those who refused to engage in abstract arguments over theology they judged as "conservatives", wedded to the past. Christian evangelism was founded on the subject's capacity to reckon with and give words to his world.

It is important to recognize how this division of self and world, of subject and object, differed from Gikuyu understanding. Time and space in Gikuyu experience were not simply mechanical structures, standing behind and dividing up human existence. Domestic space, passing time, were vital processes in which human activity played a constitutive part. In a political culture in which fat was the achievement of hard work, Gikuyu made intimate connections between building, the agricultural cycle, and women's fertile reproduction. Growing food crops evoked and participated in women's bearing of children. Gikuyu divided the two growing seasons of the year into nine parts, beginning with the period called *kihu*, the "big womb."⁶² And agricultural labor was of the womb: it birthed fertility and made men. Women cultivated millet, the short rain crop on which they subsisted during pregnancy.⁶³ Millet was harvested in March, coinciding with the initiation festivals which marked children's progressive induction into adulthood.⁶⁴ Initiates were secluded for nine days, the duration of a pregnancy, and consumed millet in bulk; bereaved families similarly secluded themselves for nine days after the death of a wealthy old man or woman. Millet promised fertility, and ensured reproduction: men built their homesteads after pouring millet on a proposed site.⁶⁵ Gikuyu talked of having

⁶²Louis Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903* (London: Academic Press, 1977). 173-74.

⁶³KNA PC/CP 9/7/1: DC Nyeri to Governow, 17 March 1927.

⁶⁴KNA PC CP 7/1/2: DC Fort Hall to PC, 8 September 1920: H.E. Lambert. *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (London: International African Institute, 1956), 50.

⁶⁵Leakey. *The Southern Kikuyu*, 162-63.

sex as "cultivation": conjugal relations and digging the land were hard to separate.⁶⁶

Women's produce was kept in storage houses which ringed the entrance to the household and guarded domestic order against exterior pollution. A man's first wife was called *Nyakiambi*, the "beginning" but also the "evening star" which cooled the heat of the day.⁶⁷ Positioned directly across the entrance to circular Gikuyu homesteads, her hut housed children and goats. It was also the site where food was cooked, where produce was rendered down to consumable fat. Her cooking guarded against the collapse of domestic productivity, cooling potentially dangerous heat of crops from the field with the fire of her hearth. The extinguishing of her fire brought contamination on the whole household, ushering the family within the ken of death.⁶⁸

The millet harvest, the consequent seclusion of initiates for nine days in March, were not simply regulated by time, by the mechanical passing of the year. "Time" was not the real structure standing behind these processes. Women's birthing of children rather recalled the harvest of millet; her rendering of produce into food enacted the sociable mastering of the wilderness into cultivable land. Birthing, cooking, growing, and initiating all inhabited an active nexus, a calculus of production and reproduction that brought sociable wealth and order into being. There was no objective structure around which the passing of the agricultural cycle was organized, no implacably impersonal machine that rendered domestic life into predictable categories. The passing of time was rather a human process, intimately bound up in the creation of civil fertility from the wild of the forest.

Gikuyu, I suggest, did not inhabit the mechanical world that missionaries sought to bring into existence. Nor were Gikuyu conceptions of self easily interpolated into the

⁶⁶Oral interview, Paul Thuku Njembwe. Young men were instructed on the limits of their pre-marital sexual activity by being told to "cultivate the upper portion but the lower portion belongs to the one who will bring the goats."

⁶⁷*AIM* Kikuyu customs, 1920s file: McKenrick, "Village Customs", 1909.

⁶⁸Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu*, 165.

subject/object dichotomy that missionaries sought to create. Gikuyu knew that selves took work, that self-mastery demanded continual management. They learned their most important lessons about private identity and public virtue through the work of forest clearing. Ambitious pioneers, their history taught Gikuyu respect for the sociable ability to cultivate wealth from the wild. Working on one's own land, converting the forested wilderness into productive soil, earned *wiathi*, self-mastery. John Lonsdale calls *wiathi* a Gikuyu labor theory of value.⁶⁹ Disciplined labor turned the wilderness into productive land, and worked civilization out of private accumulation. Self-mastering men, their houses in good order, earned the right to sit on the local elders' courts that adjudicated competing claims to land and regulated social behavior. They paid goats to the court to circumcise their children, progressively earning the right to speak on matters of public concern. Public identity, the right to speak, came from private achievement. Adults were made, proven by their exertions on the land. Children, lacking the proof of their own scarcely human: they were liable to be beaten, even killed, by young men angered at their ignorance. Charles Muhoro, later a reader at Tumutumu, remembered that one of his childhood friends had been beaten to death for stepping on the foot of an initiated man.⁷⁰ Kabetu wa Waweru, a child in the late 1800s, remembered that his father threatened to kill him after he surreptitiously ate his fathers' yams. He hoped to work off the threat:

I went straight to my mother and said to her, "Mother, if a person has property of his own, would his father take his life?" and she answered, "No, my son, he would not."...I went off to find a piece of ground and got permission to make a garden then and there. I sharpened my knife three times in one day until it was very sharp. Then I cleared the bush from my patch, made a big clearing, obtained a digging stick and dug up the ground. When I had prepared the ground I planted yams of my own.⁷¹

⁶⁹See especially Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought" in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* by Bruce Berman and Lonsdale, (London: James Currey, 1992).

⁷⁰Charles Muhoro Kareri. *Muoyo wa Chalres Muhoro Kareri* (unpublished ms. in possession of Muthoni Mwhaki. Tumutumu).

⁷¹Cited in Louis Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903* (London: Academic Press, 1977), 21.

Selfhood was an achievement, demanding hard, material labor. The materiality of self-mastery meant that Gikuyu did not stand in relation to the world as a subject stands in relation to his object. Self-hood was a process, a worked-out achievement of hard labor. So too were time and space processes, continual struggles to bring life into being against the threat of the wilderness.

Nowhere was the materiality of Gikuyu social thought more obviously in play than in practices of divination and healing. I have suggested above that hard work, careful management of materials, built up human persons and established fertile households. I now want to show how materials acted to cool diseased bodies, enveloping sufferers with fertile substances and restoring fertility through a social process of balancing. I shall examine the play of materials in two healing practices: *ugo* and *magongona*. *Ugo*, as I shall show, remedied misfortune or disease by bringing a complex of fertile materials to bear on suffering bodies, balancing out heated illness with cooling substance. *Magongona* healed imbalances in the social world: they drew fertile boundaries between the dead and the living, incorporating unpredictable ancestors into a commonwealth of consumption. Both *magongona* and *ugo* mediated a charged nexus between fertility and contamination, wealth and sorcery by bringing fat and cooling substances to bear on strained relations between the living, the dead, and the transcendent. Missionaries and anthropologists, searching for parallels to their own world of disembodied ritual and religion, thought *magongona* the stuff of "religion." *Ugo*, in contrast, they denigrated as "magic." As I shall show, neither characterization does justice to the carefully substantial ways that these practices operated to restore human fertility. The substances of *magongona* and *ugo* were not symbols, playing predetermined roles in commemorative worship services. They were unstable, unpredictable, probably dangerous practices whose implications were not mechanically

determined. Our understanding of this kinetic process of balancing must begin by taking their substantial nature seriously, inquiring of the complex ways that materials produced fertility.

Let me begin by examining *ugo*, the knowledge that identified imbalances between powerful substances and made them work among themselves to cure the dangerous heat of contamination. Gikuyu made careful distinctions between different kinds of substances, sealing coolness, life and reproduction off from heat, death and pollution. Dead bodies were supremely dangerous: dying men and women were taken from their homes and left in the bush by their relatives, who feared that death would extend its reach on the living. Feces and blood were kept separate from the homestead, and particularly from food. Certain types of plants connoted heat and danger: the *mugaa* tree, for instance, was thorny and useless as firewood. It was used to spit meat during the dangerous *muuma* oath, which called down death on the partaker.⁷² The wealthy constantly swept their homesteads, carefully keeping dangerous leaves and dirt away from human habitation. Wealth smelled sweet. Wealthy families planted sweet-smelling trees in their courtyards, flowering shrubs that had important medicinal uses. Senior elders carried staffs of flowers, exuding the cool sweetness of fertility.⁷³

Pollution, *thahu*, brought dangerous substances within the ken of the living and upset the careful balance between sweetness and death. Menstruating women visited pollution on their households when they handled sugar cane or cooked food. Eaters of wild animals were polluted: their meat and manners were dangerously uncivil. A hyena defecating within the bounds of the household brought the family within the ken of death: their feces, composed of the flesh of corpses, was uniquely hot.⁷⁴ *Thahu* was not so much

⁷²Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, 1107-09.

⁷³H.E. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (London: International African Institute, 1956), 83.

⁷⁴For these examples of *thahu*, C.W. Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1922), 105-25.

a condition as an imbalance, a dangerous juxtaposition of substances that were dialectically opposed. Sorcery, *urogi*, mastered the imbalances of *thahu* and marshaled deadening, polluting substances to work in opposition to the domestic nexus of fat, fertility and power. Sorcerers were known to cut up dead bodies, charring the flesh to powder and spiring this contaminating substance into the beer of the victim. Sorcery did not simply kill victims: it ate them.⁷⁵ Sorcerers' victims wasted away: they lost the fat on the bodies; their children perished; their homes went to ruin. Elders carefully guarded their beer, worried that jealous neighbors would poison their drink and turn their fertility to waste.⁷⁶

Gikuyu afflicted with the wasting of *thahu* looked to *ago*, wise men, to purge them of the contradictions of pollution and to restore convivial fertility to their bodies and their households. This process was called *tahikio*, "vomiting."⁷⁷ "Vomiting" reversed the body's incorporation of dangerous substances, causing the sufferer to "spit out" the contradictions they had ingested. Wise men induced this restorative vomiting by holding the hoof of a goat up the lips of the victim, enjoining him or her to vomit the *thahu* within him. The wise man then brushed the sufferer with a range of cooling substances and leaves, dispelling the heat of *thahu* and restoring the balance of the physical and social body. *Ngondu*, one of the powders *ago* used in this process, was derived from the stomach contents of the tree hyrax, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, the stomach contents of a ram, and fig tree leaves.⁷⁸ All of these substances were in some way "cool": the ram, for instance, ate only the soft leaves of non-thorny plants. The contents of its stomach, which distilled the cool fertility of productive plants, were paradigmatically useful in cleansing sufferers of heated contaminants. Wise men also used a powder called *uumu* to remove

⁷⁵For a comparison, see Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

⁷⁶Oral interview: Arthur Kihumba.

⁷⁷For descriptions of *tahikio*, see Hopley, *Bantu Beliefs*, 134-45; Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, Ch. 26.

⁷⁸Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, 1180 for *ngondu*, 1176 for *uumu* (below).

the imbalance of pollution. *Uumu*, made from the roots of a thorny bush, was deeply red. Gikuyu saw in the color red a type of heatedness: girls and boys after being initiated anointed themselves with red ochre, marking their adult assumption of sexuality; warriors wore ochre when going to war. *Uumu* in the context of “vomiting” may have articulated the contaminated heat which afflicted the sufferer, and rendered its danger up to the cooling smell of fertility. Wise men brushed *uumu* and *ngondu* on sufferers with the fragrant leaves of flowering trees, cooling the sufferer in a process called *kuhorohia*, “blowing on.”⁷⁹ Wise men blew away the contradictions of *thahu* by enveloping them within a cooling range of substances, reestablishing equilibrium between heat and fertility and guarding the bodily nexus of eating, reproduction and reputation.

Missionaries and anthropologists called *ugo* “magic”, and dismissed *ngondu* and *uumu* as “potions,” accessories to the “spells” that wise men levied on their “patients.” It is important to recognize how precisely this characterization misrecognized Gikuyu healing practice. The leaves and powders that wise men used to induce vomiting and to restore coolness were not props in a scripted play crafted by cunning magicians. The cooling feel of digested leaves, the sweet smell of flowering bushes rather enacted the transference of dangerous heat to sociable coolness. Leaves and powders acted in real ways, constituting well-ness and articulating productive health within and between people. Their multiple meanings are not always clear to historians, blinded by the disembodied inheritance of modernity. We do not know all of what *uumu*, for example, evoked. Its red color looked like blood, and heat: but the plant from which it came bore thorns, and may well have connoted danger, or something entirely else, in different settings. Some plants were used in healing because their names evoked positive conditions; others due to their relations to certain kinds of animals or birds. These substances were never simply symbols, standing in fixed, ritually determined relationship

⁷⁹Oral interview, Paul Thuku Njembwe; Macharia Gachanu.

to the heat of pollution. They were unstable, unpredictable, probably dangerous substances whose implications were not mechanically determined. Our access to this metonymic process of balancing must begin within the relations of substance by which Gikuyu knew the world, the complex process by which *ago* played out *uumu*, *ngondu* and others substances against the real terror of sorcery and pollution.

Magongona, the second practice that I want to examine, similarly guarded human fertility from wasting. *Magongona* were one of a continuing series of domestic meals through which elders incorporated capricious ancestors into a commonwealth of consumption and marked off spaces for human habitation. Gikuyu afterlife, like politics, was of local concern. The wealthy dead were buried facing their homestead, entombed together with some of their goats. They became *ngoma*, honored members of the corporeal family who dwelt in the ground near the hearth and were regularly fed beer and millet. The impoverished dead were simply left in the bush to be eaten by hyenas. They became *thaka*, hungry spirits likely to play with the fertility of the living. All ancestors were unpredictable, sometimes causing sickness among relatives who ignored them.⁸⁰ Fertile homesteads demanded careful distinctions between the domestic dead and the productive living. Elders guarded the living against the intrusions of the dead by drawing careful boundaries around fertility, boundaries of fat which simultaneously included *ngoma* in productive circles of consumption and marked them off from intercourse with the living. When faced with an inexplicable disease in their family, or when worried over the failure of their crops of bear fruit, elders slaughtered a specially fattened ram at a fragrant tree located on clan land.⁸¹ They poured the fat at the base of the tree, ate some of its roasted meat among themselves, and left the remainder to be consumed by the *ngoma*. These "sacrifices" to familial ancestors were called *kuhaka igongona*. The term

⁸⁰For the randomness of ancestors, see Stanley Gathigira, *Miikarire ya Agikuyu* (Nairobi: Scholars Press, n.d. (originally published in 1933)).

⁸¹For descriptions, Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, 1107-09; Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), Ch. X.

evokes the “smearing” of fat, the rubbing of fertile value into the ground for the consumption of the ancestors. Fat and meat sacrifices drew *ngoma* to eat, cooling their mischief and including them within productive circuits of consumption and fertile reproduction. But *kuhaka igongona* also invoked elders’ pressing concern to guard the living against the mischievous dead. Another connotation of *kuhaka* was to draw boundaries, to separate. The boundary between two different clans was called a *muhaka*; to castrate a goat was to *hakura* it. *Kuhaka magongona* marshaled fat, the achievement of domestic fertility, to draw boundaries around the living, marking out a terrain of fertility that excluded troublesome *ngoma* and ensured peaceful human reproduction.⁸²

Magongona were householders’ effort to mark out a terrain of fertility from the intrusions of the uncharitable dead. They were a means of managing the unknown, using fat to draw capricious spirits into consuming fertility. But some problems transcended the pressingly domestic diet of ancestors, necessitating more general answers to the local problem of fertile reproduction. When rain failed to fall, when locusts invaded the territory, when plague killed men and women without discrimination of wealth or family, elders from around a given region banded together to slaughter a ram for *Ngai*, “God”. Sacrifices to *Ngai* marked the failure of the local ancestors, the limits of domestic economies of consumption and exclusion. Such sacrifices were dangerous: they were conducted by leading men from all the families on a given region, men who bore no hint of contamination and whose houses were free of the stink of pollution.⁸³ These elders slaughtered a ram without blemishes at the foot of a fig tree located near the center of the territory. They cooked it and ate it in much the same manner as in their local sacrifices to ancestors, and prayed for rain, for blessing, for productivity. God, no matter how

⁸²Their history taught Gikuyu fat’s power to make productive boundaries. Gikuyu stories about the habitation of Mathira district talk of *ago* making a barrier with fat and millet across the Tana river to guard homesteads against the continual incursions of their enemies. See Barlow, “The Coming of the Kikuyu”, in *Kikuyu News* 30 (Sept. 1911).

⁸³Oral interviews: Gerard Gachau Kingori; Elijah Kiruthi; Edwin Baro and Lilian Wanjogu; Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu*, 202-03; Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs*, 43-48.

transcendent, had to be made to eat: if the slaughtered ram was not eaten by the following morning, another had to be killed in hopes of force-feeding divinity.

Faced with disasters that exceeded the household nexus of wealth and reproduction, Gikuyu turned to *Ngai* in an attempt to concoct broad answers to territorial disaster. The evidence suggests that such sacrifices were speculative, tentative efforts to come to terms with an unfamiliar deity. Etymologically, *Ngai* was a recent import in a moral economy that privileged the material, not the transcendent. *Ngai* was adopted from the Masai language, a Gikuyuized version of the singular *En-kai* of the pastoralists.⁸⁴ Other Gikuyu terms connoted divinity in material terms, making allusions to physical conditions of health and prosperity. *Murungu*, for example, was perhaps the oldest Gikuyu term for the transcendent.⁸⁵ It referred to a hornless cow, a powerful but peaceable creature which, as one elder put it, “even children could play with. *Murungu* had mercy, it could not hurt you.”⁸⁶ At least one ethnographer speculated that *Ngai* itself was a “very hefty animal”, somewhere between beast and human.⁸⁷ Other Gikuyu terms for “God” connected the divine with particular temporalities: *Mwene-nyaga* was “the owner of brightness”; *Mwene-hinya*, the “possessor of strength.” Gikuyu theology was material, making sense of divinity with earthy qualities.

Ngai was an alien word, an adoption from a foreign language that seemingly had little vernacular meaning. It spoke outside the play of human attributes and forces by which Gikuyu thought through God. Alone among Gikuyu words connoting God, *Ngai* was an “n” class noun. All other nouns connected to “God” were of the “mu-a” class, the class in which humans, animals, and living things were positioned. Gikuyu spoke of *Mwene-Nyaga* as “he” or “she”: *Ngai* earned the reference “it”, the pronoun which

⁸⁴Barlow, “A Sacrifice for Rain”, in *Kikuyu News* 3 (May 1908).

⁸⁵TT General and Miscellaneous file: Barlow to Lamont, 17 July 1944.

⁸⁶Oral interview: Gerard Gachau Kingori. See also T.G. Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 410-11.

⁸⁷Gathigira, *Miikarire ya Agikuyu*, 29.

belonged to inanimate objects.⁸⁸ Gikuyu seem to have had few words to say about *Ngai* the earliest collection of proverbs, recorded by a Catholic missionary who would have listened for God talk, listed only four that reference the Deity by name.⁸⁹ Only one articulated some positive quality about *Ngai*. Missionaries lamented the absence of Gikuyu talk about *Ngai*: Tumutumu missionary Marion Stevenson could only list two proverbs referencing the Deity, and even these she apparently misheard.⁹⁰ "Sacrifices" to God were infrequent, offered by elders only during times of calamity.⁹¹ When *magongona* to *Ngai* were offered, Gikuyu "prayers" implored God to remedy temporal, local conditions of infertility. The first Gikuyu ethnographer, Stanley Gathigira, had this as a prayer offered by a household head to *Ngai*:

Ngai, drink this fat to cease your anger. Let my father's, mother's, grandfather's and grandmother's spirits drink too. May you become happy, so that the animals, children and other people within may heal, multiply, and become bright (healthy).⁹²

Gikuyu words about *Ngai* highlight the point that I want to make. The relationship between Gikuyu and *Ngai*, mediated in *magongona*, was not ritualistic worship enacted between created and Creator. *Ngai* did not stand behind *magongona*, authorizing Gikuyu worship. Instead, *magongona* look like a gamble, a speculative, tentative attempt to work an unknown, immaterial deity into a moral economy that privileged the compact, the material. *Magongona* were a Gikuyu discipline of the real, a tenuous attempt to incorporate capricious, unknown beings into material economies of

⁸⁸TT Notes for Catechists file: Barlow, *Guthura Uhoru wa Gikuyu na wa Ukristiano*, n.d. (but 1930s).

⁸⁹Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1994 (first published 1939)), numbers 573, 618, 640, and 963.

⁹⁰SA I/Z/13: Marion Stevenson. "Specimens of Kikuyu Proverbs", lists *Ngai ni nene* and *Ngai ni nguru* as expressions of misfortune or resignation. Barlow, in marginal notes appended to Stevenson's manuscript, doubted whether such proverbs existed before Christian evangelism.

⁹¹TT Notes for Catechists file: Barlow, *Uhoru wa Ukristiano na Ugikuyu*.

⁹²Gathigira, *Miikarire ya Agikuyu*, 40.

consumption. The materiality of their religious thought made Gikuyu reflection on the immaterial irrelevant. Their language highlights Gikuyu unconcern with immateriality. Early Bible translators were compelled to use the Swahili term *Roho* for the Spirit of Christian theology.⁹³ There was no easy Gikuyu alternative. Translators similarly used Swahili for immaterial terms such as “angel” and “demon.” “Heaven” become “the place of the clouds”; Hell “the place of fire.”⁹⁴ Protestant theology, the most immaterial of discourses, had to bring Heaven to earth to make sense in Gikuyu.

This is not to suggest that Gikuyu were atheists, or that they somehow lacked a concept of “God”. But the absence of abstract Gikuyu theological discourse about God, and the exceedingly temporal economies of consumption that it inhabited, highlights the pressingly material nature of Gikuyu religious thought. *Magongona* were gambling efforts to make a capricious and unknown Deity play within material economies of consumption. Gikuyu “religion” domesticated God, and the ancestors, by marking out boundaries between the living and the unknown, between fertile households and capricious spirits. This boundary-making was never mechanically determined, never merely a ritualistic re-enactment. *Magongona*, like *ugo*, were speculative, undetermined, temporal efforts by elders to reign in and mark off the capricious alterity of the unknown. The play of substances in *ugo*, the cooling fertility of *magongona*, took shape kinetically, as a process. Far from lifeless, iterative rituals commemorating the Divine, they were terribly dangerous efforts to guard domestic fertility against the unknown dangers of the wild.

Missionary evangelism worked by abstracting *Ngai*, and the *magongona* that fed it, into ritual. The liberal theology of the Scots and Anglicans made *magongona* into natural religion, an affective belief system that all primitive peoples were supposed to possess. It was a powerfully magnetic claim on history: the “sacrifices” that elders made

⁹³AIM Unsorted, labelled “Language: Kikuyu”, Footlocker: Minutes of Language meeting, 17 June 1907.

⁹⁴AIM Committees, misc, 1930s to 1970s (Box 9): UKLC meeting, 13-14 August, 1913.

were now supposed to look forward to, find their fullest expression in, the sacrifice of Christ. But if liberalism worked by positioning Gikuyu on the edge of a powerfully magnetic future, it simultaneously reached back to their past, rendering the material practices by which Gikuyu knew the world into rituals, worship services memorializing God. Missionary evangelism worked by translating Gikuyu practice into the prefabricated categories of post-Enlightenment European thought. In so doing they created a world of words, a world to be converted through sermons about belief and conviction.

World into Word?

Protestant missionaries thought themselves engaged in a battle of beliefs, symbols, and theologies. They ranked those who converted with statements of faith, wordy signs of believing commitment that progressively inducted inquirers into the religious life of the church. Their failures they attributed to the “defensive conservatism” of elders. It was a telling portrayal, one that signaled their hopes for the Gikuyu future. For Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries were liberals, committed to an evangelistic strategy that presented Christianity as the fulfillment of the inherited religion of Gikuyu people. Liberalism was a powerful claim on knowledge: it positioned Christianity at the end of history, and made even old believers into the unwitting, half-knowing worshippers of God. We can glimpse the ways this mapping worked to textualize and evangelize Gikuyu practices in Marion Stevenson’s 1913 mediation on “How do you begin?”:

Men in every country have sought for something to cleanse their villages. Some people used to sacrifice sheep and goats every day, some have even given their children for sacrifice, but all was not enough. So, just as the head of a village seeks out a goat to sacrifice, so the Great Head of all men sought out something precious enough to cleanse away the great *thahu*...and just as, while the elders may sacrifice a poor or sick goat to the spirits, but for the sacrifice at the sacred tree to God a perfect animal all of one colour must be found, so only the perfect

Son of God, Jesus, could be a sufficient sacrifice for the great *thahu*...and He has sent us to tell them of that, that they may be cleansed.⁹⁵

Liberalism was founded on a hierarchical history, a history that inducted certain Gikuyu terms (*God/Ngai*) into a Christian narrative and left others (*ugo*) within the abstracted domain of magic and superstition. Later historians accepted these distinctions and formulated proud defenses of the genius of African "religions."⁹⁶ They debated the extent to which Christianity was "indigenized", brought into accord with pre-colonial African beliefs through translation and other means. Many were pointedly critical of the missionary enterprise for its failure to be sufficiently liberal, for the inheritance of cultural imperialism that prevented Christianity from being brought sufficiently into accord with African religion.⁹⁷

But Gikuyu converts and pagans alike would scarcely have recognized this debate over religion, over contending belief structures, as their own. Their world did not divide itself into a binary structure of theology and practice, idea and material, subject and object. The social order that Gikuyu worked to maintain, I suggested above, was a processual, highly material bargain with the encroaching wilderness. Domestic order was established, and broke down, in the midst of the complex play of vital substances. *Magongona* and *ugo* helped to balance out the pollution and disease and disaster, but neither practice was simply a functional guardian of the social order. Both *magongona* and *ugo* demanded attention to the practical, undetermined ways in which one thing could affect another, how one thing could produce heat and another coolness. Gikuyu social

⁹⁵Stevenson, "How do you begin?", in *Kikuyu News* 44 (Sept. 1913).

⁹⁶John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), together with *Introduction to African Religion* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1975) here are exemplary. For a cutting contemporary critique, see Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

⁹⁷This paragraph draws from Rosalind Shaw, "The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion'", in *Religion* 20 (1990): 339-353; and Paul Landau, "'Religion' and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model", in *Journal of Religious History* 23 (1) (1999): 8-30.

order was a kinetic process, not a functioning structure. So too was Gikuyu self-hood continually in creation, continually being worked out as men and women converted the wilderness into productive land. Gikuyu did not know the world as a fixed subject knows its fixed object. The world was too changeable, too fluid, to permit such mythic posturing. In this fluidly material world, disembodied truth statements about God, or religion, were simply irrelevant. "God" did not stand behind and authorize Gikuyu "religious" practice. *Magongona* were not memorials to an abstract deity. Rather, they were speculative efforts to include God within economies of consumption. Gikuyu gambled on God in *magongona*.

Protestant evangelism worked by making Gikuyu gambles into memorials, rituals commemorating humanity's absolute dependence on God. This textualization of practice made the substances and practices that Gikuyu took so seriously into lifeless props, place-markers in the scripted ritual of "traditional religion." Presbyterians and Anglicans in Gikuyuland were children of the Enlightenment: their history taught them that belief was an internal state of mind, and that religion amounted to a series of believable rituals designed to elicit religious dispositions. Missionaries' medieval ancestors knew well the creative, constitutive part that religious practice played in the world.⁹⁸ But the Presbyterians looked for laws, scripts, that could be compared and conquered in argument. The effect of this textualization of practice into ritual was precisely to open up a vantage point from which missionaries could observe, and pass judgment, on Gikuyu "religion." Protestant evangelism worked by dividing the Gikuyu world into a binary order: on the one hand individuals and their meaning-making activities; on the other an inert structure that existed apart from those practices and gave and framework and meaning to their lives. It was a two-stages process that 1) codified complex Gikuyu

⁹⁸c.f. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, Chs. 3 and 4.

practices in atemporal religious categories and 2) rendered these theological categories up to the searching telos of Christian truth.

Missionaries' argument began by organizing Gikuyu practices, particularly those surrounding *magongona*, into the ritualistic stuff of a "religion". The "sacrifices" that elders periodically offered at fig trees, missionaries argued, were Levitical types of the "Great Sacrifice". In their scripted predictability, they foreshadowed the Christian practice of Communion. One catechism made the comparison in this way:

Sacrificing for God under a fig tree can be equated to some of Israelites' practices and of Christianity like when an elder to be leader is one who is clean so also did those who carried sacrificial activities were referred. The lamb that was used for sacrifice under a fig tree was to be unblemished. The same was done by the Israelites. Jesus Christ was the unblemished lamb (1 Peter 1. 19); (John 1.29). Also under the fig tree *Ngai* was worshipped in words and songs. Also some meat was left for *Ngai* in the altar and the rest was divided amongst the elders. This is comparable with the holy communion among Christians.⁹⁹

Searching for pre-Christian signs of divine work among people they took to be animists, Presbyterian missionaries thought *magongona* the ritualized forbear to Holy Communion. Missionaries were fascinated with *magongona*: Barlow's 1908 analysis, for example, emphasized that the lamb slaughtered at the fig tree must be without spot or blemish--like the Levitical offerings. He described the process by which the meat was cut up and burnt in great detail.¹⁰⁰ Later ethnographers would describe the elders as "priests", and their eating at the fig tree as a "ceremonial meal", a seal on a transaction already completed.¹⁰¹ Missionaries' attempt to coalesce elders' eating with Christian communion made *magongona* look like a ceremony, a iterated rehearsal of man's dependence on God. In similar ways, missionary preaching turned *uumu* and *ngondu*, the cooling substances by which wise men had balanced out pollution, into "magical

⁹⁹TT Notes for Catechists file: Barlow, "The Choice between Christianity and Gikuyu things", n.d.

¹⁰⁰Barlow, "A Sacrifice for Rain", in *Kikuyu News* 3 (May 1908).

¹⁰¹Leakey, *Southern Kikuyu*, 202; Hopley, *Bantu Beliefs*, 19 for natural religion.

powders”, accessories to the “spells” which wise men levied on their patients. The fragrant bunches of leaves which senior elders carried to prove the sweetness and cleanliness of their homes became “staffs of office”, emblems that symbolized their official attainment within the bureaucracy that ethnographers imagined lay behind Gikuyu politics.¹⁰² And the complex, local process by which elders had chastened wrongdoers and guarded peace came to be called “law” or “custom”, an abstracted text which the colonial state--and powerful chiefs--would later use to tame fractious Gikuyu wrongdoers.¹⁰³

The first object of missionary evangelism, then, was to turn the embodied practices of Gikuyu fertility into rituals. Missionary ethnography fabricated an appearance of order, a text that was supposed to exist apart from and to structure to individuals and practices. Where such scripts seemed to be absent, missionaries worked to create them. For example, early missionaries were haunted over how to translate the term “sin.” *Thahu*, the pollution that afflicted Gikuyu homesteads, seemed a likely choice. But *thahu* seemed to depend on no Law, no moral code which sinners transgressed. Barlow framed the problem in this way:

What of sins against God? Here a vital difference is seen between our idea of sin and that of the Kikuyu. We regard all sin as committed against God, the Supreme Judge; we are responsible to Him in all our acts, even offences against the community involve sin against God. But with the Kikuyu God does not seem to fill the place of Judge, and they do not feel responsible to him for their actions...were you to ask a Kikuyu why he abstains from a given act, he would simply say it is bad or unlucky, but not because he feels morally accountable to God...It may be doubted whether he possesses a moral conscience: he is afraid being found out and punished, but excepting this he is quite comfortable in his mind.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰²H. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (London: International African Institute, 1956), 83.

¹⁰³For laws. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions*, 112-22; c.f. Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991).

¹⁰⁴Barlow, “Good and Evil in the Kikuyu Mind”, in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

Barlow's quandary was generated by an absence, a lack of Law in Gikuyu thought. *Ngai* offered no moral code, no propositional Truth to be violated by sinful humanity. *Thahu* seemed more a matter of circumstance than a willed violation of a code of right conduct. Conscience, too, seemed curiously absent: Gikuyu lacked that internal judge who regulated Christian persons and punished them for their wrongdoings. In short, Gikuyu social practice offered no point external to itself, no text, from which judgments on human deviance could be rendered.

Missionaries' quandary over "sin" was generated by their search for a suitably textualized Gikuyu morality around which to structure the Christian story of fall and redemption. Barlow and other translators were eventually forced to resolve the problem by inventing a new term, *mehia*, to stand in for "sin" in Christian lexicon. It was a new term, connoting whispers, lies, personal communication, not immutable infractions against an unchanging moral code. *Mehia* had to be taught to blithely innocent Gikuyu. As Marion Stevenson put it in 1913,

The Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. The average Kikuyu is probably perfectly sinless according to his own standard. He has no knowledge of the great thahu, and no sense of the need of a Savior. This has to be aroused. He requires to be taught the commandments, to have impressed on him that they are not for the white man or Mission people only, but for all man of all races.¹⁰⁵

Confounded by the lack of a code, a Law about which to preach about sin and repentance, missionaries set about teaching Gikuyu to believe in absolute Truths. Early catechisms invariably introduced the figure of Jesus, and a narrative of salvation, by first insisting on the salience of the Fall for all of humanity. One syllabus, for example, began with creation, moved to the "story of two trees, temptation and fall", on to "the curse and flaming sword", to the "development of evil", and from thence to the Ten

¹⁰⁵Stevenson, "How do you begin?", in *Kikuyu News* 44 (Sept. 1913).

Commandments.¹⁰⁶ Catechumens spent eight months learning the Old Testament, and had to attend at least 80 percent of their classes in order to pass on to the next level, where the New Testament was taught. The powerful pull of sin, missionaries hoped, would arouse sleeping Gikuyu consciences and bring them to repentance, and from thence to salvation. The word “repent” they translated as *ohera*, to “untie”.¹⁰⁷ The Law bound Gikuyu into a Christian story, culminating in the release of repentance.

It is important to recognize that this textualization of Gikuyu morality, this rendering of a fluid social world into a matter of rights and wrongs, was not simply an analytical mistake. It was, rather, a colonization that enabled missionaries to make compellingly evacuative statements about Gikuyu “religion.” For once Gikuyu practice had been rendered into text, once converts’ minds had been convicted by the Law, missionaries could make powerfully comparative evaluations about the validity, the truthfulness of the old “religion.” The effect of the structuring of Gikuyu life was precisely to open up a location from which missionaries could observe and pass judgment.

Presbyterian missionaries were liberals, committed to a progressivist strategy of evangelism that capitalized primitive ‘beliefs’ about God and turned them toward the Gospel. Missionary evangelism intervened in Gikuyu thinking about God, working to give *Ngai* a history and identity He seemed to lack. One catechism in 1919 framed the evangel in this way:

This little book is intended as a help to the Kikuyu to receive the Word of God (*Ngai*), so that they might not think that it is teaching about another God that has been brought to them, and not about their own traditional God whom all along they have been in the habit of alluding to: and so that they may be able to see that the teaching about Jesus Christ is one with that of their own sacrifices which so far they have been permitted by God to offer until such time as they shall know

¹⁰⁶ TT Ministers file: Alliance. “Syllabus for instruction of those being prepared for baptism”, 14 January 1918.

¹⁰⁷ AIM “Committees, misc., 1930s to 1970s” (Box 9): UKLC meeting, 13-14 August 1913.

about the Great Sacrifice which has been offered for all men, and shall know that it is this sacrifice of the Lamb of God which brings to an end all other sacrifices, for it alone has the power of really doing away with men's sin.¹⁰⁸

Liberalism made even "old believers" into unwitting forerunners of Christianity--insofar as they participated in sacrifices to Ngai. Those practices that were not inducted into Christian lexicon--*ugo*, to take only one example--were called "magic", the timeless abstraction of dynamic "religion". Christian liberalism was thus a powerfully discerning claim on knowledge, a claim that made hierarchical distinctions between different Gikuyu practices and endowed certain of them with a transcending, almost prophetic, power. It was a claim that anthropological accounts of African "religion" and "magic" would later elaborate.¹⁰⁹ It was also a claim that, as I shall show in future chapters, early converts found helpful in their debates with elders.

Gikuyu "beliefs" about God found their future in Christianity. But the imagined future of liberalism simultaneously reached back into the abstracted past of Gikuyu "religion", corralling highly temporal Gikuyu practices into the believable texts of modern religion. It was a twinned movement that inducted those practices termed Gikuyu "religion" into a particular history, a history which ended in the Word and, ultimately, in the colony. Those who acted outside this history, those who failed to accede to the claims of the Word (or who refused to reply with a suitably dialectical "resistance") were simply irrelevant, oddities.

I have belabored this point because it was in the area between practice and ritual that colonialism worked. The slippage between modern scripts and Gikuyu practices was precisely the space of colonial conquest, the space on which colonial power worked to

¹⁰⁸SA VZ/12-13: Barlow, *Kabuku ga kuurania: a catechism of Christian teaching based on native belief* (CSM British East Africa Mission, 1919).

¹⁰⁹c.f. Rosalind Shaw, "The Invention of African Traditional Religion", in *Religion* 20 (1990): 339-53.

make and articulate its subjects.¹¹⁰ Gikuyu knew the world as a process, a kinetic bargain with a threatening wilderness. Missionaries sought to turn Gikuyu social praxis toward the atemporal categories of ritual and religion. In so doing they crafted categories of rule, laws through which to preach, and govern.

* * *

Missionary theology made Christian truth the culmination of Gikuyu history. Their liberal hopes for the Gikuyu future allied missionaries with elders in common worship of *Ngai*. Soon after Barlow's arrival at Tumutumu, a group of elders visited him to request that a grassy path be left through the missionary compound to the top of Tumutumu Hill. There, 300 yards above the mission station, was a fig tree, long used for elders' *magongona*. Barlow agreed to their request, and until the 1930s a grassy path wound up to the top of the Hill through the midst of the mission station. Missionaries saw nothing incongruous about the tree's existence: indeed, Barlow and others observed elders' 'sacrifices' at the tree in order to better understand the old religion.¹¹¹ On at least one occasion, missionaries held church services to coincide with elders' prayers for rain under the fig tree.¹¹² Dr. Philp explained their thinking to a wondering District Commissioner in 1925:

It has been the policy of this mission never to throw any discredit in the sacredness of any native ceremony that is not definitely bad morally. In my opinion, some of these ceremonies performed by old men are really sacred to them as religious services in church are to us.¹¹³

The fig tree at the top of Tumutumu Hill was for missionaries the visible testing-ground of Christian evangelism, evidence of the religious world to be superseded by

¹¹⁰Timothy Mitchell makes this point in his *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹¹¹Barlow, "The Tree of Fat", in *Kikuyu News* 31 (October 1911).

¹¹²Oral interviews: Hosea Munene: Edwin Baro.

¹¹³SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 25 March 1925.

Christian truth. In 1930 the fig tree blew down, toppled by a storm.¹¹⁴ Missionaries hastened to harvest the trunk, sending it to Scotland to have a cross made of it. It was marked with a plaque, and displayed prominently in the church. The *mugummo*/cross was proof that Gikuyu religion could take the shape of Christian faith, that missionaries could hew the Truth out of the base wood of Gikuyu religion.

Sometime soon after the new cross was put on display at Tumutumu, a woman broke into the church building and made off the cross.¹¹⁵ Missionaries thought her mad. We know nothing about the fate of the cross, about the uses to which it was put. But by her strange action, the thief pointed toward the possibility that the historical weight of missionary liberalism might be susceptible to insurgent acts of cultural theft. The woman's appropriation of the fig tree/cross suggests that there were other, only partially visible worlds of meaning in which loaded missionary symbols might take up residence. It is to the examination of these other worlds that we now turn.

Of mimicry and materials

Missionaries hoped that the Word would draw Gikuyu unto repentance. Their words made Christianity look like the old religion: God was to be *Ngai*; Holy Communion was *magongona*; magic was *ugo*. Gikuyu beliefs were to find their future in the Truth. Translation, by making conceivable the transfer of meaning and intention between colonizer and colonized, articulated the direction of the History to which Gikuyu were supposed to subjugate themselves.

But the translation of the Word also resulted in a separation between the originary message of Christianity and its rhetorical formulation in the vernacular. For by making *Ngai* into the Christian God, by adopting the words of Gikuyu religious practice into the narrative of Christian sin and repentance, missionaries made the Christian God depend on, and depart from, *Ngai*. And *Ngai*, as I argued above, was in Gikuyu thought a

¹¹⁴SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu Log book for 1930: entry for 24 March.

¹¹⁵TT Hospital Board Correspondence file: Ronald Keymer, "What in the World?", 2 December 1967.

gamble, a guess. *Ngai* was less the ordinary receiver of human worship than a tenuous attempt to put a name to the unknown. Missionary talk about *Ngai*, then, sounded importunate, ill considered. Presbyterians fixed in language what Gikuyu hoped to leave at arm's length. Marion Stevenson discovered this during an evangelistic journey in 1912:

I was just leaving when some one called and I saw about 20 to 25 men hurrying toward me. The leader was a tall, pleasant looking man... We talked of various things, and then I told them I had come to ask people to go to Ngware's on Sunday evening to hear God's word. Waweru, the leader, said they did not wish to hear, as it would make them feel sorrow in their hearts. I said he was mistaken--it made men's hearts rejoice. "Ah, no", he said, "when people are in sorrow or in pain, or when the rains fall, our hearts are sad, and we call on God." I knew that, I said, but it was God, our Father, who gave us life and food, the sun, the rain, and everything beautiful, and we should think of Him and His Word at all times--not only in sorrow; and we should talk to him often, and our hearts would become pure and bright and glad like His. They did not know this, they said. They thought that if they sat round listening, God would surely come and kill one of them.¹¹⁶

Missionaries preached constantly about *Ngai*, hoping to make their hearers recognize the future in words about God. Gikuyu seem to have thought missionary words a dangerous attempt to talk about the unknown. As Stevenson's interlocutors tried to explain, *Ngai* was in Gikuyu a tentative attempt to stave off the widespread disaster threatened by the rains' failure. The speculative nature of Gikuyu engagements with *Ngai* made missionary words about it seem ill-considered, bringing a dangerously unmanageable deity close to home. As late as 1919, a Presbyterian catechism found it necessary to reassure readers that, if *Ngai* were to come into a man's village, he and his goats would not die.¹¹⁷ The immanence of Christian preaching looked dangerous to many hearers.

¹¹⁶Stevenson, "Village work", in *Kikuyu News* 16 (Jan. 1910).

¹¹⁷SA I/Z/12-13: *Kabuku ga kuurania* (CSM British East Africa Mission, 1919).

Missionary words about *Ngai* were importunate: they captured in language what Gikuyu worked to bar from human discourse. Gikuyu responded by seeking to turn aside the flow of missionary preaching about *Ngai*. H.E. Scott lamented their ingenuity in 1912:

It is most difficult to obtain a definite opinion about what their god called *Ngai* is to them. As soon as you begin to cross examine them they seek umbrage under the customary reply, "We don't know."¹¹⁸

Avowals of ignorance turned aside dangerous God-talk. Other listeners sought different means to thwart missionaries' effort to pin down *Ngai*. Some elders hoped to provincialize missionary talk by arguing that there were two Gods, one the God of heaven, the other the God of earth.¹¹⁹ It made more sense, argued the elders, to worship the God of earth than the Christian God of heaven. Elders thwarted missionaries' efforts to engage in comparative theological debate about *Ngai* by making God relative. Some elders simply dismissed the Christian God as the "God of children".¹²⁰ Missionary religion was child's play. It was a telling depiction of Tumutumu's catechumens, all of whom were propertyless young men. But more, the critique of child-like Christianity balanced the weighty, careful knowledge of elders against the ill-considered, vocal preaching of missionaries. *Ngai*, elders knew, was too capricious to capture with words.

Missionaries hoped that by naming God, Gikuyu would be drawn into a sustained, worshipful dependence on their Creator. But *Ngai*, as I argued above, was in Gikuyu a gamble, less an absolute deity and more a tentative term putting a name to the unknowable. Missionary words about *Ngai* sparked new Gikuyu gambles on God, imaginative efforts to bring God down to earth, not sustained, reflective worship. At least

¹¹⁸H.E. Scott, "The Heathen Belief in Spirits", in *Kikuyu News* 33 (February 1912).

¹¹⁹Stevenson, "A Corner of the Vineyard", in *Kikuyu News* 50 (August 1914).

¹²⁰"Three Kenia Lads", "Lions in the Path", in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915).

one hospital patient, in 1913, wondered if Dr. Philp himself was *Ngai*.¹²¹ He drew a sharp rebuke: "the doctor is only a man, and God is a Spirit," sermonized a hospital attendant. That Gikuyu be made to recognize the immaterial transcendence of God was a central concern of missionary preaching. But evangelistic words inspired Gikuyu speculation on missionary materials, not the consideration of an abstract divinity that the Presbyterians sought to evoke. Some elders at Kimaro's, near the mission, thought they had seen all of *Ngai* when shown a picture of him.¹²² They asked the evangelists to move on: they had known God. Missionaries lamented that hearers frequently termed toys, cups, and other household utensils "God."¹²³ Some school-goers whispered that silver Communion vessels were made in "God's place."¹²⁴ Missionaries thought them dumbfounded at the newness of manufactured commodities. But the richness of Gikuyu material speculation on *Ngai* highlights their creativity, not their naiveté. By attaching *Ngai* to the stuff of European material culture, Gikuyu turned aside missionary efforts to initiate them into an abstract theological discourse about the nature of God. Gikuyu speculation domesticated missionary words, and thwarted Presbyterian efforts to produce a textual, scripted world of religions.

For the Word gained few converts in Tumutumu, at least in the mid-1910s.

Missionaries themselves lamented in 1912 that

we have not yet reached the stage when divine inspiration and practical force of our religion have made themselves evident to the minds of our hearers, nor when a sense of responsibility and sin against God has awakened the hearts cry for help and salvation.¹²⁵

¹²¹Philp, "Smallpox at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 42 (May 1913).

¹²²Stevenson, "A corner of the vineyard", in *Kikuyu News* 50 (August 1914).

¹²³Stevešnon, "The Kikuyu Language Committee", in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

¹²⁴Stevenson, "After a year in Kenya", in *Kikuyu News* 46 (Jan. 1914).

¹²⁵Barlow, "Evangelistic Work in Kenia", in *Kikuyu News* 35 (May 1912).

There was, as Stevenson put it, no “gathering a little crowd to listen to the Word.”¹²⁶ Gikuyu were rarely talked into the mission, nor did they engage into sustained debate about the nature of God with eager missionaries. Their laughter, and evasive responses to talk about God, marked Gikuyu refusal to enter into debate about comparative theology. Christian words, no matter how carefully tended and translated, meant little in a moral economy that refused to render itself up to representation, to a structure amenable to comparative talk. The failure of the Word told of a larger failure of the modern logic that made morality into Law. In the speculative word associations made by Gikuyu hearers there are echoes of a mode of resistance that mocked the enframing power of missionary words precisely by refusing to allow them to resonate outside the substantial economy by which Gikuyu knew the world.

The earliest Gikuyu attempts to compass the mission took shape on the terrain of material, not of theology. Gikuyu regarded missionaries as the carriers of potent materials--flashlights, clothing, sugar, books--that might profitably be incorporated into older economies of substances. In early exchanges with missionaries, Gikuyu hearers sought to work these European objects into the kinetic process of cooling and healing by which men and women created social order. They made speculative investments in missionary clothing, writing, tea, and medicine, experimenting with European materials and creatively incorporating them into old economies of trust and protection. Missionary materials constituted an expansive, expressive, experimental language with which to conjure creative social identities, a language with which also to speak back to the whites.¹²⁷

For this struggle over substance was precisely over the possibility of religion, over the reality of the textualized world of ritual and belief that missionaries sought to create.

¹²⁶Stevenson, “Willage Work”, in *Kikuyu News* 16 (January 1910).

¹²⁷John and Jean Comaroff have made similar observations, but drawn different conclusions, in *Of Revelation and Revolution, vol. 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 235.

By making European materials real, visible, vitally constitutive players in the processual creation of individual identity and corporate order, Gikuyu hearers upset the careful hierarchies of reality and ritual crafted by missionaries. Gikuyu gambles on European materials refused missionary efforts to make the world inert, a map to be mastered by heroic subject/agents. In response to the Presbyterian demand that they speak the modern, subjective language of religious belief, Gikuyu replied with disruptively material renderings of Presbyterian substances. It was a form of mimicry, a profoundly disruptive re-reading of the hierarchies of truth along which missionary evangelism worked. As we shall see in the next section, it was also a creatively Gikuyu intervention in long-running debates over politics and personhood.

Early Gikuyu hearers beheld missionary materials with frank fascination, and made gambling linkages between objects and being. Things like letters, clothing, flashlights, or pictures articulated the potency of missionaries: indeed, they embodied the real, marking the terrain on which Gikuyu compassed and speculated on missionary ontology and identity. If Gikuyu early refused to engage missionaries on the terrain of the Word, they avidly seized on the substance of missionary culture in an attempt to compass new objects within older idioms of trust and pollution. Missionary materials embodied the problems and possibilities of Christian disciplines, as Marion Stevenson discovered in 1909.

A short time ago one of the teachers who carries on an outschool came to the Mission Station and said, "Bibi, Wamagara says you must come and take the teaching box with the books and slates in it away from his village." But why? "He says his sheep and goats are dying of sickness, and that the wise man says it is because of the white man's box in the village." "Is it that he does not want his children to learn?" "Perhaps it may be so, but the wise man says the box is evil and is causing this sickness, and that it must be removed if they wish the sickness to cease." "Well, you go and tell Wamagara that there is also much sickness amongst the sheep and goats in other villages where there are no boxes, so it cannot be caused by the box!...this talk of the wise man is foolishness. Do not let

them think you take him seriously. The box remains where it is!" And there the box remained!¹²⁸

Stevenson and other missionaries regarded objections like Wamagara's as marks of resistance, produced by elders' defensive conservatism. But Wamagara's reading of the mission box, framed within the kinetic agonisms of *thahu*, was far from a conservative reaction to the radical claims of Christianity. Wamagara's reading of the mission box was rather a creative attempt to compass missionary materials within older categories of heat and coolness, fertility and pollution. His criticism domesticated missionary education, making the technologies of reading and writing--books and slates--visible as real players, substantially dangerous threats to domestic fertility. By extending older languages of judgment on missionary technology, Wamagara subjected education and literacy to Gikuyu expectations of social order.

We can glimpse this incorporative process, this highly material reading of missionary discipline, in the seemingly prosaic character of early Gikuyu engagements with texts. Early "readers" regarded papers and correspondence as a "the most powerful charm within human ken": they carried such letters on the end of a long, thin twig and carefully preserved them for years at a time.¹²⁹ Missionaries worried lest the Gospel become a fetish. Protestant texts were supposed to lead readers to the Word: reading and writing were carefully disciplined processes, avenues directing inquirers toward the Meaning behind texts. As I showed above, missionary pedagogy began with letters and syllables, and proceeded to words and sentences, coding the meanings of words into the arrangement of letters themselves. Writing caught up the world in script, creating a discipline of mastery that re-enacted the heroic story of Genesis.

¹²⁸Stevenson, "Sidelights on School Work", in *Kikuyu News* 9 (Jan. 1909).

¹²⁹Hamilton, "Marua", in *Kikuyu News* 70 (Oct. 1919); see also Wanyoike, *An African Pastor*, 41.

But early Gikuyu writers turned letters inward, creating idiosyncratic scripts that testified more to the technique of writing than to the Meaning communicated in words. The earliest dictionaries attest that the first, speculative, word that Gikuyu put for “to write” was *gutema*.¹³⁰ The term evoked the “chopping” of trees; it also evoked the process of tattooing, marking the body at circumcision and other ceremonies of aging. The “letters” of the alphabet Gikuyu named *retemu*o, “cuts”; *ruoora*, “branded mark, stripe”; or *ndemwa*, “tattoos.”¹³¹ The Gikuyu name for “letters”, correspondence, was *marúa*. The word was probably adopted from the Swahili *barua*.¹³² But at least one missionary thought *marúa* was an old term for marks tattooed on the torso.¹³³ Writing was in some way a bodily discipline, an accomplishment that in highly material ways testified to the integrity of the writer. Gikuyu writing as tattooing made the act of writing visible: it positioned the technique, the process of forming letters, over and above the meaning of words. In 1908, Marion Stevenson was disconcerted when she entered the hut of Wanjiko, a former laundry worker, and found incomprehensible letters chalked on the wall. They were Wanjiko’s signature, she was told. Stevenson thought them a “rather pathetic effort to remember something she had learned at school.”¹³⁴ But Wanjiko’s writing marked something different than a half-hearted memory exercise. We do not know what, if anything, she meant to convey in her writing. That is precisely the point. Wanjiku’s letters on the wall positioned missionaries (and academics) outside the meaning-making circuit of writing and reading. In response to the missionary demand that she name herself, clearly positioning herself in relation to an inert world, Wanjiku replied with random letters. Her writing had an (unknowable) purpose of its own, a

¹³⁰A. Hemery, *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: RCM Press, 1903), 75; A.W. McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary* (London: SPCK, 1904), 191.

¹³¹For *retemu*o, McGregor, 100; for *ruoora* (pl. *njora*) and *ndemwa*, L. Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 185, 196.

¹³²Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 415.

¹³³Hamilton, “Marua”, in *Kikuyu News* 70 (October 1919). In support of Hamilton’s theory: *marúa* sounds much like *marua*, the plural form of the noun *irua*, circumcision.

¹³⁴Stevenson, Letter no. 7, in *Kikuyu News* 7 (October 1908).

purpose distanced from the lessons that missionaries taught about writing, communication and mastering.

Wanjiko's signature made visible a Gikuyu strategy of resistance. Her incomprehensible letters made writing into performance, a technique to be mastered, not a communicative medium to be understood. It was as if words spoke to and among themselves, losing their references to objects. The Word in early missionary teaching shaded into a language game, which early readers were strikingly adept at playing. Missionaries worried that schoolchildren memorized their reading texts, and failed to dwell on the meanings of the words they spoke. Scott noted the problem in 1910:

The power of the school children to memorize their lessons is notorious. They commit to memory a whole page of their reading book and it is only when you ask them to begin to read in the middle of a sentence that you discover that what you took to be beautiful reading was only wonderful memorizing...to teach the pupils how to think rather than memorizing becomes one of the first problems in our school work.¹³⁵

That words be alienated from memory and made to lead readers to the Word that lay behind them was the central concern of missionary pedagogy. But Gikuyu consistently broke down the hierarchy of words and Word, making Christian speech a matter of performance, not understanding. The first adherents at Tumutumu mission insisted that missionaries teach them to "pray properly."¹³⁶ Missionaries taught them several prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer, the first text translated into Gikuyu. Converts prayed the prayer continually, sometimes praying and singing through the night. Missionaries worried lest the prayers become incantations, or charms. Converts' words

¹³⁵SA I/A/10: Scott, "In Far Fields", 24 June 1910. Bernard Cohn similarly notes how in 19th century British schooling in India students parroted English and Sanskrit words, making lessons into incantations. See Cohn, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command". in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings in South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 323-24.

¹³⁶Stevenson, "After a year in Kenya", in *Kikuyu News* 46 (January 1914).

threatened to play only among themselves, losing their connection to the structure, the Meaning that missionaries thought should lay outside them.

Gikuyu word-play worked to make writing, and praying, ends in themselves. Wanjiku's indecipherable letters, writing as tattooing, reciting prayers from rote all detached the disciplines of missionary pedagogy from their moorings, from the Meaning to which they were supposed to refer. Missionaries sought to create in writing and praying vehicles to lead inquirers to divine Truth. Wanjiku and others refused to accede to the pull of meaning implied in writing. They took the technologies of missionary pedagogy as real, vital performances that played on and somehow constituted reality. We do not know, and cannot know, what they may have meant. What is clear is that writing and praying were experimental techniques of reality, somehow testifying to ambitions different than those set up by the Presbyterians.

A similar debate over the reality of missionary techniques took shape as emblems of biomedicine. From the earliest days of the mission, Tumutumu doctors sought to cure sick bodies through spectacular, public displays of surgery. Horace Philp conducted surgery outdoors, sometimes traveling to marketplaces to extract teeth before large crowds. Surgery was a discipline of subjectification: as Paul Landau has shown, in cutting the body and extracting teeth missionaries alienated Africans from the social matrix that had previously made them sick or well.¹³⁷ Disease was, in biomedicine, a problem of individuals, not a social imbalance. Pulling teeth made individuals feel pain as a subjective experience, a moment of crisis that made disease look like something emanating from within. And at the same time doctors told patients that adopting Christianity relied on individual acts of faith, coming from within the self. Teeth-pulling and conversion were alike: both were founded on and called into existence the individualized self.

¹³⁷c.f. Paul Landau, "Explaining Surgical Evangelism in Colonial Southern Africa: Teeth, Pain and Faith", in *Journal of African History* 37 (1996): 261-281.

But Gikuyu watchers seemed more inclined to dwell on the techniques of missionary medicine than on the lessons about self and world that missionaries hoped to convey. The performance of western medicine drew appreciative crowds: the first practitioner, a Gikuyu dispenser named Kitoto, dispensed iodine and purgatives in the open field at the center of the mission. Barlow envied the numbers he drew, sometimes exceeding 60 people.¹³⁸ The missionary doctor Philp was more ambivalent about the congregations that attended his surgeries, as he wrote in 1910:

A large number come to gaze at the white man and his doings. If a tooth is extracted quickly there is a murmur of approval, and for the next ten minutes each of the onlookers has to explain to his neighbor exactly how the (doctor) did it (the European mode of tooth extraction appeals very much to the native, as their own consists of forcibly digging a tooth out by knife). But if a tooth does not come out at the first pull, they like it even better, but there is no such thing as sympathy for suffering here. If a patient complains of pain they all seem to think it a very great joke, and shouts of derisive laughter greet the patient's protestations.¹³⁹

Philp hoped that tooth pulling would testify to the superiority of western medicine, leading to sustained thought about disease and self-hood. But Gikuyu watchers seem to have been more fascinated with the technique of tooth pulling than with the lessons about disease and wellness that missionaries sought to convey. As Philp mentions, watchers gossiped about "how the Doctor did it," re-enacting the extraction of teeth in front of appreciative onlookers. It was as if Gikuyu diagnosed what missionary medicine meant through its techniques, through its performance, not through its effects. Cries of pain were greeted with shouts of derision. Subjectivity, the pain of the self, seems to have been laughable. What was fascinating, the grounds on which Gikuyu engaged biomedicine, was the performance.

¹³⁸SA I/A/5: Barlow to Scott, 15 October 1909.

¹³⁹Philp, "Medical work at strategic sites in Kenia", in *Kikuyu News* 24 (December 1910).

It was as a battle over performance techniques--over needles, salves, vaccines, the technologies of missionary medicine--that early struggles over healing at Tumutumu took shape. The Gikuyu sick, at least in the first years of the mission, persistently refused to make their bodies the subjects of missionary knives and needles. In 1916-17 Philp, backed with the District Commissioner's policemen, began a program of vaccination for smallpox throughout Nyeri district. He hoped that needles would induct the reluctant majority into the explanatory ken of biomedicine. But even the chiefs were unable to prevent their people from hiding *en masse* in the bushes at the appearance of the doctor.¹⁴⁰ When they were successfully vaccinated, Philp reported that as soon as the doctor's back was turned they smeared the vaccination with cow dung and leaves, and washed the area with water.¹⁴¹ Characteristically, Philp attributed their resistance to "native prejudices". But Gikuyu evasion of the doctor's needles was creative, not merely reactive. Leaves and cow dung were emblematically cool in Gikuyu thought: they balanced out diseased heat with fertility. And vaccines, at least in 1917, were "hot": more often than not they led to an onset of the disease, as Philp himself admitted.¹⁴² More directly, disaster visited those who missionaries vaccinated: their huts were burned to the ground by a government nervous about a smallpox epidemic. Philp's smallpox vaccinations literally ruined his victims by identifying them as individual sufferers, subjecting to government law.

The bodily techniques of biomedicine, the needles and vaccines with which doctors identified smallpox sufferers, were dangerously specific in their application. Being made subjects to missionary needles literally ruined Gikuyu homesteads. Local people refused to attend the Tumutumu hospital in the early 1910s, some fearing contamination of corpses that were regularly buried in the mission cemetery.¹⁴³ Sufferers

¹⁴⁰SA IJ/2: Philp, Nyeri District Surgeon Report, 1918.

¹⁴¹SA IJ 1 & 3: Philp, "Report on the health of the native reserves in Nyeri district", April-August 1918.

¹⁴²SA IJ 1 & 3: Philp to Paterson, Sanitation Officer, 23 March 1925.

¹⁴³"Annual meeting of the Kikuyu Mission", in *Kikuyu News* 43 (July-Aug. 1913).

responded to dangerous biomedical technology by working to reposition the suffering within the older, social economy by which wise men balanced out illness. In 1912 Philp visited at a village near the mission and found a group of elders performing 'sacrifices' for an ill man, lying prostrate on the ground. He called for a hammock, took the sufferer to the hospital in Tumutumu, and injected him with drugs for malaria. Within two days, his relatives had spirited him out of the mission and brought him to his village, where further 'sacrifices' were performed and, eventually, he recovered.¹⁴⁴ This struggle over a patient's body, played out several times at Tumutumu, was a debate over the ontology of illness. Missionaries insisted that illness was a problem deriving from, and resolved in, individual bodies. Gikuyu continually deflected the individuality of missionary healing technologies, working the ill into older material economies of health and healing.

Struggles over patients' bodies, rubbing vaccination scars with dung and leaves, were attempts to break down the subjective logic of missionary healing. The unencumbered self of missionary medicine, Gikuyu knew, was positively dangerous: healing was a process, connecting the body to a wider social nexus of fertility and health. So too did Wanjiku's writing deflect the individuating lessons of missionary pedagogy. Her random letters refused missionary demands that she name the world, clearly positioning herself in relation an inert map. In response to the missionary demand that they speak the language of subjectivity, the language of self and world, early Gikuyu hearers replied with random talk, rubbed-out vaccines, strikingly material readings of schoolbooks and pencils. Missionary talk about belief and God, in other words, failed to elicit the sorts of reasoned, subjective responses that the evangelists hoped to evoke. There was no anguished dialogue about self and other in these early exchanges, no culturally driven dialectic that somehow resolved into "hegemony" and "resistance". The Gikuyu world was too fluid, too processual, to be reified into abstract categories. Gikuyu

¹⁴⁴Philp, "Surgery at Tumutumu", in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

confronted missionaries not as subjects, speaking for authentic African traditions or beliefs, but as gamblers, creatively speculating on the substances of missionary culture. Early hearers' mimicking engagements with missionary representations defined a third space, behind or ancillary to the dialectics of colonial discourse. By upsetting missionary notions about self and world, about the Meaning that was supposed to lay behind social practices, Gikuyu mimicry made the substance of colonial rule take on a life of its own, outside the Meaning so carefully adduced in missionary teaching.

* * *

What I have termed "mimicry" was a strategy of resistance, an insurgent attempt to break down missionaries' divisions between subject and object, self and world. But "mimicry" was simultaneously a creatively Gikuyu intervention in the old politics of materials and persons. The mimicry by which Gikuyu broke down distinctions between self and world embodied new possibilities for material accomplishment. For at least some Gikuyu, "converts" to a material religion, partial adoptions of mission dress and deportment opened up a range of substances, a creative language of identity, that offered fresh means to work into the old ambition of self-mastery. Their intellectual and intricate gambles in the substance of missionary culture worked new substances into the material balancing act by which men and women created sociable civility from the wilderness, and defined an agnostic field of vernacular debate over gendered morality and political power.

The popularization of Christian materials was part of the process by which Nyeri Gikuyu entered into a profitable colonial economy of wage labor and commodity production. Maize exports made farming in the Gikuyu reserves profitable: from 1911, the cultivated area in the reserves rose dramatically, more so when the beginning of war pushed up both domestic and foreign demand. By 1913, products of African origin earned 3/4 of Kenya colony's export earnings.¹⁴⁵ Exporting pushed up prices on the

¹⁴⁵Bruce Berman. *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: the Dialectic of Domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), 53-54.

domestic market: in January 1911 a rupee bought two tins of maize in Nyeri, down from six tins in July 1910.¹⁴⁶ Commodity farming earned profit, at least for the wealthy men who had access to sufficient hilltop land on which to farm the new crops.¹⁴⁷ Some Gikuyu, most young men, turned to wage labor to supplement their farm work. In 1911, 7,556 men from Nyeri district spent part of the year away from home working for wages at European farms, or in Nairobi's construction circuit. By 1913 the number had risen to 8,417, 23 percent of the total able-bodied male population.¹⁴⁸ Almost all returned home for the planting seasons in May and November, mixing their wage work with careful attention to their homes.¹⁴⁹ They used their wages to finance the virtuous goals that made men into men: wage earnings, as a Labour Commission in 1912 discovered, went to pay bridewealth and funded additional purchases of livestock.¹⁵⁰ Wages allowed young men to prove their adulthood according to the old logic of material accomplishment.

Some young men bought differently, and hoped their purchases would define new avenues to prove their self-mastery. Cash wages funded young men's gambles on European clothing and foodstuffs. Wage laborers in 1912 often returned home with khaki clothing, or blankets, which they wore when working for the Europeans.¹⁵¹ Some purchased tea and sugar, rice, pepper, salt and bread, which they usually consumed themselves.¹⁵² One bought himself a basin, plate, cooking pot and tumbler with which he ate his rice.¹⁵³ Some elders, at least, admired their sons' perspicacious pursuit of new goods: in 1913 Philp was able to purchase an additional five acres of land for the mission from an elder of *Njora*, Gacece wa Karuoro. The price was a new cooking pot and an

¹⁴⁶*KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/2: Nyeri Political Record Book*, McClure, entry on "Trade", Jan. 1911.

¹⁴⁷M.P. Cowen, "Differentiation in a Kenya Location" (Nairobi: East African University Social Science Council, 1972).

¹⁴⁸*KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual Report, Nyeri District, 1914-15.*

¹⁴⁹Monthly labor statistics are in *KNA VQ/16/49: Annual Report, Nyeri District, 1917-18.*

¹⁵⁰East African Protectorate, *Native Labour Commission, 1912-13: Evidence and Report* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1914).

¹⁵¹Evidence of Wagura wa Kagongo and Makumi wa Mohia, in *Native Labour Commission.*, 203: 236-37.

¹⁵²Evidence of Mukoma wa Njiri, in *Native Labour Commission*, 232.

¹⁵³Evidence of Makumi wa Mohia, in *Native Labour Commission*, 236-37.

arm chair.¹⁵⁴ By 1915 Indian shops within the reserve were doing a brisk business in needles, blankets, mirrors, cotton and other products of European manufacture.¹⁵⁵

Young wage-workers' purchases articulated their subjection to the colonial economy, as capitalist markets restructured the needs and identities of African people. But the hats, umbrellas, tea pots and sugar they bought with their wages also defined imaginative possibilities, space for intricate and intellectual investments in modern commodities.¹⁵⁶ Among the most imaginative were the first converts of the Tumutumu mission. The sons of land-holding clans near the mission, most were *tuhii*, uninitiated boys. *Mbari ya Njora*, holders of much of the land originally given to the mission, sent many of them: 6 of the 14 catechumens in 1911 were from that clan.¹⁵⁷ Though it held much land on the western side of Tumutumu Hill, *Njora* lacked the livestock which made for wealth. Its elders, little needing their labor for the work of herding, sent their junior sons to the mission. *Mbari ya Murakaru* boasted of more goats; its children, needed for the hard work of herding, generally did not attend school.¹⁵⁸ Tumutumu's school thrived in its earliest years as a clan project, driven by *Njora* elders' hopes that reading and writing would produce Gikuyu wealth.

Not all early students at Tumutumu were *mbari* patriots. Many attended school precisely because they were marginal to families, and could scarcely hope to earn the land and wealth that would establish them as adults. Their marginality inspired their religious creativity. Some early adherents, like Danieli Mageria, were illegitimate children, sent to the school by relatives not willing to offer them land on which to settle.¹⁵⁹ Others, like

¹⁵⁴SA I/F/9: Contract between Horace Philp and Kachichi wa Karuoro, 17 Oct. 1913.

¹⁵⁵KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual Report, Nyeri District, 1914-15.

¹⁵⁶c.f. Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁷TT "PCEA Tumutumu Parish: The History of Tumutumu", 1998; Barlow, "Taking a Stand", in *Kikuyu News* 28 (May 1911).

¹⁵⁸Oral interview: Kariuki Muturi and Joseph Muthée Muriuki; Hosea Munene.

¹⁵⁹Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki; Cecilia Muthoni, *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki*, 1982 (unpublished mss, Tumutumu).

Paulo Kahuho, came from a family that lacked the goats and sheep to pay his circumcision fees.¹⁶⁰ Like their colleagues in other parts of Gikuyuland, the Scots missionaries attracted those who had little hope of mastering themselves.¹⁶¹ Many young men came in hopes of earning wages from the mission, and protested hotly when, in 1910, Barlow ceased paying schoolgoers for their work in reading.¹⁶² Most of this first group of readers were circumcised in the mission dispensary in 1912.¹⁶³ Their fathers named the initiation group *Heho*, "coldness", possibly a pun at the expense of young men who lacked the means to fire their virility. But the Tumutumu initiates renamed themselves *Baragu*, "wealthy man."¹⁶⁴ *Baragu* was a telling reply to elders' scorn: but more, it signaled the young convert's vital hopes that their labors in the mission would allow them to work into new identities, mastering new criteria to pass the old test of self-mastery.

Converts to a material religion, Tumutumu's young men worked their facility with foreign substance into a claim on Gikuyu politics. They hoped to make missionary materials and technologies embody ethnic reputation, to make foreign food feed vernacular fertility. I want to examine Gikuyu debates over one substance, *cai*. *Cai*, tea with sugar and, occasionally, milk, was by the late 1920s the drink of wealthy sociability, the lubricant of a series of social rituals by which ambitious readers worked their culture into ethnic identity.¹⁶⁵ But *cai* began as a contentious interruption of familial consumption, marking off readers from the circuits of beer, millet drinking and cooling civility by which readers' fathers digested conflict and assured fertility. Early struggles

¹⁶⁰Oral interview: Edwin Baro and Lilian Wanjogu; Waruiru, *The Female Initiation Controversy*.

¹⁶¹c.f. John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith: Kikuyu Anglican Christianity, 1900-1945* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1999), 49-56 for similar observations regarding southern Anglican mission stations.

¹⁶²Barlow, "Tumutumu Notes", in *Kikuyu News* 22 (Sept. 1910).

¹⁶³SA I/E/4: Arthur to Orr, 11 September 1912; Barlow, "Tumutumu notes", in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

¹⁶⁴Oral interview: Edwin Baro; Waruiru, *Female Initiation Controversy*; Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 24.

¹⁶⁵c.f. John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities", in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 1999.

over *cai* and beer marked the imaginative possibilities of new goods, the complex ways that new substances embodied an experimental, contentious language of identity for young converts. Gikuyu debates over *cai* were, as we shall see, particularly pointed around the process of marriage. Debates over *cai* in bridewealth payments were debates over the possibility that new substances would articulate old standards of accountability, responsibility and fertility. They also demarcated divisions within the new reading communities, divisions over class and gender that were constituted by some men and women's inability to participate in the consuming passions of the Christians.

Cai was introduced in Nyeri by the Scots missionaries, who thought that their cooking would civilize their converts and reform their manners. They began serving *cai* to the inhabitants of the mission boarding school; by 1913 young men from locations far distant from Tumutumu asked missionaries for the *mahuti ma cai*, tea leaves.¹⁶⁶ In 1914 missionaries served some 800 cups of tea to elders gathered for Christmas celebrations.¹⁶⁷ They drank from emptied tins of canned salmon or pickled meat. Missionaries hoped the new drink would wean them from beer. The elders seem to have viewed the tea with more equanimity: old men remembered that the tea taken at the mission had burned them on the lips with its sweetness.¹⁶⁸ Their evaluation posed burning tea in opposition to the cooling civility of beer, a distinction that had important consequences for the politics of consumption and marriage in years to come.

Disputes over tea, beer and marriage marked the earliest years of evangelism in Tumutumu. Gikuyu marriage was constituted by a series of exchanges of livestock and beer from the family of the young man to the bride's family. Marriage was a contract of consumption in which eating actualized the transference of reproductive value from one patriline to another. It was precisely this (re)productive nexus that early Christians

¹⁶⁶Mrs. Philp, "Notes on Itenerating", in *Kikuyu News* 40 (Jan. 1913).

¹⁶⁷Dannis, "The tea", in *Kikuyu News* 47 (Feb. 1914).

¹⁶⁸Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

attacked. The first recorded occasion, in 1915, at which the Church of Scotland's Gikuyu converts (all men) met to debate church doctrine took shape as follows:

It was entirely a native *shauri* (dispute) and a straight fight between the young men who were all out, not only not to drink, but to forbid it in the buying of their girls etc., and two or three of the older Christians who made the opposition. One could well have understood the older leading the younger in this respect, because they already have their wives, and the younger men would have to bear the burden of the fight with the old men; not so, however, the magnificent thing was that it was the young men who knew it was going to cost them much, who were all in for it. In the end there were two plain issues: 1) that drinking or taking beer by Christians should be prohibited. Only two or three of the older ones admitted to still taking it. The motion was carried with only one dissident, 55 church members voting for it. 2) that beer in payment of buying a girl, or for work done, or as a friendly gift, should be prohibited. There was more discussion on this point, but in the end it, too, was carried, with perhaps three or four dissidents.¹⁶⁹

The young CSM converts' eager stand against beer was a Christian commitment, an abstention probably learned from missionaries, some of whom were teetotalers. But their principled objections to beer were equally an offense directed at their fathers. Gikuyu beer proved men's reputation and valorized households' fertility. Beer was sometimes made out of millet, the grain that embodied women's fertility and marked sociable production. Alternatively, beer was brewed from sugar cane, a men's crop grown along the marshy river valleys. Women crushed cane, or ground the millet, and brewed the beer in their own huts. It was kept during the night before consumption at the foot of the bed of the senior wife. Beer was reproductive labor rendered up to political value. In the context of marriage negotiations, beer, together with livestock, enacted the transference of girls between families and compensated one form of reproductive value, women's work, with an equivalent, valorized form of value. Beer drinking at marriage bound families together in a continuity of consumption: early dictionaries defined "to

¹⁶⁹SA I/D/3: Arthur to Peel, 21 Sept. 1915.

broth" as *kuiguana*, evoking listening together, feeling together, agreeing.¹⁷⁰ Husbands lubricated cordial ties with in-laws by continuing to offer small gifts of beer and livestock after marriage: bride price, the proverb went, was never finished.¹⁷¹ The beer and goats of bridewealth bound families together in a commonwealth of consumption. Marriage was not a commercial transaction but a vital process of incorporation, working girls into families and families into accord.

The young converts' refusal to produce beer in marriage exchanges spoke to their agnostic struggle to work their mastery of missionary material into a substantial accomplishment. Early readers argued that *cai* marked a new sociability, earning them the right to call themselves men and allowing them to lay claims on marriageable women. The first Christian marriage conducted at Tumutumumu wed two inmates of the boarding school. Their parents refused to attend; older converts stood in for them during the ceremony. They served tea at the conclusion of the festivities.¹⁷² To missionaries, the tea they consumed, and clean white clothing they wore, attested to redeemed hearts. But early readers saw in *cai* something more than Christian redemption: they saw a new kind of sociable wealth. They paid sacks of sugar to the fathers of the women they hoped to marry, purchasing the sugar from the Indian shops in Nyeri or Karatina.¹⁷³ Sugar was relatively inexpensive: it was given out in small quantities as *bakshish*, a "thank you", in Indian stores and after the first world war cost only 25 cents a kilo.¹⁷⁴ But tea leaves were costly, and so was milk. *Cai* was generally consumed in marriages by senior Christian men, drinking among themselves. Wives and children drank millet porridge, and cleaned the cups after the men finished. As one woman put it, "tea was for when the old men came."¹⁷⁵ Tea embodied a new kind of civility, no less gendered than the old. Some

¹⁷⁰McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*, 22.

¹⁷¹c.f. Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 209, for *uthoni* ties.

¹⁷²Jack, "The First Christian Marriage in Kenia", in *Kikuyu News* 59 (April/May 1916).

¹⁷³Oral interviews: Gerard Gachau Kingori; Grace Mukunya.

¹⁷⁴Oral interviews: Grace Gathoni; Monica Muumbi.

¹⁷⁵Oral interview: Jerida Kirigu.

men, lacking the cash to buy leaves and sugar, make *cai* from the charred bark of *muthukoroi* or *thiomi* trees.¹⁷⁶ *Cai* was a drink of accomplishment, of wealthy mastery. It marked out divisions within growing communities of readers, divisions of attainment which left poor men and women outside the passionate consumption of the new civility.

Angry elders protested that sugar and *cai* carried little worth in marriage transactions. Beer had compensated the reproductive value of women with an proximate sort of realized value. Sugar carried none of these fertile resonances. Readers' failure to brew beer was one of the most frequently-voiced objections to their marriage practices.¹⁷⁷

Their failure to produce beer at marriage negotiations alienated women's reproductive capacity from families. Beer at marriage brought common accord between families, binding in-laws together in a continuity of consumption. Sugar at marriage brought only prostitution: it made eating into alienation, not incorporation. Girls who went to school in the early years married far away from their families, and ate alone; they contributed little to the wealth of families. Their eating, and being, was abnormal; more, it was degenerative. Readers at the mission in the 1910s and 20s were rumored to eat wild animals, gazelles and pigs.¹⁷⁸ They drank their tea from human skulls, and ate human flesh.¹⁷⁹ Their consumption made them *arogi*, sorcerers who visited death on the living. Their food marked their incivility, their antagonism to the socializing consumption by which Gikuyu rendered productive work into fatty value.

Readers' food led to prostitution, to wasting, not to fertile fat. Anxious elders' critique of early readers centered around food precisely because their eating placed them outside the political circles of consumption that made families into families and men into men. One elderly reader, Mwati wa Kiruba, remembered that in 1920 he opened a tea

¹⁷⁶Oral interviews: Francis Mahinda; Leuel Njuki; Muri Wanjiru.

¹⁷⁷c.f. oral interviews: Maritha Gakeria wa Maina; Idis Kahiga; Alice Wanjeri; Esther Mbau Mwhaki.

¹⁷⁸Oral interview: Jerida Kirigu.

¹⁷⁹For skulls, oral interviews: Gerard Gachau Kingori, Paul Thuku Njembwe; for human flesh, oral interview: Elijah Kiruthi.

kiosk in Karatina town, hoping to attract business from wage laborers and carriers returning to the reserve from the East African campaign.¹⁸⁰ He seized on the idea after dining at another kiosk, where he noticed that a pot of tea had quickly sold at a price of two cents per glass. Mwati's kiosk did a brisk business with men: he sold fried potatoes, boiled maize, and tea. Women, however, refused to enter. They complained that the food had been brought to Karatina from Nairobi by the Swahili. Fried food, like tea, was an innovation in central Kenya: the onions that Mwati used to fry potatoes made his food akin to that of foreigners. It worked against the domestic fertility of Gikuyu food, millet or beans boiled over a wife's fire. Women who ate at Mwati's kiosk risked being called *maraya*, prostitutes. Their foreign diet enacted moral wasting, the degeneracy of their fertility.

Cai was a contentious, divisive mark of Gikuyu conflict in the first decades of Christian work in Tumutumu. In an economy where eating made for civil sociability and gendered order, where food valorized productive work, readers' *cai* and onions were to elders dangerously abstract, wastefully indolent. Youthful converts, stung by elders' criticism, hoped to turn their drink into the substance of Gikuyu fertility. *Cai*, clothing and other marks of missionary culture became for them a marker of new accomplishment, a criterion of wealth and mastery no less demanding of labor and discipline than the beer of their fathers. Like beer, *cai* sifted out the poor and marked men's diet off from women. *Cai* bore the imprint of readers' achievements, and lubricated their claims on self-mastering manhood.

The Tumutumu marriage crisis of 1914-15 embodied readers' claims that *cai* could make for substantial virtue. The crisis was sparked by missionary legalism. Missionaries thought marriage as a sign of conversion, a symbol of the wedding between Christ and church. But more, carefully tended, monogamous homes were for

¹⁸⁰Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

missionaries the foundation of the evangel, the disciplined embodiment of Christian virtue. John Arthur put it this way in 1923:

The very first principle of Christian teaching is the endeavor to make home like here something that it is not--namely "home" life, where health, purity, and love--between man and wife, and between parents and children--reign. The home is the centre of all advancement of a people and the woman of the home is the central factor. The foundation of Christian homes is the missionary aim.¹⁸¹

Tumutumu's missionaries carefully guarded the integrity of marriage by insisting that Christian marriages could only be contracted among the baptized. But until 1916, the catechumenate at Tumutumu was exclusively male.¹⁸² The young male adherents of the mission worried that missionaries' intransigence would delay their adulthood, and make them womanly. Elders called the Christian God the "God of children", mocking the young readers with their immaturity.¹⁸³

The young men, desperate for brides, made payments for girls outside the mission. Some of them insisted that their future wives join the girls' boarding school, formed by Marion Stevenson in 1912, where they would be taught the skills necessary to maintain Christian homes.¹⁸⁴ Others, somewhat older, paid bridewealth but left their wives with their fathers. By 1914, many of the young men of the mission had long-standing engagements with unbaptised girls whom they hoped, eventually, to marry.¹⁸⁵ But missionaries insisted on the ideal of Christian marriage, reminding anxious young men to "wait patiently for the time when there will be Christian girls who would make worthy partners and helpmeets in their lives."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹SA I/A/30: Arthur to East African Standard, 7 November 1923.

¹⁸²SA I/B/7: Annual report, Tumutumu, 1916.

¹⁸³"Three Kenia lads", "Lions in the path", in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915).

¹⁸⁴Philp. "Tumutumu notes", in *Kikuyu News* 48 (July-August 1913). c.f. Summers on men's marriages.

¹⁸⁵SA I/A/19: Stevenson to Barlow, 9 Jan. 1915.

¹⁸⁶Barlow, "Kikuyu Marriage Customs", in *Kikuyu News* 40 (January 1913).

The lengthy suspension of readers' marriages created a crisis in 1914. It was a crisis of authority for missionaries, but more, it was a failure of the series of Laws by which missionaries worked to create and regulate a Christian Gikuyu society. Perhaps hoping that the completion of their marriages would protect them from recruitment into the government's Carrier Corps, some young catechumens attempted to force their marriages. They demanded an increase in the wages they earned for their teaching, hoping to use the cash to complete bridewealth payments.¹⁸⁷ Some of them threatened to leave mission employ, claiming that their work for the mission had made them feel the "pinch of poverty."¹⁸⁸ A few, both ambitious and desperate, entered into the series of feasts and dances that enacted the fulfillment of Gikuyu marriage. One young reader, Macaria, completed paying his bridewealth and convened a feast near the mission. His family brewed beer for their in-laws. Stevenson, together with twelve mission adherents, marched as a body to the scene of the eating and announced, loudly, that "this was not a Christian marriage, that those two were acting as heathen."¹⁸⁹ Stevenson hoped that her actions would help "make a break in the eyes of the people" between things Christian and things Gikuyu. But her young converts stubbornly refused to make such representative distinctions. One of them, Samsoni, had waited for 4 years to complete his marriage to a 'village girl', Njebere. She, tiring of the wait, had married another man.¹⁹⁰ Samsoni hoped to use his wages to make payments for a different woman, named Cai. He asked searching questions of Stevenson.

He had two questions showing the depth of his ignorance. 1) Would we not allow them be married (as if it lay in our hands and was a caprice of ours!) because he had had to wait for Njebere? 2) Would it be wrong if he married a heathen (!) girl and had her come to school afterwards!!!¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷SA I/A/19: Barlo to MacLachlan, 7 April 1915.

¹⁸⁸SA I/A/17: Barlow to Arthur, 10 December 1914.

¹⁸⁹SA I/A/19: Stevenson to Barlow, 16 January 1914.

¹⁹⁰SA I/A/17: Filipu Mathenge to Barlow, 3 January 1915.

¹⁹¹SA I/A/19: Stevenson to Barlow, 16 Jan. 1914. Parentheses in the original.

Stevenson replied to Samsoni's sly interrogation by making a forceful distinction between marriage and her personal caprice. She insisted that marriage was not an arbitrary figment of missionary will: it was rather "for Christians all over the world. This marriage law is not for *athungu* (whites) only!" But Samsoni's questions refused to make distinctions between missionaries' personality and the Law. His mimicking queries harnessed his virtuous acquiescence to mission authority--had he not waited for four years?--to a pointed critique of the rigidity of marriage as law. Samsoni sought to engage the stultifying rigidity of law precisely by breaking down the careful distinctions missionaries made between themselves and the law, between their personality and Christianity. His deconstructive criticism permitted him, and other converts, to work even 'heathen' girls into civil, reproductive relationship.

It is important to recognize that the 1914-15 struggles over readers' marriages were struggles over the possibility that 'law' would regulate social practice. To missionaries, Gikuyu marriage stubbornly refused to present itself as a law, as a system which could be legislated upon and made into a disciplining system. The very indeterminacy of 'marriage' allowed young readers to challenge missionaries' ability to regulate their lives, and wives, as Stevenson discovered later in 1914.

I have just come from explaining marriage to the boys. They are in great puzzlement as to when it can be said that the sheep are finished being paid for a girl, seeing they say the *shauri* is never finished here. I said I did not believe that: that there must be a point when these sheep were really gifts from the son in law to the father in law and not really payment. Further I said that if there was no *muhaka* (boundary) where a man could say "the girl is now mine and not her father's" that we must make one! I certainly think that if the father allows the banns of marriage to be proclaimed he should be precluded after that from demanding further payment for the girl. Let them protest if he is not satisfied.¹⁹²

¹⁹²SA I/A/19: Stevenson to Barlow, n.d. (but 1914).

Stevenson's quandary arose from the failure of the logic that abstracted social practices into immutable Laws. As I showed above, the eating that surrounded Gikuyu marriage offered no points of definition, no contractual completion which would allow missionaries to name it as complete. Indeed, Gikuyu marriage worked precisely to deny its legal abstraction. The livestock exchanges and consumption of beer that enacted marriage engaged people and things in a series of consuming exchanges, meals that bound families together and made men's reputations. The ceasing of this consumption led to the wasting of houses, the end of fertility, the prostitution of women. Marriage was always in a process of becoming because houses, families and reputations were themselves vital processes, carefully balanced bargains with a threatening wilderness. Marriage, part of the larger process that made social order of the unproductive forest, was a substantial transaction that defied attempts to resolve it into law.

The Tumutumu marriage dispute highlights, again, how the structuring of Gikuyu life into Law served missionary interest. By making contracts of complex processes, by rendering space into a map, and by engaging old men in abstract arguments about religious rituals, missionary evangelism worked to create a mechanical world, a society structured by law and acted on by unencumbered individuals. Laws allowed missionaries to pass judgment on Gikuyu, determining, for example, whether Macaria's illicit festival constituted a "real" marriage. Over time, these rules would be elaborated, codified, and made into the abstract stuff of "customary law", the rulebook for government chiefs in Kenya as elsewhere. The textualization of Gikuyu social life, the rendering of process into religious ritual and law, was as much a colonization of Gikuyu society as were the great moments of military conquest.

But Gikuyu selves were not easily interpolated into the hierarchy of texts set up by missionaries. In reply to the British demand that they make their bodies speak the language of laws and beliefs, Gikuyu responded with gambling speculation about

missionary technologies and materials. They experimentally worked to incorporate *cai* and other materials into older economies of substance; turned letters into marks of bodily maturity; and rubbed vaccines with dung and leaves. These material readings of the evangel, these intricate investments in missionary substance, upset the careful hierarchies of object and subject, self and world, that missionaries sought to create. The effect of their speculation was to deflect the force of law, to turn a textual colonial world into a lively place for human habitation.

* * *

Fourteen years after elders drank tea from salmon and meat tins in Tumutumu, the Nyeri reader Charles Ng'undo wrote to the Kikuyu Central Association's newspaper *Mwigwithania* lamenting the consequences of social disintegration among his people.¹⁹³ People no longer knew how to address each other, he complained: "a man will not speak to his child or a child address his father for want of a sign." Political order was in danger: Gikuyu no longer drank beer to distinguish elders from children, men from boys, males from females. "How is a man to be recognized as an elder nowadays?", asked Ng'undo. Ng'undo answered the troubling question by suggesting that Christians and others

make a feast of very much Food and Tea; and let this feast be given this name--the Festival of the Circumcision Guild. And let them come and eat and drink tea, for such is a Christian feast, in place of the beer of the circumcision guild, so that children may have an opportunity of recognizing their Fathers properly, and so that you Christians may not abandon your clan.

By 1928, readers like Ng'undo could argue that *cai* was a ritual of instruction, a marker of social memory. *Cai* and other marks of readers' civility guarded social order against decay, building new defenses against the prostituting lures of the city and the domestic scorn of children. Theirs was a powerfully conservative agenda, one which, as

¹⁹³KNA DC Machakos 10B/13/1: Charles Ng'undo, "One does not part from one's clan or circumcision guild". in *Mwigwithania* i. (12) (May 1929): 5.

we shall see, enabled readers to work their early prostitution into a moral claim on a new Gikuyu nationalism. It was a nation founded on words, on new technologies of print, on the Word of Protestant Christianity. But as we have seen, readers' nation-of-words began as play with words, as a series of miming engagements with missionary materials.

The passage between mimicry and culture, sly civility to civil sociability was fraught with violence and dislocation. Tumutumu's schools were stripped of students in 1915, when the government began recruiting Gikuyu young men for work in the Carrier Corps. Many returned eager for education: the first "mass movement" to Christianity sprang up in the wake of the war. After the war, too, famine and influenza decimated Gikuyu families.¹⁹⁴ Desperate orphans joined mission schools, seeking bread as much as the Word. But it was also during the war that the younger generation began to pay goats to their elders, marking the beginning of their long redemption of the land.¹⁹⁵ Their cumulative payments added up to *ituika*, the ritual transfer of power from elders to youth by which Gikuyu cleansed the land of its inheritance of pollution.¹⁹⁶ It was this confluence of British and Gikuyu time, and the creative energy that it inspired, that drove Christian readers to work their material ambitions into the stuff of a literate culture.

¹⁹⁴The famine called "Thika" and the subsequent influenza epidemic carried off from 10 to 20 percent of the Gikuyu population, for which *KNA PC CP 4/1/1*: Kenya Province Annual Report 1918-19. See Chapter Three.

¹⁹⁵*KNA DC Nyeri/1/1/2*: Nyeri district annual report, 1926: Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities".

¹⁹⁶For a summary history of *ituika*, Lonsdale, "Moral Economy", 344-46 and 373-75.

Chapter Three

Of Soap and Salvation The ethnic politics of cleanliness in post-war Nyeri

Early one morning in 1921, Monica Muumbi slipped off to school at Magutu, near the Mt. Kenya forest. Daughter to the junior wife of a wealthy polygamist, she was inspired by her brother, who had recently been cured of yaws at the Tumutumu hospital. On arriving at school, the teacher gave her a cotton frock to replace her goatskin dress and a bar of soap to wash the ochre from her head. She proudly remembered herself inducted into a new regime of beauty:

We left the kind of beauty that was there before and embraced a new one of Christianity--one of cleanliness (*utheri*: brightness, fertility). Some of the non-readers said we were not beautiful because we were not using ochre. You know we came from darkness and light was brought with education.¹

This chapter, together with the one that immediately follows, unpack the rhetoric of generational debate among Nyeri Gikuyu during the years immediately following World War One. It was a time of intense, demanding speculation among Gikuyu men and women, driven by nothing less than the burden of death. For after the war, Nyeri district was rocked by a succession of disasters--first famine, then influenza--that killed thousands and left a lingering taint of pollution on the land. How best to deal with the post-war burden of death inspired creative argument among old and young, men and women, Christians and pagans, a "long conversation" structured by Gikuyu expectations of social order. Monica's passage from darkness into an enlightened "beauty of cleanliness" illuminates one, particularly compelling answer to the burden of death. Young men and women hoped that soap would redeem them from pollution. They argued in familial debates and (as I show in the next chapter) in the translated Bible that

¹Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

cotton clothing, modern medicine, and soaped dishes embodied the peace and fertility of *ituika*, generational succession. *Ituika* was an inspiring story, a old tale promising that, if young men paid off discredited elders with fees of livestock, peace and fertility would be restored among people tainted with death. *Ituika* was a home-grown idiom of moral redemption. Youthful readers like Monica seized on its promise, hoping to work their mastery over the substance of missionary culture into a revolutionary claim on Gikuyu politics.

This chapter focuses on the interior structure of Gikuyu ethnic debate, a theme on which later chapters will elaborate. I am trying to reconstruct the rhetoric with which young and old, men and women, made political claims about death, pollution, and, ultimately, the future. My argument is that it was precisely as a rhetoric of ethnic debate that young men and women adopted missionary clothing, food and medicine. John and Jean Comaroff, among other fellow-travelers who locate themselves within the Gramscian tradition, have prepared the ground for my claims with their powerful work on Christianity and colonization in Southern Africa.² As the Comaroffs have shown, colonial power was an everyday process, acted out as much in the exchanges of seemingly innocuous objects like mirrors and combs as in the great moments of conquest and militant resistance. By illuminating the unexpected outcomes of these exchanges, their work makes it impossible to reduce colonialism to a zero-sum game of domination and resistance, or to a mechanically determined process driven by the implacable demands of the economy. Like them, I attend to the everyday play of colonialism, the

²See especially John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Megan Vaughan, *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Indianist scholarship has also developed Gramscian insights: Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a recent critique, see Pier Larson, "Capacities and Modes of Thinking: Intellectual Engagements and Subaltern Hegemony in the Early History of Malagasy Christianity", in *American Historical Review* 102 (4) (1997): 969-1002.

fluidly human arena in which Africans made claims on the substance of European missionaries. But in distinction from their work, I argue that the material marks of modern culture, the bourgeois stuff of cotton clothing and squared houses, were popularized not as a victory of European hegemony but as a desperately Gikuyu experiment meant to bring peace in a troubled land. Driven by the terrible burden of death and pollution after the First World War, called to service by inspiring stories about generational duty, young men argued that foreign substances could embody the peace and fertility of *ituika*. Their elders accused them of being prostitutes: cotton clothing made diligent wives into delinquent whores, alienated from home. Gikuyu arguments over soap were arguments over gendered order; arguments over generational unity and family politics; arguments, finally, over contending answers to the pressing moral problem of social disaster.

The chapter begins by sketching the extent of the moral disaster that afflicted Nyeri Gikuyu in the wake of the Great War. It then moves to explore the different answers that elders and youth proposed to the lingering problem of death. Landlords argued that redemption would come only through family prosperity. Youthful converts, marginal to their homes, could scarcely hope to benefit from family prosperity. Their material interest led them to argue that generational redemption, *ituika*, would restore fertility to a ravaged land. Their claim on generational power divided readers as it brought them together. For some readers sought virtue by family means, buying their way to *mbari* seniority. Others, wage earners with inferior clothing, hoped generational redemption would bring rural democracy. In the final section of the chapter, I show that women used the language of cleansing to forward new claims about marriage and gendered obligation. Men worried that they would become prostitutes, alienated from home. Generational politics was a language of gendered debate, a language with which also to argue about the moral economy of class formation.

* * *

The disasters of the First World War obligated Gikuyu to argue about pollution, fertility and the future. Just before the war, Tumutumu for the first time enjoyed marked growth in school attendance: 605 children attended school in 1915, 350 in seven new outschools built with Gikuyu money. Selling maize to European farmers made peasant farming profitable: the District Commissioner collected a record sum in tax in 1914.³ Only 5.8 percent of the able bodied male population went out for wage work, a testament to farm profitability.⁴ Missionaries were exultant--"not a village but wishes its own school", rejoiced Marion Stevenson--and lamented the shortage of teachers that constrained school expansion.⁵ All save one of the seven new schools were built within a half hour of the Tumutumu station; the majority were constructed on land owned by relations of *Mbari ya Njora*.⁶ Schooling thrived as a family project, paid for by peasant farming.

In 1915 the colonial administration began systematic recruiting in Nyeri for men to fill its Carrier Corps, sent out to lift loads for the British army in German East Africa. War was the drill sergeant of generational politics. For common service under the British inspired young men with a shared history, from which they drew inspirational lessons for the future. Tumutumu's outschools were among the first places the recruiters looked to press-gang carriers.⁷ It was the only mission station in Gikuyuland where readers were pressed into war service early on.⁸ Within a month, only a hundred scholars were left, most of them protected by the missionaries at the central station. Some Gikuyu thought the readers in league with the recruiters: at Murigu's, Solomon Ndambi drew "intense

³KNA PC/CP/1/1/1: Provincial Record Books: "Political History of Kikuyu Province", n.d.

⁴DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri District Annual Report, 1914-15.

⁵Marion Stevenson, "Kenia--Forward or Back?", in *Kikuyu News* 56 (August-Sept. 1915).

⁶Gathigira's, Kiangoma, Kabiro's, and Kibabei's were built at the behest of *Njora* relations.

⁷SA I.A.26: Arthur to Chief Secretary, 6 November 1918.

⁸Compare Karanja. *The Birth of an African Faith*, for the Anglican experience with Carrier Corps recruitment.

anger" when his newly-established school was raided, the recruiters lacing cords through the pierced ears of the scholars and leading them off to war.⁹ But two years later, many volunteered when John Arthur from the southern Presbyterian station at Thogoto called on them to join the Kikuyu Mission Volunteers (KMV), a missionary-officered carrying unit. 250 young men from Nyeri joined, most of them "raw villagers."¹⁰ They feared the more onerous burdens of the ordinary carriers: by 1917, a steady stream of veterans were returning to the reserves, carrying new diseases and telling tales about the horror of the war.¹¹ The KMV marched to war 1,700 strong. Its first lessons, at Mazeras, were about hygiene: the corps spent four weeks cutting the tall grass around the camp, erecting sheds, and learning to put their trash into sacks. It was, Arthur wrote, a sanitary battle; the victory, won with "constant hammering" from officers and "a little selected judicious kibokoing," was in instilling "the necessity for discipline, and the essentialness of being clean."¹² The KMV returned from war having suffered only three percent casualties, a marked contrast to the ordinary Corps, where of the 150,000 men recruited in Kenya, nearly 24,000 perished.¹³ As I shall show below, the young men of the KMV returned confident that soap could save Gikuyu from the disasters of death.

For post-war Gikuyu politics was haunted by the specter of death, embodied in the twinned disasters of famine and influenza. The short rains failed at the end of 1917; families, heavily taxed for government labor during the war, had few reserves of food. Crops dried in the fields; by the beginning of 1918 the reserve, wrote Philp, looked like a desert.¹⁴ Government imported maize from South Africa and sold it at the railhead in

⁹Philp, "Nyeri", in *Kikuyu News* 70 (Oct. 1919); Mary Wanyoike, *Karatina: Economic changes and their impact on the economic activities of Mathira Division, Nyeri District, Kenya, 1902-1963* (M.A. thesis, University of Nairobi, 1991), 62.

¹⁰SA I/A/25: Arthur to MacLachlan, 2 May 1917.

¹¹SA I/J/2: Philp, Kenya Province medical report, 1916.

¹²Arthur, in *Kikuyu News* 64 (August-Oct. 1917).

¹³Annual report, 1918, in *Kikuyu News* 69 (July 1919); MacPherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: Presbyterian Church of East Africa, 1970), 68.

¹⁴SA I/J/2: Philp, Nyeri government report, 1918.

Thika, 50 miles south, at 6 times the cost of home-grown maize.¹⁵ The cattle-rich had little difficulty: elderly informants remembered that they survived by drinking the milk and blood of their stock.¹⁶ Those with waged employment, too, could afford to purchase rice and maize to feed their families. Cecilia Mugaki's father, an early reader, purchased a sack of rice with his mission wages, together with sorghum and millet, and moved his family to Chuka to escape thieves.¹⁷ There, Cecilia remembered, "we did not hunger."

But children, women, and the livestock-poor had little recourse. They boiled seeds from a grass called *wangara* that grew in the emptied fields.¹⁸ Their children suffered diarrhea as a result.¹⁹ Others cooked banana suckers.²⁰ Both were meals of desperation. Missionaries at Tumutumu provided some relief: they daily fed some 400 women and old people with 3/4 pound of maize meal per person, but turned away from 40 to 80 starving people each day.²¹ The Scots reported that thousands were like "living skeletons."²² Some of the hungry left their dried-up land and migrated to the Rift Valley, there to work on settler farms. Songs promised beans in Njoro, and enjoined the hungry to seek out sweet-potatoes on Masai land.²³ Other hungry men and women walked the long road to Thika; many died along the way.

Mwati wa Kiruba, a herdsboy for a cattle-rich farmer during the famine, remembered the time in this way:

I was very hungry. In the hunger of Thika there could not be anything to cook. There was only the Hombe greens. There were about 2,000 women who would go

¹⁵Allen, "Famine", in *Kikuyu News* 68 (Oct.-Dec. 1918).

¹⁶Oral interviews: Mwati wa Kiruba; Edwin Baro.

¹⁷Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki* (unpublished ms. in possession of Cecilia Muthoni, Tumutumu).

¹⁸For *wangara*, T.G. Benson, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 1964), 560.

¹⁹SA I/J/1 and 3: Philp, "Report on the health of the natives in Nyeri district", April-August 1918.

²⁰Oral interview, Daudi Ndiangui.

²¹SA I/A/26: Charlie Jones to Arthur, 21 July 1918.

²²SA I/J/2: Nyeri surgeoncy report, 1918.

²³Tabiatha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau* (London: James Currey, 1987), 23-24 for the song "I cannot continue to eat maize only, when there is a surplus of beans at Njoro".

to pick greens. I used to be left at home and would get hungry. The hunger stayed for years. Only those with cows or goats had better children...my mother had to stop making pottery and go and look for greens. Later, some maize was found in Thika. It was brought by the whites. People used to go to Thika to get it. People used to die on the road.²⁴

The trip to Thika was a terrifying experience. Charles Muhoro, then a student at boarding school at Tumutumu, first went to Thika together with a group of other students sent to bring up maize for the relief feeding. He remembered turning over the corpses of the dead when clearing bush beside the road to set up the missionaries' tent.²⁵ On a second trip, this to buy food for his hungry parents, his sister fell ill from malaria and malnourishment along the way. In desperation, Muhoro made porridge from grass seeds. His sister recovered. Later, Muhoro called the *wangara* "manna in the wilderness." His description made the Thika road into the wilderness of Sinai. Others thought the road bewitched: famine looked like an attempt by the wealthy to get land through sorcery.²⁶

The famine was quickly followed by another malady, influenza, that left the land open for the greedily wealthy. The flu was part of the worldwide pandemic that began in Spain early in 1918, reached Bombay by September and, over the course of four months, killed at least 12 to 14 million Indians, most of them lower caste younger men and women. Birthrates were depressed for years afterward.²⁷ On 23 September a ship from Bombay put into Mombasa, on Kenya's coast. Within weeks the disease had reached Nairobi.²⁸ Ex-carriers from Nyeri, sent to Nairobi to collect their war medals, contracted the disease and brought it to Tumutumu.²⁹ Days later, three Scots missionaries and 104

²⁴Oral interview, Mwati wa Kiruba.

²⁵Charles Muhoro, *Muoyo wa Charles Muhoro wa Kareri* (unpublished ms. held by Muthoni Mwhaki, Tumutumu).

²⁶SA I/J/1 and 3: Philp, "Report on the health of the natives in Nyeri district", April-August 1918.

²⁷I.D. Mills, "The 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic--The Indian Experience", in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23 (1986): 1-40.

²⁸c.f. Marc Dawson. *Socio-Economic and Epidemiological Change in Kenya, 1880-1925* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1983), Ch. 3.

²⁹SA I/J/2: Philp, "Spanish Influenza at Tumutumu", 17 November 1918.

boarders were ill. The disease swept through the region, killing men and women already weak from famine. Medical dressers trained at Tumutumu opened dispensaries--ten in the course of a few months--to combat the disease.³⁰ But by December, Philp reported that "the total population is either convalescent or dead." Corpses lay untouched in all directions, ignored by overfed hyenas.³¹ They made the air stink.³² A few missionaries imagined the disasters foretold the nearness of the Lord's return.³³ For most Gikuyu, influenza promised no such happy ending. Some 17,000 people, from 10 to 20 percent of the total population in Nyeri, perished from influenza alone. Many were young men recently returned from war.³⁴

War and its attendant disasters were the pressure cooker of Gikuyu debate over death, pollution and fertility in the early 1920s. More than demographic disaster, famine and influenza were moral problems. They left a taint of death over the land, cursing the living and marring hopes for a fertile future. How best to deal with the burden of the 1918-19 disasters made young men and old, and men and women, argue over competing ethnic strategies of moral redemption. As I show below, landed men argued that family progress was the best answer to polluting death. Prosperity restored progeny in *mbari* thought. And landlords had good evidence: after the war, commodity prices soared, making family farming profitable and allowing landlords to expand cultivation. Their profits came at the expense of the land-poor, some disenfranchised during the famine, others lacking the capital to invest in the commodity trade. Young men, desperate for words and means to argue with their dictatorial elders, maintained that generational solidarity, not *mbari* progress, would redeem Gikuyu polity from death. They thought themselves obligated, as a generation, to purchase common peace and fertility through

³⁰SA I/J/2: Philp to Provincial Medical Officer, 3 December 1918.

³¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu Medical Report, 1919.

³²Stevenson, "The problem--labourers", in *Kikuyu News* 76 (May 1921).

³³SA I/A/26: Philp to Arthur, 28 November 1918.

³⁴SA I/J/2: Tumutumu Medical Report, 1918; KNA VQ/16/50: South Nyeri district annual report, 1918-19.

ituika, the mythical handing-over by which a younger generation bought government from elders and cleansed the land of pollution. Young men gave shape to *ituika* by investing in missionary materials. They speculated on soap, cotton clothing and fried food, arguing that missionary materials embodied a new regime of fertility. The burden of death spurred vigorous Gikuyu arguments over private virtue and public redemption, inspiring young men and women's gambles on the substance of missionary culture.

***Mbari* politics after the war: Progeny through Property?**

Famine and influenza were a disaster for Nyeri families. But not all suffered equally. For some wealthy cattle-holders, the post-war disasters, followed quickly by a boom in commodity prices, were an opportunity to forward land consolidation at the expense of hungry tenants. They built mission schools on land claimed from tenants, hoping to convert Christian commitment into legal proof of ownership in colonial courts. Landholders' ambitions fed a post-war "revival" of Christian interest. Mission-educated teachers and clerks benefited, and used post-war wage inflation to convert cash into a productive investment in land. Uneducated men, whose earnings climbed but little after the war, invested episodically in schooling, hoping to work into higher-paying jobs by staging their learning. Landlords met the post-war burden of death by promising that property would restore fertile lineages. But *mbari* expansion equally laid the basis for the class formation that would later divide Gikuyu from within.

Famine and influenza allowed some livestock-wealthy families to expand their landholdings at the expense of their hungry relatives. The British had closed off the northern frontier of Gikuyu expansion in 1910, turning Laikipia--formerly Masai territory--into settler plantations and Nyandarua and Mount Kenya into forest reserves. The land had been used by wealthy men to graze their cattle--and British inattention meant that, even after 1910, Gikuyu cattle still grazed on Masai grass to the north. But as

early as 1915, chiefs and other cattle-wealthy men complained of a lack of grazing land.³⁵ In 1918, the British insisted that Gikuyu cattle return to the reserves.³⁶ Rustling increased: it may have been difficult for wealthy men to hide their stock from the jealous eyes of neighbors.³⁷ Lacking sufficient pasture to hold their stock, cattle-wealthy men parlayed their excess livestock into claims on the land of hungry relatives. Several informants remembered that the cattle-wealthy gave poor relations milk cattle in exchange for land during the famine.³⁸ Edwin Baro's mother, for example, died during the famine; his father, incapacitated with flu, was unable to feed the children. Baro himself went to Tumutumu to become a boarder, and later worked a houseboy for a prosperous reader. His father, lacking livestock, exchanged land for the loan of cattle from a wealthy relative. It was a relationship of dependency that blurred the lines between tenancy and kinship, played out in numerous straightened families during the upsets of 1918. The DC worried lest the wealthy take advantage of the poor and till their land without recompense.³⁹ Later, in the mid-1920s, the family livestock-for-land deals agreed on during the famine would become the stuff of public debate, as *mbari* landlords sought to refine their hold on clan land in colonial courts.

But the cattle-wealthy were not the only ones who traded on the famine to forward land expansion. Tumutumu's readers, protected by their wages, seem to have parlayed cash, and missionary patronage, into expanded claims on unused land. Many were like Gathigira wa Mwema, members of junior lineages, or children of dependent *ahoi*. Ambitious pioneers, Gathigira and his dependents had settled on the edge of the Mt. Kenya forest in the early 1900s--but were forced out in 1912 when the forest edge was

³⁵KNA PC/CP/1/1/1: Minutes of meeting of administration and elders in Nyeri, 31 December 1915.

³⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/4/3: McClure, "Grazing for alienated stock on alienated lands", 1 January 1917; M.P. Cowen, "Notes on agricultural labour in a Kenya location", in *Development Trends in Kenya* (Edinburgh: African Studies Program, 1972), 39-69.

³⁷Cases of stock theft rose from 3 in 1917 to 27 in 1918 and 22 in 1919. KNA VQ/16/50: Nyeri district annual report, 1918-19.

³⁸Oral interviews: Daudi Ndiangui; Edwin Baro; Susan Kirigu Njebwara; Mwati wa Kiruba.

³⁹KNA VQ/16/50: Nyeri district annual report, 1918-19.

demarcated.⁴⁰ Years later, his son would movingly remember before the Carter Land Commission how his houses had been burned, his cattle loosed in the reserves, the crops left to be eaten by wild animals. Turned from pioneers into tenants of *mbari* landlords near Tumutumu, Gathigira sent three of his sons to Tumutumu to train as artisans before the war. During the war, he laid claim to part of the unoccupied land on the northern base of Tumutumu Hill.⁴¹ It was a plot of some 600 acres, left vacant for pasturage. Gathigira planted maize and beans, later wattle and cypress, hoping to prove his claim to the land through diligent investment in long-standing crops. He buttressed his argument by sponsoring a Scots school on the land. Philp thought him "one of the most progressive native elders in this district," and defended his claim when the original landholders sought to reclaim the land during the land crisis of the mid-1920s.⁴² Gathigira's prosperous sons, years later, would become leaders of the Tumutumu-based Progressive Kikuyu Party and advocate for permanent freehold title for progressive farmers. Investment in mission schooling propped up upstart claims on unused land, bringing missionaries around to support ambitious *ahoi*.

Readers' and landlords' hopes for *mbari* progress were fed by post-war commodity profits. Kenya's settler economy recovered rapidly in the brief post-war boom. Pressed for cheap labor, settlers relied on coercion, not higher wages, to contract unskilled agricultural workers. Unskilled workers earned some 5 to 6 rupees per month working on settler farms in northern Nyeri in 1920--only a marginal increase over the 4 to 5 rupees they had earned in 1912.⁴³ But by 1920, a small sector of the waged work force, estimated by Gavin Kitching to amount to 10 percent for Kenya as a whole, began to earn

⁴⁰Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence and Memoranda, volume 1* (London: HMSO, 1934): evidence of Stanley Kiama Gathigira, 102-4.

⁴¹SA I/A/38: Philp to DC, 25 March 1925.

⁴²SA I/E/10: Philp to DC, 13 February 1925.

⁴³KNA PC/CP 4/1/1: Kenia province annual report, 1918-19; Cowen, "Differentiation in a Kenya Location" (Nairobi: East African Universities Social Science Council, 1972).

wages substantially higher, and sometimes dramatically higher, than unskilled workers.⁴⁴ In 1915, the highest paid senior teachers at Tumutumu earned Rs 18 per month; in 1922, trained teachers got 58/ (Rs 29), while untrained teachers earned 18/ (Rs. 9).⁴⁵ Skilled workers, trained as masons or carpenters at Tumutumu, earned comparable wages on European plantations.⁴⁶ They invested their earnings in agricultural production at home, hoping to turn ephemeral cash into landed reputation.⁴⁷ Many, like Gathigira, cleared unused *mbari* land on ridgetops or river basins to produce new, profitable crops. Some planted wattle when, in 1921, government issued seeds to chiefs, headmen, and through missionaries to select *athomi*.⁴⁸ Others planted vegetables, introducing new crops like European potatoes to the older crop mix. It was a profitable enterprise: pushed by settler demand, vegetable staples in Nyeri shot up in price in the early 1920s. Bananas, for instance, cost 2 cents in 1916 for 30; in 1920 they cost 10 cents. Sweet potatoes increased from 2 to 3 cents for one; sugar cane, used to brew the beer of elders' respectability, increased from 2 cents for 2 sticks in 1916 to 5 cents for a somewhat lesser amount in 1920.⁴⁹ Maize, grown for sale to settlers, cost 2 cents for a "large measure" in 1916; in 1920, 7 pounds cost 12 cents. The post-war boom fed peasant profitability, and demanded new innovation of landholders, especially readers. As monogamists, readers lacked family labor to work the new crops. Pressed for workers, Tumutumu readers introduced wage labor to the reserves in the early 1920s, paying junior relatives or others

⁴⁴Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 254; 263-69.

⁴⁵SA I/A/19: Barlow to MacLachlan, 7 April 1915; SA I/E/10: "Tumutumu post-apprentice wages", Oct.-Dec. 1922.

⁴⁶SA I/J/1 & 3: Philp to Director of Education, 27 May 1920.

⁴⁷Cowen, "Notes on Agricultural Wage Labour on a Kenya Location", in *Development Trends in Kenya* (Edinburgh: African Studies Program, 1972), 39-59.

⁴⁸c.f. Cowen, *Wattle Production in Central Province: Capital and Household Commodity Production, 1903-1964* (unpublished mss., July 1975).

⁴⁹Price date for Nyeri district compares KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/3: District Record Book, entry for 1916, with KNA PC/CP/6/4/2: DC Nyeri to PC, 11 November 1920.

to weed and harvest crops.⁵⁰ In Kirimukuyu location, informants remember working for *athomi* relatives as gardeners or herdsboys.⁵¹ It was a new innovation, one that marked out incipient lines of class formation within *mbari*.

Not all profited from the post-war commodity boom. Young men unconnected with the mission were forced out to work for settlers by chiefs and the District Commissioner, empowered by a series of wartime ordinances to demand up to 60 days of work from able bodied men. The height of the state's involvement in labor recruiting came in 1919-21, when the "Northley Labor Circulars" directed state officials to forcibly recruit Gikuyu for estate work.⁵² Adherents of missions were generally exempt from this coerced recruiting. At Murigu's school, readers wore special badges and red blankets to signal their identity to chiefs.⁵³ Marion Stevenson worried that the poorer among them would be unable to afford the new attire.⁵⁴ They were obliged to perform communal work--maintaining the road in front of the school--for only two days per month and were not recruited for estate labor. Some readers hoped to turn their special status into patronage: they claimed exemptions for relatives "near and far", wrote the frustrated D.C.⁵⁵ Non-readers could hope for no such protection. They went out to work *en masse*, preferring profitable voluntary labor to the low wages of Nyeri's settlers. In 1920 wage workers earned 700,000/- outside the district and only 125,000/- for work within Nyeri.⁵⁶ The settler recession of 1921-22 set back wage earnings, but by 1923 missionary observers could report that wages had "stabilized."⁵⁷ An average of 40 percent of able-bodied Nyeri men went out to work during the boom decade of the 1920s.

⁵⁰Cowen, "Notes on Agricultural Wage Labor".

⁵¹Oral interviews: Edwin Baro, Mwati wa Kiruba.

⁵²c.f. Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 144-49.

⁵³KNA DC/Nyeri/1/4/3: McClure, meeting at CSM Tumutumu, 4 December 1917.

⁵⁴KNA PC/CP 8/5/2: Stevenson to McClure, 17 November 1917.

⁵⁵KNA PC/CP 4/1/1: Nyeri district annual report, 1919-20.

⁵⁶KNA PC/CP 4/1/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1920-21.

⁵⁷SA I/B/7: Annual Report, Tumutumu, 1923.

Forced to work by a settler-controlled colonial state made desperate at its "labor crisis," manual workers mixed wage work with schooling in hopes of earning higher-paying jobs. They went to school episodically, using their earnings to fund bouts of school-going while at home planting on family farms. Wage work had its rhythms: male workers in the early 1920s consistently returned home from January to March to plant for the long rains, and returned home again in October for planting for the short rains.⁵⁸ The rhythm domesticated wage work, marrying the regime of cash earning with the local respectability of agricultural production. The same rhythm allowed some men to invest in education when at home from work. Outschool enrollments expanded dramatically, doubling from 1918 to 1919 and doubling again from 1919 to 20.⁵⁹ Young adults, and especially young men, comprised some 70 percent of the attendees.⁶⁰ They mixed schooling at home with wage or farm work away from home. The Mihuti outschool, for instance, was populated by wage workers from the Stanley Hotel in Nairobi, who returned home periodically to plant and attend school in the mornings.⁶¹ Missionaries worried that numerous other wage workers learned illicitly, in "little primitive schools," while planting on the reserves. Tumutumu's schools in the early 1920s were regularly emptied once upper level pupils had reached the sixth month of Standard II: having learned to read, most left to take high paying jobs as clerks for European planters.⁶² Missionaries lamented that of 3000 pupils attending school in 1924, very few had attended continuously for two years.⁶³ Schooling was for men a carefully-staged strategy of investment in an increasingly differentiated wage economy.

⁵⁸KNA VQ/16/49: Annual Report, Nyeri district, 1917-18.

⁵⁹SA I/C/1: Annual Reports, Tumutumu mission, 1918, 19, and 20.

⁶⁰SA I/B/7: Tumutumu school report, 1922; SA I/Z/8 and 9: Stevenson, "Evidence to the Education Commission of the East Africa Protectorate", 1919.

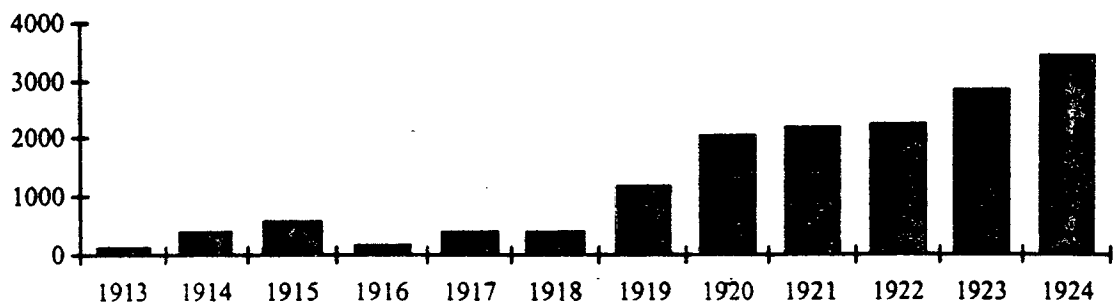
⁶¹SA I/E/5: Philp to DE, 13 May 1925.

⁶²SA I/E/10: Stevenson to Tate, 27 December 1919; SA I/J/1 and 3: Philp to DE, 27.5.20.

⁶³SA I/E/4: Philp to DE, 25.8.24.

The expansion of Presbyterian schooling and the growth in the wage economy reinforced one other during the early 1920s. The communion roll expanded from 252 in 1921 to 348 in 1922, reaching 486 in 1923.⁶⁴ Tumutumu's converts formed a Kirk Session in 1920, signaling the beginning of African church leadership.⁶⁵ The first Gikuyu Presbyterian pastors were ordained in 1926. The hospital similarly enjoyed new popularity during the early 1920s: attendance more than doubled in 1919, doubled again in 1920, and doubled again by 1921.⁶⁶ Exultant missionaries thought themselves "in the early days of a mass movement of a great tribe toward education, and as education is almost entirely in the hands of missionaries in this country, toward the Gospel."⁶⁷

Chart 1: Attendance in Tumutumu schools, 1913-1924



Sources: Annual Reports, in SA I/C/1; I/B/7.

But Gikuyu were not of one mind in this first mass movement of Christian interest. They embraced divergent hopes for the future, and gambled on schooling for different reasons. *Mbari* landlords, committed to redeeming the land through property, hoped that schooling would prop up family profits. They learned from *Mbari ya Njora*, the clan that had, in 1908, given the land to Arthur and Scott. In 1926 three of the first

⁶⁴SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual reports, 1922 and 1923.

⁶⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu report for April 1920 to March 1921.

⁶⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu hospital reports, 1919-20; 1921-22.

⁶⁷SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1919-20.

five ministers ordained at Tumutumu were *Njora* men.⁶⁸ Hoping similarly to turn Christianity into family reputation, landlords in the early 1920s financed rural “outschools” for the instruction of their children. The first outschool at a distance from Tumutumu, near the Mt. Kenya forest at Magutu, was sponsored by the then recently-appointed Chief Murigu in 1916.⁶⁹ It was on the frontier of Gikuyu expansion: ambitious pioneers from Iriaini, near Tumutumu, were clearing the land and using it as pasturage for cattle.⁷⁰ Some remember that the school was built on a dancing ground, left vacant for public festivals.⁷¹ Others think it was land vacated by a landholding *mbari* decimated during the famine.⁷² School buildings legitimated chiefs’ ambitious claims on land. More, they extended *mbari* patronage. Murigu called up female *corvee* labor to construct the school building: elderly women remember marching to Kagati, in the forest, to collect bark and grass for the school.⁷³ Most of the first attendees, however, were men, younger relatives of Murigo.⁷⁴ They learned profitable skills: of the first six graduates, two became carpenters and four worked as teachers.⁷⁵ Murigu appears to have adopted the first teacher, Solomon Ndambi, making the school into a family matter.⁷⁶ Schooling allowed livestock-owning *mbari* lords to convert stock into social capital. The first generation of scholars, remembered one old woman, were “those whose fathers had goats.”⁷⁷ Goats could be sold to pay for school uniforms, worn eagerly by *athomi* seeking

⁶⁸Oral interviews: Hosea Munene; Kariuki Muturi and Joseph Muthee Muriuki; Christopher Waruiru, *The Female Initiation Controversy at CSM Tumutumu, 1912-1937* (BA thesis, University of Nairobi, 31 March 1971).

⁶⁹SA I/A/24: Stevenson to Arthur, 2 February 1917; SA I/Z/6: Station Log Books, entry for 24 April 1929.

⁷⁰Oral interviews: John Muriuki; Ngunu wa Huthu.

⁷¹Oral interview: Daniel Muriithi.

⁷²Oral interview: Ngunu wa Huthu. The permit for the school, registered in 1919, lists Maitho Wathia as “githaka owner” (KNA DC/Nyeri/1/4/3: Permit for Magutu school, 24 April 1919). I was unable to locate anyone who remembered this individual.

⁷³Oral interview: Susan Kirigu Njebwara.

⁷⁴Hamilton, “An Epistle of the Primitive Church”, in *Kikuyu News* 64 (August-October 1917).

⁷⁵TT Magutu Parish file: “Rugano rua Church wa Magutu kuuma 1916 nginya 1966”, n.d.

⁷⁶Philp, “Nyeri”, in *Kikuyu News* 70 (Oct. 1919).

⁷⁷Oral interview: Susan Kirigu Njebwara.

protection from government labor recruiters.⁷⁸ It was a convenient arrangement for *mbari* seeking protection for their sons: during the war, enrollments at Murigu's more than trebled.⁷⁹ After the war, Murigu's became the first outschool to boast of intermediate level classes.⁸⁰

Mbari calculation made post-war schooling into a matter of familial patronage, financing the rapid growth of churches and outschools. But young school-goers, worried at elders' power and driven by the disasters of the late 1910s, saw a different future in missionary schooling. They argued that the redemption of Christ, and the soap they used at mission schools, made for the fertility and cleanliness of *ituika*, generational succession. As I show below, youthful readers hoped to convert their soap into salvation: they sought to make new standards of missionary cleanliness into a rhetorical claim on Gikuyu political redemption. They openly tested old rules about pollution, courting *thahu* (ritual pollution) by sleeping in graveyards and burying dead relatives. These were dramatic assertions that Christ's redemption freed them from the old law. By playing with *thahu*, young converts hoped to prove themselves subjects of a new social order, a generation-in-waiting, cleansed of the burden of death by the blood of Christ and by the cotton clothing of missionary schools. Missionary clothing, hygiene and medicine became a rhetoric of generational debate, a bodily polemic arguing that soap could redeem the land from death.

Proving *ituika* Medicine, soap and the rhetoric of generational debate

The history of *ituika* is difficult to reconstruct, probably because it was less a linear process with an institutional past and more an idea, a means by which an intensely local culture argued about the exercise of broader public power. Its historians agree that

⁷⁸KNA PC/CP 8/5/2: Stevenson to McClure, 17 November 1917.

⁷⁹Tumutumu annual report, 1918, in *Kikuyu News* 68 (July 1919).

⁸⁰SA I/A/38: Philp to Champion, 26 January 1926.

it was a religious festival that converted private wealth into public peace, cleanliness and fertility.⁸¹ *Ituika* seems to have taken place several times in the 19th century, often in the midst of famine or some other disaster.⁸² Young men paid livestock fees to *mbari* elders discredited by disaster, purchasing government and redeeming the land from the overwhelming weight of sorcery and pollution accumulated during famine. Young men's investment of wealth ushered in a new reign of peace and fertility, called *utheri*. Where famine brought pollution and death, *utheri* was "bright", "clean", "clear", even "cheerful" and "lighthearted" in the words of an early dictionary.⁸³ Gikuyu moral thought was highly dualistic about fertility. Peace demanded hard work, sacrifice and virtue of young men. The dragon, *ndamathia*, that hallowed *ituika* brought the point home. If representatives of the incoming generation were to take power from their elders, they had to tame the monster of power and pluck its tail hairs to adorn the lodge in which the lore of generational power was passed on from elders to youth. *Ndamathia* could be seduced, not forced, out of its river-pool home with gifts of roasted meat and honey beer, and by the sight of a beautiful girl. Intoxicated, *ndamathia* was to be convinced to arise out of the river-pools and allow its hairs to be plucked. *Ituika* taught Gikuyu that the dragon of politics was unpredictable, tamed only with creativity and virtuous investments of property.

The famine and disasters of World War I led young converts to make creative investments in *ituika*. They began paying goats to their elders in 1922, when missionaries noted that the exchanges were going on "continually" throughout the year.⁸⁴ A few

⁸¹ Among the more useful accounts of *ituika* are C.W. Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1922), 98-99; Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938), 189-194; Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 22-24; and particularly Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (Oxford: James Currey Press, 1997), 277-280, and Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau", 344-46 and 373-75.

⁸² A point owed to John Lonsdale, "Moral Economy", 346; and Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below*, 277-80.

⁸³ Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 202-3.

⁸⁴ SA I/A/38: Steveson to Wade, Chief Native Commissioner, 12 August 1922.

Anglicans in Kabare balked, worried that the goats would be used for "pagan sacrifices".⁸⁵ Tumutumu readers felt no such scruple. They paid the goats, upbraiding the Anglicans by their example.⁸⁶ By 1925 the Nyeri African District Council, a body of chiefs and readers appointed by the British, ruled that all young men of the missions should pay *ituika* goats.⁸⁷ Some goats were killed and eaten by elders before the watching District Commissioner, their fat poured at the foot of a fig tree. Clerks kept careful track of who had paid.⁸⁸ They were called *mburi ya irungu*, the "goats of straightening."⁸⁹ *Ituika's* investments promised to straighten out Gikuyu politics, blighted by elders' corruption and the pollution of war.

The early 1920s were for young men a time of speculation on politics and the moral authority of leadership. Obligated by the burden of death and disaster, young readers thought themselves on the cusp of a new social and political order, an order birthed through their virtuous investment in *ituika*. Post-war successes in missionary medicine stoked readers' polemical claims that a new order of peace and fertility was at hand. Galyl, a new drug that ameliorated the worst signs of yaws, proved that missionary hygiene could embody fertility and restore health among suffering people. Healing was a rhetoric of generational struggle. Yaws, an endemic disease in central Kenya, caused extreme ulceration of the face, erosion of the palate, nose, and appendages, and in an advanced stage attacked the bones, crippling its victims.⁹⁰ Philp thought fully half the population of young men in Nyeri disabled, most from yaws.⁹¹ Gikuyu called it *mucari*, from the verb "burst open, spill out."⁹² The bursting ulcers and blood of yaws polluted

⁸⁵KNA DC/Nyeri/1/7/3: Champion, "Inquiry", 24 November 1924.

⁸⁶c.f. evidence of Njagga wa Kioko, in KNA DC/Nyeri/1/7/3: Champion, "Inquiry", 24 November 1924.

⁸⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1925.

⁸⁸SA VE/10: African District Council meeting, 6 July 1925.

⁸⁹For *mburi ya irungu*, see SA VZ/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1933, entry for 6 May.

⁹⁰SA VJ/2: Philp, District Surgeon Report, 1915; c.f. Dawson, *Socio-economic and epidemiological change in Kenya*, Ch. 4.

⁹¹SA VJ/2: Philp, "The Labour Problem in Kenya Province", 24 August 1918.

⁹²Benson, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 49.

the healthy: yaws patients at Tumutumu had to be kept separate from the other patients. But missionaries before the war could do little to alleviate their suffering: they only salved the sores with potassium iodide, a uncertain cure that took months to effect.⁹³ Early language exams evidence the extent of the problem, and the sense of futility that missionaries brought to it. "Where are you ill? I have an ulcer on my leg," practiced missionaries only six months in the field in 1913.⁹⁴ Two years' candidates were expected to say "wash this ulcer and bind him up."⁹⁵ But there were no sentences of commendation, no sense of rejoicing, in missionary talk about yaws. Successes were few, too few to mention.

In 1917 the Tumutumu doctors began administering a French formulation of a German drug called Galyl.⁹⁶ It was delivered via injection, most often by African dressers at Tumutumu's outdispensaries. The results, attested Irvine in 1919, were remarkable: patients came with "the most disgusting sights with ulcers" and went away cured with one or two injections.⁹⁷ Patients flocked to dispensaries to be injected: hospital attendance soared in the early 1920s. In 1922, at the height of the Galyl revival, Tumutumu dressers administered over 100,000 injections.⁹⁸ Missionaries charged more than £1 per treatment; hospital finances for the first time began to show profit. In 1922, the hospital earned £1788 from Galyl alone.⁹⁹ Philp thought that the day was near when the hospital would no longer require outside funding, only shipments of Galyl.¹⁰⁰ It looked like a revival to the missionaries, who preached to the crowds gathered at the

⁹³For histories of yaws treatments in Africa, see T. Ranger, "Godly Medicine: the Ambiguities of Medical Mission in Southeastern Tanzania, 1900-1945", in S. Feierman and J. Janzen eds., *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* (1992), 256-82; John Iliffe, *East African Doctors: A History of the Modern Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8-9, 40-41.

⁹⁴SA I/K/6: "Six month exam", June 1913.

⁹⁵SA I/K/6: "Two year's paper", Sept. 1910.

⁹⁶SA I/J/2: Nyeri medical report, 1917.

⁹⁷SA I/J/1 and 3: Tumutumu Medical Report, 1919.

⁹⁸SA I/B/7: Tumutumu hospital report, Oct. 1921-Sept. 1922.

⁹⁹TT "Estimates" file: Estimate for 1923.

¹⁰⁰SA I/J/1 and 3: Tumutumu Medical Report, 1919.

hospital. African dispensers, too, preached the Gospel with Galyl: at Mihuti the dispenser began the day's injections with a sermon and prayer, preaching to "old men and women, and young ones too, who would never have come to school."¹⁰¹ Some Gikuyu were impatient, and failed to return for the second injection of the drug.¹⁰² It sometimes took weeks for the sores to heal, and many had little time to wait in outdispensaries. Others looked for a quicker cure: late in 1922 three ex-hospital apprentices stole a quantity of Galyl from the hospital and dispensed it in Ukambani, drawing large crowds for treatment.¹⁰³ All three had been dismissed in March for consorting with Harry Thuku, who (as I describe below) seems to have thought himself the embodiment of generational politics. The Galyl thieves demanded sheep, the incoming generation's payment to elders, in return for the drug. Did the Galyl revival finance young men's speculation on *ituika*?

Galyl certainly stoked *ituika* aspirations among some ambitious readers, for medicine suddenly seemed to promise redemption from yaws and the accumulated domestic pollution of famine and influenza. They argued openly that missionary medicine and hygiene would redeem the land from death. Francis Kibugu enrolled in school in 1922, at the height of the Galyl revival. He remembered being drawn to school by the songs of Samsoni, hospital attendant and sometime schoolteacher:

Those who sang were early readers. They used to sing that there is a good place. He sang this on the road and while looking after cattle. He used to sing that in heaven it is all happiness and there is no death there.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu medical report, 1919-20.

¹⁰²SA I/J/1 and 3: Irvine, Tumutumu Hospital Report, 31 January 1920.

¹⁰³SA I/B/7: Philp to Arthur, 26 October 1922.

¹⁰⁴Oral interview: Francis Kibugu. Charles Kareri similarly remembered being sung into the mission, for which c.f. Brian McIntosh, "The Scottish Mission in Kenya, 1891-1923" (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 1969), 243.

The Galyl revival looks like the cutting edge of generational debates over cleanliness, hygiene, and health. Emboldened by the new success of missionary medicine, called to public service by the dragon of *ituika*, readers like Samsoni thought themselves on the leading cusp of a new moral order. They eagerly sought to prove that soap freed them from the old law of death. Readers courted pollution, *thahu*, to prove their new cleanliness. John Muriuki, for example, was called home from school in the mid 1920s at the death of his grandmother.¹⁰⁵ Working without the assistance of relatives, he dug the grave, wrapped the body in cloth, and placed it in the grave. He remembered that a few relatives assisted by throwing dirt into the grave. They were later cleansed by elders, but Muriuki refused. He explained himself in this way.

When Christianity came from Tumutumu, cleanliness (*utheri*) was started as we came to know about it. It was the mission people who started the idea of burying the dead. They brought the light and we learnt from them. When I was burying my grandmother, people would not come to help me, they feared being caught by *thahu*. Even after I buried her, my mother wanted a ceremony to be performed but I didn't want that.

Burying dead relatives was a public performance of readers' argument that missionary hygiene made for the cleanliness and fertility of *utheri*. Such burials were also very material interventions into *mbari* politics. For burying relatives made direct claims on the ownership of *mbari* land.¹⁰⁶ In Tumutumu and elsewhere, burials made *mbari* landlords nervous: too many tenants under the soil made it difficult to prove title to clan land. At least some readers converted their eager testing of *thahu* into profit: they hired themselves out for burials, prompting the Kirk Session at the southern station of Thogoto to bar them from taking a fee for their work in 1920.¹⁰⁷ Junior *mbari* members and ambitious *ahoi* were eager to turn Christian redemption into domestic profit.

¹⁰⁵ Oral interview: John Muriuki.

¹⁰⁶ A point learned from John Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau", 377-78.

¹⁰⁷ SA I/B/4: Kirk Session of Kikuyu, 22 October 1920.

Readers' hopes that missionary hygiene would birth *ituika*'s cleanliness sketched out the lines of a long debate between landlords and tenants, young and old. It is important to recognize that this debate was highly fluid: *ituika* was more an idea than an institution, and Gikuyu politics were never simply reduced to arguments over age and generation. Gikuyu politics was parochial, shaped by the local evidence of reputation, of fertile households. The highly parochial nature of Gikuyu politics made it difficult for anyone, even the most committed readers, to see themselves as sharing a generational identity with young men from other regions in Gikuyuland. Besides, Tumutumu readers were divided from within, over propertied interest. As I mentioned above, some converts were more invested in *mbari* progress than in generational unity. Convinced that family property made for a fertile progeny, landed readers were more inclined to side with polygamous elders than with impoverished young men over matters of political interest.¹⁰⁸ Harry Thuku brought Tumutumu readers' divisions home. Later the first hero of Kenyan nationalism, Thuku's subclan was in the early 1920s involved in a lengthy court case with another *mbari* over chiefship in Kiambu. Thuku hoped to turn parochial interest into wider politics: he held mass meetings throughout Gikuyuland in 1921-22 and demanded the vote for all educated citizens. The readers of the CMS station at Kahuhia, Thuku's rural Murang'a base, hailed him as Moses. Others thought him *ndamathia*, the rainbow dragon whose tail hairs hallowed *ituika*.¹⁰⁹ When Thuku came to Nyeri's Gakindu market for a meeting in March, his supporters called themselves, in Swahili, "the unity of Tumutumu" and appealed for readers to come and hear "how the whites slander Harry Thuku and keep secrets together with the chiefs of Kikuyu."¹¹⁰ Thuku called young men to a new politics of generational dissent, posing youthful virtue against chiefly corruption.

¹⁰⁸c.f. a 1922 debate over poll tax, in which Solomon Ndambi and other landed readers sided with polygamous older men against junior readers, in SA 1/C/7: Stevenson to Arthur, 29 November 1922.

¹⁰⁹I owe this connection to Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau", 369-71.

¹¹⁰SA 1/F/9: "Umoja wa Tumutumu", 7.3.22.

But Thuku's generational theory looked like dictatorship to most Tumutumu readers. Senior readers went to Thika in 1921 to meet Thuku and the chiefs of the Kiambu-based Kikuyu Association, but refused to sign a letter sent to the Colonial Office. The letter was about "things we were not aware of and didn't know about": Kiambu people should not presume to speak for all Gikuyu.¹¹¹ Thuku drew a his supporters from the junior apprentices at Tumutumu, who held meetings in the evening at Hezekiah Mundia's tea shop.¹¹² Most hailed from Tetu or Othaya; none were Mathira men. Many were relatively land-poor, or junior sons of landlords with little hope of inheritance. They were later the nucleus of the Kikuyu Central Association in Nyeri. Philp thought them "fellows of no standing": all of the senior teachers and apprentices refused to join Thuku, and berated their delinquent juniors.¹¹³ Despite missionary backing, senior readers similarly refused to join Kiambu chiefs' Kikuyu Association when Philipo Karanja toured Nyeri seeking support. They accused Karanja of "double dealing and of being like Harry Thuku, desirous of becoming paramount chief of Kikuyu."¹¹⁴ Philp reported that they wanted to be free of Kiambu politics. When Thuku was arrested and detained in Nairobi early in March 1922, only 30 Tumutumu apprentices were dismissed by the missionaries for conspiring with him.¹¹⁵ Philp thought senior readers' support for the mission a testament to the "persistent teaching of loyalty to the government and to the Apostolic injunction to live in peace with all men." But Thuku's relative lack of success in Nyeri had more to do with the parochialism for *mbari* politics. How could anyone speak for all Gikuyu?

The parochialism of Gikuyu politics made *ituika* in the 1920s less a law-bound, linear movement and more a rhetoric, a compelling vocabulary of generational protest

¹¹¹SA I/C/9: Zakayo Muruwakagotho, Samuel Maguta, Jason Kaguru and Samuel Kathumbu to Barlow, 2 July 1934.

¹¹²SA I/C/7: DC Nyeri to Arthur, 1 March 1922.

¹¹³SA I/C/8: Philp to DC Nyeri, n.d. (but 1922).

¹¹⁴SA I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 12 March 1922.

¹¹⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1922.

that called young men to public service by promising redemption through private discipline. *Ituika* was a way for young men and women to talk about virtue, and cleansing. Divided over generational unity by property and *mbari* interest, but brought together in common hope for redemption from the pollution of death and disaster, Nyeri's readers fought *ituika* from within families. They did so by translating themselves to the other side of *ituika*, arguing that missionary soap, clothing and food amounted to the cleanliness and fertility of *ituika*. The old dichotomies of Gikuyu thought--*thahu* versus *utheri*, pollution versus clean brightness--became for readers a rhetoric a protest, a vocabulary with which to typify opponents and claim moral authority. *Ituika* was a debating language, a vocabulary that allowed young readers to convert their Christian delinquency into a claim on family power.

Missionaries' soap embodied young readers' claims on the cleanliness and fertility of *ituika*. Soap had long been integral to salvation in missionary thought. Missionaries had early given bars of lye soap to readers as Christmas presents, together with a handkerchief.¹¹⁶ It was a line item on the station budget in 1913, costing more than wages for teachers.¹¹⁷ By 1920, missionaries thought soap could create a new people. Tuberculosis, increasingly prevalent after the war, was to the missionary mind "spread by contact with civilization and by better clothing without corresponding improvement of native dwellings."¹¹⁸ The disease of the half-civilized, living in hyphenated states of delinquency, tuberculosis taught the colonial mind the virtues of hygiene, and stone houses. Philp thought the readers who lived in square houses around the missions more healthy than their neighbors: their windows and doors let in air and dispelled lingering contagion.¹¹⁹ Besides, their floors and utensils could be washed more easily. Some readers got water piped to their homes when the mission installed a pipeline from the

¹¹⁶Stevenson, "The Mission-boxes", in *Kikuyu News* 40 (Jan. 1913).

¹¹⁷TT "Estimates" file: Estimate for 1913.

¹¹⁸SA I/B/7: Stevenson, school report for 1924.

¹¹⁹SA I/J/2: Philp, Tuberculosis amongst the Kikuyu natives", n.d. (but 1920).

Ragati river in 1927.¹²⁰ Missionaries paid to install new washrooms for boarding students. Soap and salvation went together. Gikuyu who did not build in stone were liable to have their houses burned down in government-led anti smallpox campaigns in the mid-1920s.¹²¹ Many hid sufferers in the bush, hoping to avoid domestic disaster.

Colonial hygienic theory, in Kenya as elsewhere, allowed medical officers entry into the most intimate aspects of African life, creating new avenues for coercion and colonial control.¹²² But soap was equally a way for ambitious converts to prove their public integrity, their redemption from the taint of death. Readers argued that soap made fatty beauty, the accomplishment of wealthy elders' households. One elderly woman, Monica Muumbi, remembered that she and fellow students, once washed with soap, were called *tukaraku* by other Gikuyu.¹²³ It was the same term that Gikuyu used for ochred fat, the mark of beauty and wealth that graced non-reading girls. Muumbi herself claimed for soap the cleanliness of wealth:

Q: What did girl readers do to decorate themselves?

A: They just washed themselves. They could not apply fat but they could apply soap foam. We did not used to plait the hair but we used to comb it...we left the kind of beauty that was there before and embraced a new one--one of cleanliness (*theri*). Our beauty was cleanliness and putting on clean clothes.

That Christian beauty would produce oiled cleanliness and free readers from the deadly taint of *thahu* was a matter for familial argument. Girls were at the center of the dispute. Gikuyu fathers had beautified their daughters by anointing them with the fat of a ram. The less well-off made oil from the beans of the *bariki* bush, fried and rendered

¹²⁰SA 1/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1927.

¹²¹SA 1/J/1 and 3: Philp to Sanitation Officer Nairobi, 23 March 1925.

¹²²c.f. Vaughan, *Curing their Ills*; Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*; John and Jean Comaroff, "Home-made Hegemony: Modernity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in South Africa", in Karen Hansen ed., *African Encounters with Domesticity*, 37-74; Philip Curtin, "Medical Knowledge and Urban Planning in Colonial Tropical Africa", in Feierman and Janzen eds., *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 235-55.

¹²³Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

down.¹²⁴ Girl's beauty valorized the wealth of men's households and incorporated them into the cycle of domestic reproduction that proved men's virtue. Reader's soap threatened to interrupt family reproduction, turning girls into prostitutes.

Grace Gathoni, an early reader, remembers that her father beat her regularly one she put on readers' clothes and cut her hair.¹²⁵ He only stopped once she had taken the ornaments from her ears and sewn back her lobes. It was a contentious mark of domestic assertion remembered by several readers, both men and women.¹²⁶ Gathoni remembered that

People would scream over you on seeing how you are. Some would fall down on the path in amazement.

The sewing back of ears, both for men and women, was a shocking act of familial protest, an act that defined boundaries between readers and their relatives. Clothes, too, articulated readers' differences. Gikuyu clothing was stitched of softened goat or sheep skins, tailored to the standing and maturity of the wearer. Readers' clothing was called *matonyo*, related to the verb for "to enter." Clothing was a limen. Early readers on joining the mission were issued a loin cloth and blanket, working their way up to a shirt and shorts.¹²⁷ On deciding to leave, they left their clothes behind.¹²⁸ In 1917, chiefs and headmen on the Nyeri District Council resolved that readers, exempt from communal labor, could be identified by their shaved heads and "European" clothes. That, they thought, was a "sufficient guarantee" that only the truly interested would go to school.¹²⁹ Clothes marked converts' investment in learning.

¹²⁴Oral interviews: Monica Muumbi; Grace Mukunya; Susan Kirigu Njebwara.

¹²⁵Oral interview: Grace Gathoni.

¹²⁶Oral interviews: Elizabeth Mweru, Esther Mbau Mwihaki. Men, too, remarked on the sewing back of ears as an act of commitment: oral interview, Muriuki Kiuria.

¹²⁷Barlow, "Tumutumu Notes", in *Kikuyu News* 31 (Oct. 1911).

¹²⁸Barlow, "Tumutumu Notes", in *Kikuyu News* 22 (Sept. 1910).

¹²⁹SA I/E/10: DC Nyeri to Hamilton, 30 January 1917.

Clothing was a commitment to citizenship, a mark of belonging to a new order of cleanliness. But the makeup of *matonyo* divided readers into different categories of attainment, classes in formation. Scots housewives in the 1920s sent their castoff clothing to Tumutumu: in 1925 the mission received blue and white cotton shirts, pajamas, striped dresses, cotton caps, pinafores, and handkerchiefs.¹³⁰ Boarding school students wore most of them; other girls learned to sew cotton frocks and collared shirts from missionary seamstresses.¹³¹ Missionaries' words in the early 1920s were frequently about sewing, demanding precision in what their converts wore. "Unpick this seam, it has been sewn badly," ordered one sentence on a language exam in 1926.¹³² "Your blanket has been torn, what has it been torn by?", went another.¹³³ Some readers were beginning to look like carefully turned-out bourgeoisie.

In outschools, however, collars were scarce: *matonyo* amounted to wool blankets. Stevenson reported in 1922 that in rural outschools

most scholars are young men and young women. Side by side we find the man whose gray hairs are already appearing; the young brave still in all the glory of his red paint and beads; the other youth, much more objectionable, who has been to Nairobi and proudly sports some filthy tattered "civilized" blanket; the small boy clad in a scrap of goatskin on one shoulder, the merest apology for a garment. Yet in the station schools paint is virtually a thing of the past and the number of decently clad people is steadily increasing.¹³⁴

Clothing divided readers as it brought them together in hope of redemption, marking off incipient lines of class formation. Educational attainment defined the most profound divisions: teachers, pastors and other prosperous wage earners could afford shirts and trousers. As one elderly man put it, "teachers used to put on clothes. They had

¹³⁰SA VB/8: "List of contents and values of Tumutumu box no. 29", 1925.

¹³¹SA I/C/12 and 13: Garriock, "A suggested scheme of needlework for juniors", 1926.

¹³²SA L/K/6: "First Year exam", August 1926.

¹³³SA L/K/6: "Second Year exam", Sept. 1926.

¹³⁴SA L/E/10: Stevenson, "Elementary Education", July 1922.

money."¹³⁵ Migrant wage workers could scarcely pay for expensive clothing. For wage earning men, blankets and shukas represented an affordable way to work cash earnings into the stuff of prosperous respectability. Mwati wa Kiruba, for instance, remembered using nine shillings loaned from his mother to purchase a shuka, a long piece of cloth, on beginning work in Karatina town:

(The shuka) was the one we used to tie round the body. I also bought a blanket which was tied on the other side of the body. I also bought a shuka for my mother. The shuka cost a shilling. That was in 1927. Other people before used to wear skin clothes. Men at that time could go to work on the white farms and would buy *matonyo*, they were paid 6/ a month...when I went to Karatina I started putting on *matonyo*. Most were readers who frequented there. The clothes were khaki clothes. Some had shorts and trousers. Me I did not put on ochre, I just washed and combed by hair.¹³⁶

Kiruba wore his shuka while starting a tea shop catering to readers in Karatina.

Matonyo allowed cash-poor men to enter monied employment, offering a form of affordable respectability. A blanket in 1920 cost 3/50 in Nyeri, more than half the monthly wage for unskilled workers.¹³⁷ Shukas cost less: Kiruba paid 1 shilling in 1927; another elderly woman bought one for 2 shillings around the same time.¹³⁸ Migrant workers wore shukas and blankets to work, and saved money to buy shirts and trousers. Missionaries worried when wage workers traded their shirts and trousers for skins on returning to the reserves: it looked like bad hygiene.¹³⁹ But expensive clothes were a resource to be carefully guarded.

Clothing marked men's ambitions, and defined incipient divisions of attainment among readers. *Matonyo* enrolled converts in a new order of cleanliness, embodying *ituika* with cotton. Like soap, sewn-back ears, and carefully swept houses, clothing was a

¹³⁵Oral interview: Ngunu wa Huthu.

¹³⁶Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

¹³⁷*KNA* PC CP 6/4/2: DC Nyeri to PC, 11 November 1920.

¹³⁸Oral interview: Esther Mwhaki Mbau.

¹³⁹Philp, "Nyeri", in *Kikuyu News* 70 (Oct. 1919).

highly material proof of cleanliness, an experimental, expressive language with which lay claim to the cleanliness of *utheri*. Readers put on their clothing, and washed themselves with soap, to prove themselves virtuous according to an ethnic vocabulary of redemption. Readers' wives worked hard to cleanse the new clothes, as Muri Wanjiru remembered:

We used to wash. We could not leave (the clothes) dirty, we used to wash them in evenings or mornings.¹⁴⁰

Not all women were content to launder ambitious men's cotton clothing. It appears that if clothes marked out divisions of property and attainment among aspiring young readers, they equally defined a gendered field of argument between women and men. Indeed, the languages of generational politics and gendered dissent seem to have converged around the Christian vocabulary of cleanliness. Both attacked the material basis of polygamous men's wealth.

Engendering dissent

Generational debates over the substance of *ituika* may allow us to eavesdrop on the vocabulary of gendered struggle in the early 1920s. For generational theory was a vocabulary of virtue: soap and clothing allowed young men and women to prove their respectability to suspicious elders. Arguments over virtue were arguments over gendered morality. Women hoped to parlay Christian clothing and food into a vocabulary of marital negotiation. They used the substance of readers' material culture to prove their domestic virtue, and to carve out new spaces for personal profit. Older men, threatened at home by generational theory, accused young men and women of sexual delinquency. Far from *irungu*, straighteners, young men and women were wanderers, who corrupted

¹⁴⁰Oral interview: Muri Wanjiru.

Gikuyu polity and endangered children. Generational debate about the burden of disaster demanded intense Gikuyu thought about posterity and the moral obligations of marriage.

I suggested above that the early 1920s were a time of intense speculation among young men about political redemption. The archival record suggests that for women, too, the post-war years demanded creative thought about private virtue and domestic order. Working to manipulate (or create) old ethnic identities to contest husbands' authority, women throughout Nyeri in the early 1920s demanded to be released from polygamous marriages. Some women had been married to wealthy Nyeri men during the famine of Thika in 1918; others came from Ukambani during an earlier famine in 1899. Their families, eager to be relieved of the responsibility of feeding marriageable girls, had pawned them to wealthy Nyeri men in exchange for cattle, sometimes as many as six.¹⁴¹ Others received only food in return for their daughters.¹⁴² In the early 1920s, hundreds of junior wives threatened to return home. Kamba men, and jealous Gikuyu suitors, pressed the point: they raided wealthy polygamists' homes and carried off wives.¹⁴³ Other women, dissatisfied with their position, simply absconded. Chief Njagga, for example, paid bridewealth for a woman named Mukuthi in 1907. She was, he claimed, a Gikuyu, proving that his investment was legally binding. But ethnic identity was pliable, deployed by women to meet particular needs. Mukuthi summoned Kamba relatives in 1921, who "stole" her from Njagga's homestead in an armed nighttime raid.¹⁴⁴ Such raids were apparently frequent occurrences in 1921-22: a register lists at least a hundred women 'abducted' from polygamous homes.¹⁴⁵ Many had several children, having lived in Nyeri for many years. Wealthy men pressed charges in colonial courts, but District Commissioners waffled, not knowing where the absent wives belonged. They worried

¹⁴¹ *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6*: DC Nyeri to Senior Commissioner, 14 November 1921.

¹⁴² *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6*: DC Machakos to DC Nyeri, 7 November 1921.

¹⁴³ *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6*: DC Kitui, "Akamba refugees in Kenya", 2 November 1921.

¹⁴⁴ *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6*: DC Kitui to DC Nyeri, 24 August 1921; DC Nyeri, notes, 29 August 1921.

¹⁴⁵ *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6*: "Wakamba refuges (1899-99 famine) women allege to have been abducted by Kamba from Kitui", n.d.

that a ruling in favor of either Nyeri husbands or Kamba relatives would lead to social disintegration, with bands of warriors roaming the reserves, and possibly war among different factions.¹⁴⁶ Women's attempts to negotiate marital obligations spurred male fears of social disintegration.

It is impossible to make direct connections between the Kamba marriage crisis and the politics of *ituika* in Nyeri. What is clear is that for women as for men, the early 1920s were an occasion for intense, sometimes violent negotiation over old expectations of marital order and personal virtue. Nowhere was the debate more heated than in Tumutumu's schools. The vocabulary of readers' *ituika* threatened polygamous men both with protest from junior wives and ambitious competition from junior men. Women's enrollments in Tumutumu schools doubled from 1919 to 20; in 1920 girls and women comprised almost 25 percent of the total school population. Initiated but unmarried young women spurred this growth; later, in 1927, young girls began to attend school, again driving up enrollments in the last part of the decade.¹⁴⁷ Many women worked to balance household labor with school-going, a strategy that carried risks as well as rewards. Women profited from the 1920s commodity boom, growing vegetables in their own gardens and selling at markets in Karatina, Nyeri and elsewhere.¹⁴⁸ Some women plowed their profits into schooling for themselves and their children, exciting men's fears of female prostitution.

Commodity profits offered some women means to rework relationships of dependency and obligation with male relatives. Gathoni Gachigua's story illuminates the intersections between generational protest and gendered struggle and the possibilities that commodity agriculture opened up for women eager to renegotiate marital expectations.

¹⁴⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/6: DC Embu to SC Nyeri, 18 November 1921.

¹⁴⁷c.f. statistics in SA II/E/29: Dickson, Report, July 1942.

¹⁴⁸c.f. Claire Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way: Women, Men and Trade in the Nairobi Area, 1890-1990*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 74-100.

Gathoni was the daughter of a widow who managed the land of her dead husband.¹⁴⁹ She had let out the land to several tenants, hoping to convert land into tenants' political support. Her husband's brother, Gathoni's uncle, had nominally "inherited" the family from his deceased brother: but Gathoni's mother seemed eager to establish her autonomy from her husband's family. Her daughter's ambition stoked familial struggle over the family's belonging. Gathoni went to school in the late 1920s with the permission of her mother, who paid the fees. She was convinced to join school by her uncle's children, whose clothes and manners impressed Gathoni. She remembered that "they looked so beautiful, I used to long for them, then I started going to school." Reader's *matonyo* could produce envy--but demanded hard work for the cash-poor. Gathoni mixed family work with schooling: she remembered walking to Tagwa, 40 kilometers distant, to fetch firewood for her mother.

We used to go for wood three days a week. When I started school, the first day I would go to school, the second for firewood. At school they would know I was absent for one day and they would punish me by fetching a can of water from the river that was Kabiruini. So on that day I wouldn't learn anything.

Hard work allowed ambitious girls to mix schooling with family obligations--but earned the opprobrium of nervous male guardians. Gathoni's uncle sought to marry off his school-going niece, fearing that her reading and writing would turn her to prostitution. It was a common fear among men in the 1920s, as Gathoni explained.

The reason why girls were being told not to go to school was because if they went, the elders would be refused to drink beer. When they were invited (to a wedding), they would be very happy and spend the whole day in festivities. So when a man would hear that the girl was going to school, he would be very angry. At the same, the elders were saying--"the girls who are going to school, they will become prostitutes. If they go, and if we do not drink beer, where will they get sexual relations?"

¹⁴⁹Oral interview: Gathoni Gachigua.

Gathoni remembered that she protested at her uncle's efforts to marry her off, arguing that "for me the question of crushing cane did not arise because I was educated, I was a Christian, I didn't want anything to do with that." Christian identity, young readers' principled stand against elders' beer, was a rhetoric by which young women could contest elders' nervous control. Readers' material culture offered some women means to rethink familial expectations, sparking heated debate over gendered morality.

As Gathoni's story demonstrates, it was as a threat to sexual discipline that older men criticized youthful readers' soap, clothing and food. Arguments over generational politics were a vocabulary of gendered struggle in the 1920s. Food preparation, perhaps more than any issue at stake in readers' redefinition of domestic cleanliness, sketched out contentious lines of debate between propertied elders and ambitious junior men and women. Prior to British intervention, eating made families: foods like millet, cultivated and consumed as part of the household cycle of birthing, circumcision, and death, made female sexuality part of household reproduction. Readers' new foods, fried promiscuously in open pans over a fire, marked their lusting after foreign ways. Fried food with onions threatened to turn female cooks into prostitutes, alienating their labor and sexuality from Gikuyu households.

Readers' attempts to prove the integrity of their purpose made food into a matter of gendered debate. For they hoped to make their fried onions and potatoes into the substance of domestic fertility. Missionaries were the first to cook with onions: they experimented with cauliflower, tomatoes, leeks, peas, carrots, and other new crops in mission gardens.¹⁵⁰ Eager readers, schooled at Tumutumu, began planting potatoes and other new crops such as maize from the early 1920s.¹⁵¹ Their new crops spurred the agricultural boom of the mid and late 1920s. Their new crops also led to redefinitions in

¹⁵⁰SA I/E/10: Philp to Director of Agriculture, 27 September 1924.

¹⁵¹Cowen, "Notes on Agricultural Wage Labour in a Kenya Location".

domestic diets. Readers' meals performed their claim that missionary materials could produce Gikuyu fat. Cecilia Mugaki, daughter of prominent early readers, remembers that crowds gathered at her mother's house to sample her cooking:

My mother was loved by all...they used to say that her pot of food is very big, you cannot finish all of it and that it was delicious because of greens and onions. My mother used to prepare enough food to last two days...she had a small field of green vegetables which she constantly manured. So we were used to taking food prepared with greens and onions.¹⁵²

Onions and greens marked out the new standards of readers' cooking. Many women had learned to fry food at school: cooking was on the girls' dormitory syllabus at Tumutumu from early on.¹⁵³ Marion Stevenson toured outschools in the mid-1920s teaching cookery, hygiene and childcare to large crowds of women.¹⁵⁴ In 1926, 225 girls learned from the teacher's wife in one school; at another 200 married women talked miles in the evening to attend two hour long cooking and sewing classes.¹⁵⁵ Others learned privately, as househelp for prosperous readers.¹⁵⁶ They learned to fry food with fat. Some elders thought it a waste: Jerida Kirigu remembered that her father objected to using a ram's fat for ordinary cooking.¹⁵⁷ Cooking with fat fed generational struggle. Male readers, proud of their food, pressed the point with elders. Ngunu wa Huthu remembers arguing about food with his parents after eating at the house of his uncle, an early reader:

The food at my uncle's place was more clean than that prepared at home. At my uncle's place it was prepared well. I would on learning this go to accost my mother that an item was not clean. She also used to put earrings and other

¹⁵²Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki*, 1982 (unpublished mss. in possession of Cecilia Mugaki, Tumutumu).

¹⁵³Stevenson, "About some Kenia girls", in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915).

¹⁵⁴SA I/B/7: Stevenson, report on women's work, 1924.

¹⁵⁵SA I/B/7: Annual report on women and girl's work, 1926.

¹⁵⁶Oral interview: Edwin Baro.

¹⁵⁷Oral interview: Jerida Kirigu.

decorative items and its me who made her throw them away as I became a reader. I told her that these were interfering with her cooking and would applaud her on leaving them. I also encouraged her to buy a shuka which cost 50 cents. Then I was clever...I would tell my father how my uncle had become clean and he could not talk because he had come to appreciate this when he had been at Tumutumu hospital.¹⁵⁸

Readers' cookery argued that hygiene and soaped utensils could make for redemptive cleanliness, for the health and fertility on display at Tumutumu hospital. They annoyed elders, and interrupted the cordiality of familial eating. David Ngora, son of readers, remembers going to his grandfather's house as a child to eat yams. On arriving,

My grandfather gave me some meat but when he was giving it to me I ran away very fast because I did not like it. I told him I had come for yams. I refused the meat because it was from the fire and it was not clean. We had been trained in cleanliness.¹⁵⁹

Cooking with fat and onions, washing utensils, wearing laundered clothes, all fed struggles within families and articulated new, generalizable standards of cleanliness for readers. Readers' houses, cleansed of pollution and dirt, spoke forcefully of their claim to be virtuous, reputable leaders of the incoming generation. For readers no less than for their elders, politics began at home. What was at issue was the substance of household fertility, the means by which men and women could prove themselves virtuous. Readers' creative investments in missionary clothing, onions and soap was a vocabulary of reputation, a rhetoric with which to work the base metal of material interest into the wider vocabulary of generational virtue.

But elders thought that readers' clean food was but prostitution, wasteful lusting after foreign ways. Debates over food were a language of gendered struggle in the 1920s

¹⁵⁸Oral interview, Ngunu wa Huthu.

¹⁵⁹Oral interview: David Ngora, with Moses Waciira.

and 30s. For women's cooking, and eating, seem to have been a ground on which elders replied to readers' claims of generational redemption. Readers' food looked like it would bring disaster on men's households, turning female fertility into wasting. Gathoni Gachigua's father worried that her refusal to make beer for marriage negotiations would lead her to prostitution.¹⁶⁰ Other fathers drew similar conclusions: elders argued that girls who did not brew beer would not have children, or that the children would be born under a curse.¹⁶¹ Readers' food looked to go to waste. Mwati wa Kiruba remembers that in 1920 he opened a tea kiosk in Karatina town, hoping to attract business from wage laborers and carriers returning to the reserve from the East African campaign.¹⁶² He seized on the idea after dining at another kiosk, where he noticed that a pot of tea had quickly sold at a price of two cents per glass. Mwati's kiosk did a brisk business with men: he sold fried potatoes, boiled maize, and tea. Women, however, refused to enter. They worried that eating onions and potatoes in public would make them look like *maraya*, prostitutes. The new foods were best cooked, and eaten, in the privacy of home. But gendered debates over domestic labor made food, and women's cooking, into a matter of public concern. Nelius Githae remembered that male relatives visited her husband as a group when she began to go to school in the late 1920s. She recalled that

they used to tell my husband that if he allowed me to go to church I would stop giving him food...I was feeling I ought to go to church but my husband was old and against it. I was fearing him even as I was going because he even told me that if I joined the church he will never see me again.¹⁶³

That readers' onions should not tempt women into prostitution and interrupt familial feeding was something that both elderly polygamists and male readers could

¹⁶⁰Oral interview: Gathoni Gachigua.

¹⁶¹Oral interview: Gerard Gachau King'ori.

¹⁶²Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

¹⁶³Oral interview: Nelius Githae.

worry about. Anxiety about women cut across class and generational lines, uniting men in condemnation of female traders and other women whose labor drew them to Nairobi. It was a matter of considerable concern among men by the late 1920s. The Kiambu reader George Ndegwa, writing to the KCA journal *Mwigwithania* in 1928, asked chiefs and other leaders to limit the women who traded in European potatoes, peas, milk, firewood and ripe bananas in Nairobi.¹⁶⁴ Such trading, he argued, was a danger to girls and newly married women,

for frequently it is the road to the beginning of PROSTITUTION...since (women's trading) began, many have gone into PROSTITUTION, and many had had their heads turned (HAVE GONE SILLY) while still at their own homes. But we would hazard a guess and say that it is not want that makes many of them sell potatoes, although it may be that some are poor.

"KNOW WE ARE BEING EXTERMINATED AT A BLOW", warned Ndegwa.

Nyeri men were similarly alarmed. The South Nyeri Local Native Council refused to support a child welfare hospital in Nairobi in 1930, arguing that the home would only assist "Kikuyu women who had run away from their father and husbands and become Swahiliized or Mohammedanized."¹⁶⁵ Johanna Mwea voiced readers' concerns with special force:

The girls who went to school were much more inclined to run away than the girls in skins. They wanted better houses and better clothes and better living conditions so they ran away into towns or non-native areas to other men who had paid no dowry e.g. the houseboys or to Swahili or Kavirondo or just went from one man to another like prostitutes.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴KNA DC/Machakos/10B/13/1: George Ndegwa, "The trading of girls and women in potatoes and other things in Nairobi--this is the cause of waywardness", in *Mwigwithania* 1 (8) (Dec. 1928-Jan. 1929), 9, 7.

¹⁶⁵SA I/G/6: Muhoya wa Kagumba, in South Nyeri Local Native Council, 14 October 1930.

¹⁶⁶SA I/G/6: Johanna Mwea, in South Nyeri Local Native Council, 14 October 1930.

Readers' wives, made flighty by new generational vocabularies of accomplishment, threatened to turn their husbands' claim on public respectability into shame. Generational cleansing heightened gendered debate, clarifying some women's ambitions and widening *ituika* into a language of marital struggle.

I shall have much more to say about men's and women's debates over marital obligation in future chapters. For the moment, the point I want to make is that onions, soap, and cotton clothing shaped heated ethnic debate about private virtue and political citizenship. For young men and women, new commodities embodied their hopes for *ituika*, for a restoration of peace and fertility in the wake of disaster. The burden of death drove creative Gikuyu investments in the substance of missionary culture. Their elders thought young Christian converts prostitutes, neglecting their obligations to families by whoring after onions. Inherited expectations of ethnic conduct and political leadership structured Gikuyu engagements with missionary substances.

Gikuyu debates on the substance of missionary culture shed light on what may be the most serious blindness in post-Gramscian scholarship in colonialism in Africa and India. As I intimated in the introduction of this chapter, the Comaroffs have admirably directed attention toward the everyday nature of colonial power, the ways that the new modes of social organization and material culture took root within African societies. What the Comaroffs have not as yet theorized are the interior debates by which colonized people extended older languages of judgment on new materials. As this chapter suggests, and as I shall have occasion to demonstrate at more length in future chapters, the "long conversation" between missionaries and Africans was only one of several conversations about civility. Driven by the burden of disaster, Gikuyu people made creative intellectual investments in missionary substances, arguing about their place within an inherited economy of fertility and pollution. These creative debates were not simply driven by colonial power, or by the operation of the wage economy. They were also driven by the

compelling burden of disaster, the morally obligating sense that the post-war years demanded creative thought of young men and women. Missionary materials were one rhetoric with which Gikuyu argued about their future.

Chapter Four

The Rhetoric of the Word Ethnic debate in Bible translation after the Great War

This chapter is about the ways that youthful readers creatively thought through Christian and Gikuyu words, working out a language that transcended the local complexities of ethnic debate and translated their material interest into the broader morality of new communities. Generational debate between young men and their fathers was demanding, fiercely demanding, on early readers' imaginations and forensic skill. Most converts were propertyless juniors who could scarcely claim a hearing from suspicious elders. Public speaking required property, the material evidence of landed self-mastery and solid reputation. Readers' words were unweighted with either sweated accomplishment or productive wealth. Proverbially, their tongues were thin. Bible stories opened a field of words, a stock of moral fables, with which young men could make new and imaginative arguments about familial and colonial power. Readers argued out their politics with the Word, finding in its vocabulary of personal and public redemption ways of talking about *ituika*, generational succession. The New Testament, translated in full by 1926, was a phrasebook of generational debate.

Recent scholarship in "translation studies" generally understates colonized people's creative participation in the labor of translation. The post-colonial canon views translation as a practice of colonial power, an immobilizing process by which Europeans catalogued, organized and colonized native tongues and bodies.¹ Some scholars call for a process of retranslation, post-modern translations that disrupt the fixity by which colonial linguists pinned down vernacular languages, allowing texts, and words, to express their

¹The Comaroffs, for example, mark Non-Conformists' appropriation of SeTswana terms like *muroi* (teacher) for use in Christian lexicons as a "subversion" of indigenous terms and as an index of missionary colonization of languages. (John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 218-19). See also Bernard Cohn, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command," in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings in South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 276-329.

foreignness, their radical diversity.² But as I show below, Gikuyu have long translated their own diverse theories of politics into the Word. Bible translation in central Kenya has a popular history, intimately bound up with men and women's efforts to position themselves within ethnic and colonial discourses. Gikuyu converts, like others in Africa and elsewhere, had a large role to play in making their own Gods, and Devils.³ "Translation studies" scholars, in their eagerness to de-scribe colonial texts, assume for themselves a political task long claimed by colonized people.

This chapter is about the imaginative work by which Gikuyu readers translated the Word to speak to their own pressing discursive needs. I demonstrated in the previous chapter that the disasters of influenza and famine led young men and women to make creative investments in the materials of Christian culture. They argued that soap, onions and tea redeemed them from pollution and embodied the stuff of *ituika*, generational redemption. Their elders doubted their integrity, accusing them of being prostitutes. This chapter documents how early readers translated their moral delinquency into a claim on Gikuyu power. The meanings of words about knowledge, subjectivity, and political power were continually remade during the first 20 years of missionary work in central Kenya. I suggest that these changing vocabularies reveal the creative ways that readers thought through the Word in argument with their elders. Early readers, most impoverished young men, found in the Christian vocabulary of "soul," "mind" and "conscience" means of argument, a subjective platform from which to speak to their

²Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the colonial context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Niranjana, "Translation, Colonialism and the Rise of English," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 (15) (April 1990): 773-78; Lawrence Venutti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), 308-9. See Paul Landau, "'Religion' and Christian Conversion in African History: Toward a New Model," in *Journal of Religious History* 23 (1) (Feb. 1999), 8-30 for a more nuanced call for "retranslation".

³I here follow Birgit Meyer, "Beyond syncretism: Translation and diabolization in the appropriation of Protestantism in Africa," in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, eds., *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The politics of religious synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 45-68, and Margaret Jolly, "Devils, Holy Spirits and the Swollen God: Translation, Conversion and Colonial Power in the Marist mission, Vanatu, 1887-1934," in Peter van der Veer ed., *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 231-262.

suspicious elders. Claiming to know better than their fathers, they found in Christian redemption a grammar of arguing about generational succession, and a vocabulary with which to condemn their fathers.

Fired with an acute sense of injustice, but suffering from a crippling awareness of the particularity of the imaginative means available to them, a generation of Christian Gikuyu thought through the Word. Their creative investments in the Bible shaped the language of family argument, and later the vocabulary of class struggle.

Translating the Word

Translation is generally understood to be an act of authorial genius, a scholarly technique by which the words of one language are transmitted into the another tongue. This was certainly how missionaries thought about their labor in translating the Word: they looked for precise correspondences between English and Gikuyu terms, and hoped through translation to make Christian truth look like the inheritor of the old religion. But as I show in this section, missionaries were not the only ones invested in translation. Gikuyu evangelists carried out translations of Christian terms from the earliest years of missionary work in central Kenya, working out new meanings in hundreds of face-to-face arguments with their elders. The Christian language they invented was highly polemical, less a definitive language leading to revealed truth and more a speculative vocabulary with which to argue. Where missionaries looked for a fixed set of terms with which to translate, Gikuyu seem to have valued translated words precisely for their indeterminacy, their new-ness. They used the unfamiliar words to engage their elders in arguments about knowledge, self-hood and virtue, finding in the Word a rhetoric for ethnic debate.

For missionaries, Bible translation was liberal history in the active voice, the means by which certain aspects of the "old religion" were incorporated into the narrative revelation of Christian truth. Missionary linguists longed to enter into Gikuyu minds, to

understand their "methods, linguistic imagery, songs...to the glory of God."⁴ Marion Stevenson framed the need for accurate translation in 1912:

It is our part to seize...points of contact and build what bridges we can over the gulf that separates us. For we have come with our great message and we cannot claim that we have delivered it until we have put it into words and forms which may be understood by the people. To stand and preach of strange far away things having no connection with their daily life and thought because we are ignorant of that life and thought and have not taken sufficient trouble to inform ourselves about it, and to continue to speak with a ludicrous Scotch (or American or English) accent, using atrocious grammar and meaningless words and expecting our hearers to exert themselves to find out what we can possibly be attempting to say, what is this but to put stumbling blocks in their upward path instead of steps?⁵

By bridging the gap between the past and the future, translation inducted Gikuyu into the narrative of Christian history. Properly considered Christian words invited hearers onto the upward stair leading toward *matwini*, the "place of the clouds," as early translations called Heaven. Early missionary grammars worked to fix the meanings of Gikuyu terms, sifting through their meanings and preparing the ground for Bible translations. One early grammar devoted an appendix to a "list of words and phrases which may be a use in religious teaching, with the meaning they convey to a Kikuyu."⁶ Another dictionary, published in 1904, speculated on Gikuyu terms for words such as "rabbi," "high priest," "herald," "Lucifer," and "messiah."⁷ Dictionaries were missionaries' guidebook to the Gikuyu mind, the means by which a vocabulary of religion was fixed and rendered up for Christian translation. So too did early grammars map out the structure of Gikuyu language, parsing out the language into nouns, adjectives, pronouns and verbs, and rigorously documenting how each noun related to

⁴Barlow, "Evangelistic work in Kenia," in *Kikuyu News* 35 (May 1912).

⁵Marion Stevenson, "The Kikuyu Language Committee," in *Kikuyu New* 37 (August 1912).

⁶Barlow, *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1931 (first printed 1914)), 232-36.

⁷A.W. McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904).

other parts of speech.⁸ By doing so, missionaries hoped to create a vehicle for Christian truth, a neutral, unchanging medium with which to reveal their future to Gikuyu.⁹

Calling hearers to recognize their future, missionaries carried out translations from the earliest days of their work in Gikuyuland. They began with the Gospels, and with *Acts*, hoping to teach moral truths and to inspire dedicated commitment through stories of personal sacrifice. The CMS missionary A.W. McGregor, writing from his hilltop station in Murang'a, translated *John* in 1903.¹⁰ The 500 copies printed never sold: Gikuyu were likely to cover their faces in fits of laughter on hearing the text.¹¹ A.R. Barlow, the lay evangelist of the Church of Scotland Mission, rendered *Mark* in 1908 while resident in Edinburgh, after being deported from Kenya colony by settlers made nervous at his eagerness to attend Gikuyu young men's dances.¹² American missionaries were prolific translators, offering up *Acts*, most of the Epistles, and two gospels over the course of five years.¹³ But their work was largely a local concern: Barlow, by 1912 the leading Gikuyu linguist, called the translations "unidiomatic, stilted, and painfully roundabout."¹⁴

The first translations to be widely distributed were the gospels of *Luke* and *Matthew*, published in 1915 and sold throughout Gikuyuland for 25 cents a copy--a full

⁸A.W. McGregor, *A Grammar of the Kikuyu Language* (London: Richard Clay and Sons, 1905).

⁹This paragraph owes much to Bernard Cohn's thinking on translation in colonial India, for which see Cohn, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command," and on Vincente Rafael's work on Catholic translations in the Philippines, for which see Vincente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), Ch. 1.

¹⁰*John* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1903).

¹¹SA I/A/1: H.E. Scott to Kilgour, 18 June 1909.

¹²SA I/A/3: Barlow to Scott, 8 October 1908.

¹³I unfortunately have not found copies of these translations. John Henderson of the Africa Inland Mission apparently translated *I and II Corinthians* and *Galatians* by 1907 (AIM Henderson to Hurlburt correspondence file: Henderson to Hurlburt, 19 July 1907); by 1912, he had completed *I and II Timothy*, *James*, *Philippians*, *Acts* and two unnamed gospels (AIM Kikuyu Language file: Henderson to Barlow, 3 March 1912).

¹⁴SA I/A/12: Barlow to Arthur, 2 December 1912, commenting on Henderson's translation of *Luke*.

day's wage.¹⁵ They were translated by a team of Protestant missionaries and Gikuyu assessors, working for weeks at a time in a settler's potato store near Dagoretti.¹⁶ *Acts* was published in 1920 by American missionaries eager for its heroic evangelistic stories; *Genesis* followed in 1924.¹⁷ The growth of the church in Gikuyuland may have been a "veritable romance with the Gospel," as the secretary of the National Bible Society of Scotland claimed in 1935.¹⁸ But the romance was prefaced with a long, difficult courtship.

Translation was for missionaries, searching for words to talk Gikuyu into the kingdom, a technique of inducting them into a long conversation about the past and the future. But it is important to recognize that these early, formative translations were not carried off by missionaries alone. The dry history of publishing and authorship obscures a rich story of popular translation, worked out in the day-to-day conversations in which Gikuyu readers made Christian religion speak. Gikuyu readers worked through their own translations of Biblical texts well before the "formal" translation work of missionary linguists was underway. As late as 1918, Barlow doubted whether the mission needed to translate evangelistic storybooks, arguing that evangelists were "skilled in giving gospel narratives in their own words, fitted to the understanding of the villagers."¹⁹ Most of them translated their stories from the Swahili Old Testament, available in central Kenya from 1914.²⁰ Missionaries worried that readers' understanding of Swahili was imperfect, and led them to misunderstandings. A few imaginative students, reading in Swahili, thought that the pool of Bethesda was a great kettle with five eyes, into which, when

¹⁵SA I/Z/4: *Uhoro mweka uria wandikiruo ni Luka* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915); *Uhoro mweka uria wandikiruo ni Mathayo* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915). For prices and distribution, SA I/A/20: Leakey to Arthur, 1 October 1915. For wage data, KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual report for Nyeri district, 1916.

¹⁶Barlow, "The position of translation work," in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915).

¹⁷SA I/Z/19-20: *Mawiko* (Kijabe: AIM Press, n.d. (but 1920)); *Genesis* (Kijabe: AIM Industrial School, 1924).

¹⁸KNA NBSS 1/81: "Memorandum on the work of the NBSS in Kenya," June 1935.

¹⁹SA I/A/26: Barlow to Arthur, 10 July 1918.

²⁰SA I/Z/21: *Magano ya Kale* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1914).

boiling, sick people were put.²¹ Misreadings like these made Christianity sound more like sorcery than good news: but readers persisted. Tumutumu teachers in 1914 went to “great lengths” to learn the Swahili New Testament, despite their difficulty in understanding it.²² They favored the Epistles, probably finding in Paul’s often heated exhortations models for their own rhetoric.

Missionaries’ translation work entered into a linguistic field in which readers were already working through the meanings of Christian words, in which popular translation was already in train. These “informal” translations, agreed upon in countless vernacular conversations, vitally shaped formally translated texts. Missionaries rarely invented Christian terms as an act of authorial genius: they were too worried about ‘misunderstanding’ to do that. Most often, they capitalized on the work of Gikuyu readers, ratifying meanings already being worked through out in readers’ linguistic imaginations. We can see this process at work in Charles Muhoro’s autobiographical account of his collaboration with the linguist Arthur Barlow in the early 1930s. Muhoro, a young Tumutumu reader, rendered a “draft” version of the text--in this case a Psalm--and then explained the translation to Barlow.²³

There was a time we had an argument about a word in Gikuyu, one which I wanted to use and he wanted to know the reason of. I was straightening out the *irumi* (inherited curses) of Gikuyu. I began in the morning and when I prayed God then started work, I began to be given words of the Bible which are in Titus 1:15 which says “all things are clean to those with clean thoughts, and to those with dirty thoughts there is nothing clean, but their hearts and tongues are dirty.” After this is when I was told to explain to him the ways I had used *irumi*...even I told him the customs they came from. I stretched my mind and began with “malevolence” and “curses” which he had asked me to explain. We began to evaluate that word until we know well the reasons it was there...The words we did

²¹ Marion Stevenson, “The Kikuyu Language Committee,” in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

²² SA I/A/17: Stevenson at Tumutumu to Arthur, 22 August 1914.

²³ c.f. SA I/B/7: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1933, for Barlow’s description of his collaboration with Muhoro.

in this ways were many, for example the matters of oaths of Gikuyu, on marriage, and the arrangement of many things concerning initiation.²⁴

Readers like Muhoro sifted through Gikuyu words, contemplating their meanings and usage and rendering them up to missionaries for use in Bible translations. It took courage: a *kirumi* was the inherited abuse of a dying father, angered at a son's waywardness. *Irumi* were a secret affair, shared and redressed only among intimate kin. Readers, nervous of their own standing with jealous fathers, consoled themselves with *Titus*, who promised them protection from fathers' wrath. *Irumi* now means "curses."²⁵ There was nothing pre-determined about this or other translations, no automatic equivalencies discovered by Sherlockian translators. The earliest dictionaries defined "curse" as *othethi*, a term that now means "unguarded talk."²⁶ *Irumi* and other words took on new meanings as a historical process, a process driven in large part by the creativity of readers like Muhoro. As I discuss below, readers similarly worked through other words, "soul," "knowing," "redemption," and "sin" for example, translating them in ways that spoke powerfully within Gikuyu conversations. These words found their way into missionary texts, defined through the sorts of conversations carried out by Barlow and Muhoro. This is not to say that missionaries exercised no authority over Bible translations, that their theology did not enter into the debate. Far from it: missionaries debated the theology of translation as heatedly and convincingly as did readers.²⁷ But Gikuyu seem to have argued theology, and defined words, as part and parcel of missionary translations. Christian words were translated in the midst of a Gikuyu debate,

²⁴*Muoyo wa Charles Muhoro Kareri*, unpublished mss., n.d. (but 1970s), in possession of Mwihaki Muthoni, Kirimukuyu location, Mathira division.

²⁵SA I/Z/26: Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 98.

²⁶McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*, 42.

²⁷Missionaries' debates about translation revolved around the incommensurability of Biblical and Gikuyu modes of expression. With the exception of Harry Leakey, no Protestant translators read Greek or Hebrew: most early translations were rendered from the English King James Version or the Zanzibari Swahili New Testament, published in 1899 (SA LK/1: Barlow to Arthur, 8 November 1929).

between readers like Muhoro and their fathers, over older questions of obedience, wealth, power and knowledge.²⁸ There follows an important methodological point, assumed in my argument below: the theological and political aspirations of Gikuyu readers are therefore partially recoverable by mapping the shifts in words' meanings, and can be read out of missionary texts themselves.²⁹

Gikuyu debates vitally shaped the vocabulary of Bible translation. Indeed, it was as a debating language, as a rhetoric, that early converts seem to have thought about the Gospel. If missionaries sought to induct Gikuyu hearers into history through the Word, early converts found in Christian texts words for their own arguments. The Gospel was a rhetoric of ethnic debate. Gikuyu called the Gospel *Uhoru wa Ngai*. Missionaries thought of *uhoro* as *Logos*, the eternal Word of God.³⁰ But *uhoro* equally meant "language," "case," "edict," "engagement," "information," "story," "message," or "verdict."³¹ The Gospel as *uhoro wa Ngai* was an argument, a polemic, framed to convince listeners out of the back-and-forth of argument. Converts who acceded to this language, who were convinced of the rightness of it, "believed." Like many other languages, Gikuyu language did not express the sort of existential "belief" posited by modern Christianity.³² The Gikuyu word translated as "believe" was *itikia*, "assent to."³³ *Itikia* located belief in the midst of a debate: Gikuyu "assented to" convincing speech, backed by forensic skill and virtuous property. *Itikia* connoted "consent," "realization,"

²⁸This is intended as an amendment to Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), which posits too much of missionary linguists' ability to transcend vernacular languages in rendering the Bible. The central thesis of Sanneh's argument, however, concerns the plural possibilities arising out of Bible translation; my argument is intended to amplify this claim.

²⁹I advance a theoretical justification for this point in Peterson, "Translating the Word: Discourse and dialogism in two Gikuyu dictionaries," *Journal of Religious History* 23 (1) (1999), 31-50.

³⁰AIM Committees, misc., 1930s to 1970s file: UKLC meeting, 13-14 August 1913.

³¹Definitions for *uhoro* culled from A.W. McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904), and Fthr. A. Hemery, *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: Roman Catholic Mission Press, 1903).

³²c.f. Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

³³KNA MSS (BS) 1/2: Barlow to Garriock, 1 January 1914.

“reliance on,” “accepting.”³⁴ It may have also connoted “obedience,” capitalizing a Gikuyu link between speech and being.³⁵ To “believe in the Gospel,” *kuitikia Uhoru wa Ngai*, thus meant more than the sort of faith promised in English. It meant acceding to an argument, accepting the idiom of a language, converting to a set of premises laid out to form a *kihooto*, a “reason that convinces.” Christian belief, and its language, was crafted out of the back and forth of vernacular argument. It was a vocabulary designed to convince. Its words, crafted by readers and forged in the fire of debate, were marked by the polemics in which they were produced.

Vernacular Christianity was a language with which to argue. Gikuyu debate was inspired by the indeterminacy of Christian words. For as I demonstrated in Chapter One, many of the words on which evangelism turned--sin, “God,” redemption--were foreign, untested. Christian language in Gikuyu was less a deterministic language of good and evil and more a series of guesses, inviting listeners’ gambling interpretation. This was not true of all missionary translations: the Presbyterians’ Pietist cousins in Ghana diabolized Ewe “traditional religion” by translating the ancestors and pre-existing gods as agents of the Devil.³⁶ Kenya’s missionaries, drawn to the idiomatic possibilities of Gikuyu cosmology, eschewed diabolization and chose English words for evil. They early speculated on the valence of *ngoma*, the ancestors that periodically worried Gikuyu householders. An early dictionary had for *ngoma* “angels” and “demons,” “devils” and “spirits,” “Satan” and “Holy Spirit.”³⁷ *Ngoma*, for missionaries no less than for Gikuyu elders, were a gamble, unpredictable and uncontrollable. By 1912 translators had made up their minds: *ngoma* were simply “the spirits of those who are dead,” more irrelevant

³⁴Definitions from McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*.

³⁵AIM Kikuyu Language File: Language committee meeting minutes, 17 June 1907.

³⁶Birgit Meyer, “Beyond syncretism”; and Meyer, “If you are a Devil, you are a Witch and if You are a Witch, you are a Devil: the integration of ‘pagan’ ideas into the conceptual universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22 (2) (1992), 98-132.

³⁷The range of definitions given by Hemery in his *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: Roman Catholic Mission Press, 1903) indicates the confusion: *ngoma* were variously angel, demon, devil, Satan, and Holy Spirit.

than evil.³⁸ A 1919 catechism dismissed them: “the departed spirits can do nothing,” it wrote.³⁹ It was not the departed spirits that troubled Gikuyu, it was demons, translated as *ndaimono*, a Gikuyu-ized version of the Greek term. Satan was *Shaitani*, or *Cetani*, an English term agreed to as early as 1907.⁴⁰ “Devil” was *muthitangi*, a term meaning “accuser” or “gossiper” that had previously belonged in Gikuyu law cases, not in cosmology.⁴¹ “Hades,” the transient place where theology says souls are judged, was called *handu ha ngoma*, the “place of *ngoma*,” but the more permanent residence of the afterlife, “Hell,” was simply *handu ha mwaki*, the “place of fire.”⁴² Framed with foreign terms, the Christian vocabulary of evil and punishment was ambiguous, uncondemning of the ancestors, less an unquestionable vocabulary of moral choice and more a rhetoric with which to make claims about the personality of evil.

The ambiguity of the Devil was matched by other terms connoting divinity. The “Holy Spirit” left many questions unanswered: it was *Roho Mutheru*. *Roho* was adopted from the Swahili word for “spirit,” which itself was derived from the Semitic term *ruach*, breath or wind.⁴³ *Mutheru*, the adjective which described *Roho*, was a metaphoric term appropriated from Gikuyu social thought. It connoted the clean brilliance of the clouds surrounding Mt. Kenya and practically meant the cleansing of households and people from pollution, *thahu*.⁴⁴ *Roho Mutheru* was practically meaningless for Gikuyu, at least until he was argued over. Jesus was similarly ill-defined: he was simply *Jesu Kristo*, not so much demanding as ambiguous. His character and teaching, though, would provoke much controversy. “Church” was *kanitha*, a term adopted from Swahili *kanisa*.

³⁸The answer to the question “what are *ngoma*?,” in *SA I/Z/12-13: Murio na metikio* (Kijabe: AIM Press, 1912).

³⁹*SA I/Z/12-13: Kabuku ya kuurania* (CSM British East Africa Mission, 1919).

⁴⁰*AIM Kikuyu Language File: Minutes of language committee*, 17 June 1907.

⁴¹*KNA MSS (BS) 1/2: Barlow to Mr. Garriock*, 1 January 1914. For the etymology, Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 518.

⁴²*SA I/Z/12-13: Maurio na metikio* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1911).

⁴³*KNA NBSS 1/81: Barlow*, “Putting the Scriptures into an African tongue,” 1958.

⁴⁴c.f. McGregor’s 1904 *Kikuyu English Vocabulary*, which gives as meanings for *-theri* “whiteness,” “bare,” “purified,” “brilliance”.

Missionaries early worried that the term would be "mirth-provoking": it was related to the verb *nitha*, to be old or aged.⁴⁵ Youthful readers, eager for a hearing from their elders, seized on the incongruity of "church" to make their own claims toward political power, as I shall outline below.

The liberal vocabulary of divinity and evil declined to enter into condemnation and judgment on Gikuyu cosmology. Christian terms for divinity and for evil were foreign, untested. Their indeterminacy made them singularly good to argue with. Joshua, a youthful evangelist/teacher from the Tumutumu mission in Nyeri district, made rhetorical points with *Ngai*, "God," in a debate with an unnamed elder early in 1914:

Joshua had a great war with one of the elders, who maintained that apparently there were two gods, this new "god of heaven" and the old god who was here on earth, whom he and his fathers had always worshipped by pouring fat at the sacred tree. He held that it was much wiser to continue to worship the god who was here on earth because they themselves were here on earth. With great joy Joshua told how he had conquered the old man, "not with anger, but with the wise words which God gave me," by telling him that the God of heaven and earth was one, that long ago He had made the earth and all things in it, and that now He rules both earth and heaven. He ended by begging to come back there again, as the old men had said that they would try to pray to God night and morning as he did, "with our mouths and hearts, and not with a sheep."⁴⁶

Missionaries found in these sorts of encounters the heroic stuff of prayer letters: at a time when hearers seemed more inclined to laugh at them than to listen attentively, Joshua's success in drawing his interlocutors into a conversation about the character of God--and from thence into Christian prayer--marked the promise of liberalism, the possibility that "God" might be a bridge across the chasm separating the "Gikuyu" and the "Christian." What is more remarkable are the polemics of the encounter, the languages in which the elders and Joshua debated the nature, location and identity of

⁴⁵KNA MSS (BS) 1/2: Barlow to Garriock, 1 January 1914.

⁴⁶Marion Stevenson, "A Corner of the Vineyard," in *Kikuyu News* 50 (August 1914).

Ngai. As I argued in Chapter One, *Ngai* was for Gikuyu less an absolute God and more a speculative gamble, a name put to the unknown. Joshua and other youthful converts seem to have made their own gambles on *Ngai* in Christian evangelism. For the word *Ngai* was, conveniently, related to the Gikuyu verb *-gaya*, to allocate or divide. Gikuyu elders usually divided (*gaya*) their possessions among their children when they were close to death. Joshua's claim that the "the God of heaven and earth was one," named *Ngai*, was more than a liberal attempt to link a pragmatic but theologically muddled Gikuyu morality with the transcendent and theocentric claims of Christianity. It was also a polemical intervention in an old Gikuyu problem, the question of wealth and power. By centering creation around the demanding figure of *Ngai*, Joshua conjured up a metaphoric referent by which he and other readers could make systematic claims on the prosperous wealth of their elders. It was a language game they played with numerous other Christian words.

As Joshua's play with the term *Ngai* suggests, Christian terms for good and evil, sin and repentance were good to think with. It was precisely the indeterminacy of the translated terms that allowed readers to work out new meanings, to translate Christian words into Gikuyu debates. Christian liberalism worked to make even unbelievers the unwitting worshippers of God: as a 1919 catechism argued to suspicious elders, Christianity was "all about their own accustomed God whom all along they have been in a habit of alluding to."⁴⁷ Christianity was thus founded as a claim on knowledge, a claim that Christ had revealed to his converts a way of knowing superior to that of the elders. But just as the three persons of the Trinity seemed as strangers to Gikuyu, Christian knowledge answered few questions in itself. It demanded definition, elucidation, to be made into an argument. Christian converts, eager to prove their manhood to skeptical elders, happily stepped forward to the task.

⁴⁷SA I/Z/12-13: *Kabuku ga kuurania* (Church of Scotland Mission British East Africa Mission, 1919).

offered them a way to transcend the particularity of the words available to them, translating the narrow complexities of their material self-interest into a wider morality of Christian ethnicity.

Knowledge, redemption and the vocabulary of generational succession

The polemics by which elders and readers debated the Christian gospel placed profound demands on Gikuyu vocabularies of knowledge, politics, and identity. We can eavesdrop on the language of generational debate by reading successive translations of the gospels. The Word of the New Testament gave readers words to articulate new ways of thinking through old problems, new idioms with which to speculate on the links between virtuous self-mastery and political power. Readers in the 1910s and 20s fashioned the purposive Christian language of mind, conscience, and knowing as a way of holding up their end of ontological and epistemological debates with suspicious elders. But readers' claim to be knowledgeable was a prelude to a further claim on ethnic power and domestic wealth. Claiming to know better than elders, asserting their right to speak, readers in the wake of post-war disaster and famine seem to have found in the Christian language of redemption and forgiveness of sins a powerful metaphor for generational succession, the cleansing of the land, and the burden of ethnic leadership. Christian knowing, conscience, and redemption allowed readers to imagine themselves as a nation-in-waiting, cleansed of its debts and ready to take up virtuous leadership. It was a language that spoke powerfully for readers, firing them with a sense of meritorious virtue and translating them into citizenship in a new, redeemed polity.

The first stage of readers' argument established a vocabulary of knowledge, speech, and subjectivity. The moral demands of Gikuyu debate made careful thought about the self imperative for young converts. Proverbially, converts tongues were thin:

The young men of the mission were driven to invest in the Word by the paucity of words open to them in the old vocabulary. Gikuyu called themselves *mbari ya atiriri*, the "clan of I say to you." Speech made for political identity. But as I intimated in the previous chapter, the wealthy always had more to say. Gikuyu politics was founded on reputation, proved through the local test of domestic order and virtuous self-mastery. Proverbially, wealth was the reason that convinces.⁴⁸ Those whose homes did not speak of virtue and discipline, junior men and the poor, were supposed to sit quietly on the edges of council grounds, trying to catch the words of the elders. The poor were rarely consulted in matters of clan or territorial politics: their dilapidated homes spoke of their delinquency, their lack of ancestral blessing.⁴⁹ The hunger of the poor kept noone awake: they cleaned up the scraps left by the elders at meat feasts, and drank the dregs of the honey beer after the rich had satiated themselves.⁵⁰ Poverty demanded silence, and careful obedience.

The translation of Christian terms opened the range of words in which juniors could prove their self-mastering virtue. Early converts were young men, many of them disinherited by angry fathers or the junior sons of livestock-poor clans. They could scarcely hope for a hearing from the wealthy, or from God. Christian language allowed them to lift the ethnic politics of reputation out of the local context in which virtue was proved, permitting them to articulate a claim to be men, to be virtuous. Christian words set the houses of ritually and socially junior readers in order, allowing them to demonstrate a forgiven self-mastery in the face of elders who questioned the weight of their speech. There was a conservative theology, one that left untroubled the older connections between wealth and leadership, virtuous self-mastery and fitness for politics. But for young readers seeking to prove their manhood, the Word was good news: it

⁴⁸Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1994), 35.

⁴⁹See Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below*, pp. 66-68 for Gikuyu ideologies of class.

⁵⁰Oral interview: Leuel Njuki.

unpropertied, youthful, uninitiated, they were ritual juniors.⁵¹ Elders' knowledge, weighted with property and proven by virtuous self-mastery, was called *úgi*. *Úgi* was an accomplishment of wealth: elders proved their wisdom with goats, the stock they paid to have their children circumcised, to pay brideprice, and to buy their place in generational age-sets. A successful life required an outlay of not less than 172 goats, to pay the fees required to enter into senior courts of elders and, less predictably, for ceremonial slaughter to angered ancestors.⁵² *Úgi* thus linked property with knowledge. But it also linked knowledge with speech. *Úgi* is semantically related to *uga*, the verb "to say," and it was by saying, by arguing vociferously, that elders worked through the demanding requirements of their moral ethnicity. Their maxim was *kuuga na gwika*, "say and do" or, more properly, "doing through speech." Speech was effective. Elders' wisdom was proved in speech, and in the property that backed it. It was sharp: elders when deciding complex law cases spoke of *gutua maciira*, cutting through cases.⁵³ Men's knowledge proverbially cut like knives,⁵⁴ much as elders marshaled evidence in argument by cutting twigs and sticks to mark the points they had agreed upon.⁵⁵ *Úgi*, the provenance of the wealthy, demanded "tact," "sense," "skill," "memory," "reason," "acumen," "acuteness," and "eloquence," in the words of an early dictionary.⁵⁶ These were the forensic skills displayed at elders' councils. The poor, the young, and women were compelled to listen to elders, hanging around the outskirts of council grounds and trying to catch elders' sharp words. Early dictionaries hint at Gikuyu links between listening and understanding,

⁵¹"A poor man's tongue," said a Gikuyu proverb, "is always thin." G. Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, 98.

⁵²L.S.B. Leakey, "The economics of Kikuyu tribal life," in *East African Economics Review* 3 (1) (1956); cited in Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 342.

⁵³John Henderson, *Easy Gikuyu Lessons* (Nairobi: The Times, n.d. (but 1902)), and KVA MSS (BS) 1/2: Barlow to Garriock, 1 January 1914.

⁵⁴Barra, *1000 Kikuyu proverbs*, 109.

⁵⁵C.W. Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1922), 216-19.

⁵⁶These definitions of *úgi* are derived from A.W. McGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary*.

hearing and being.⁵⁷ These links belonged to those outside the circle of elders' knowledge, who were enjoined to listen quietly.

For youthful evangelists seeking a hearing from their prosperous elders, *úgĩ* as knowledge was too demanding. The words and works by which *úgĩ* was proved required property, and disciplined self-mastery. Young converts lacked the wealth that made claims on knowledge. Early converts, I showed in the previous chapter, were often marginal to their families. Some were orphans; others were sons of junior wives of landholders, sent to the mission as a speculative attempt to make allies of the whites. The first "mass movement" to missions in central Kenya came in 1920, after influenza and famine orphaned young boys and girls. Orphaned, destitute or at least poor, and lacking the accumulated virtue of age, early readers could but be silent in the presence of their seniors. The Word of Christian evangelism demanded new ways of claiming knowledge, required the fattening of evangelists' tongues, and of their vocabulary. We can hear readers casting about words to speak with in early dictionaries and catechisms. In 1903, *koririkana* was "thought," "thinking," "considering," "reflecting," all disciplines that *úgĩ* claimed as its own.⁵⁸ A 1908 catechism used the verb *-ruta*, a term implying "to teach," in the question "How do we know (reflexive) the matters of God?"⁵⁹ In 1911, God's watching over and knowledge of humanity was defined with the verb *-ona*, a term which seems to have connoted "considering opinions," "marking," "noticing."⁶⁰ God in 1911 "knows all things we do" with the verb *-úúú*. These competing definitions articulated readers' imaginative attempts to define new ways of knowing, and speaking, that allowed them to hold up their end of an argument in which they were at loss for words.

⁵⁷The CMS missionary A.W. McGregor gave *thikereria*, "listen," for "mind" and a derivative of the verb *igua*, to hear, for "reason". From these I infer that Gikuyu subjectivity, for juniors, came into being as they listened to elders, for which see Peterson, "Translating the Word."

⁵⁸Fthr. A. Hemery, *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: Roman Catholic Mission Press, 1903).

⁵⁹SA 1/Z/12-13: Church of Scotland British East Africa Mission, *Haro ya maundu ma Ngai*, 1908.

⁶⁰SA 1/Z/12-13: *Maurio na Metikio* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1911). For definitions of *-ona*, see Hemery, *Handbook of the Kikuyu Language*.

By the mid 1910s, readers had settled on a useful way of making themselves knowledgeable in the verb *-menya*. The first translations of two gospels (1915) and Acts (1920) provided the words in which they argued out their claims.⁶¹ Jesus' critique of the sophistry of the Pharisees became Gikuyu readers' critique of *ûgî*, and the knowledge of God taught by Jesus became the knowledge, *umenyo*, assumed by the readers. The children of this world, admitted converts in 1915, have a knowledge (*ûgî*) that surpasses the children of the light (Luke 16:8). But this wisdom was craftiness, the sort of knowledge that the Greeks called sophistry. Readers, the inheritors of Christ's "great commission," were given *ûgî* so that they could understand, *menya*, the good matters of God (Luke 24:45). Christ throughout the 1915 version of *Luke* called for his disciples to understand, to *menya*, his teaching. Readers "know with certainty" through the verb *menya* (Luke 1:4). Christ came to give the knowledge, *umenyo*, of salvation for the remission of sins (Luke 1:77), but the elders had taken away the keys of this knowledge (Luke 11:48). True knowledge, *umenyo*, rightly belonged to those called just (*athingu*, a name applied to converts) by *Ngai*, the Christian God (Luke 1:17). Doctrine, the learning of Christ, was *umenyerio*, while teaching was *-menyeria*, to cause to have *umenyo* (Acts 5:24). Scholars learned to know, to *menya*, in mission schools. By 1924, the knowing of readers had become masterful, intimately linked with the knowledge of God: Adam and Eve in the first translation of *Genesis* ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree that promised to "help to *menya*" humanity (Genesis 2:17).⁶² Readers made the verb *menya* the inheritor of the noun *ûgî*, the active fulfillment of the wisdom of the elders and the paradigmatic activity through which knowers could seek out true wisdom.

By 1926, when the New Testament was printed in full, *athomi* had worked out their polemical claims to know better, and more fully, than the elders. We hear them

⁶¹SA I/Z/4: *Luka* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915); *Mathayo* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915); SA I/Z/19 & 20: *Mawiko* (Kijabe: AIM Press, n.d. (but 1920)).

⁶²SA I/Z/19 & 20: *Genesis* (Kijabe: AIM Industrial School, 1924).

proudly reading to their elders the text of I Corinthians 1:27, which claimed that God chose the affairs of children to shame those who had wisdom, *ugi*.⁶³ Readers were frequently dismissed as “children” by suspicious elders, who refused to pray to the undiscerning God of youth. Paul’s letter allowed them to turn their foolish child-likeness into favor with God--and into an indirect affront to their elders. They reassured themselves with the text of James 1:5, which promised that those who lacked *ugi* could ask of God and it would be given. But the knowledge given to readers compassed more than *ugi*: it was the fulfillment of *ugi*, the culmination of the muttered prayers and blind sacrifices of their seniors. People of today, claimed readers in I Corinthians 13:12, see through the glass darkly; they know (*úúú*) in part, but under the reign of Christ they shall know, *menya* in full. The verb *menya* allowed readers to position themselves, and their elders, on a continuum of knowledge: *ugi* belonged to the old dispensation, the craftiness of the past age. Christ demanded learning, teaching, true knowledge, expressed best as *menya*.⁶⁴

If readers were to know better than the elders, they needed a definition of the knower, a subjective position from which to *menya*. Translators’ difficulties over the word for soul give evidence of the strain that readers’ claims to knowledge put on Gikuyu lexicons of selfhood. The problem was ontological: as I showed in Chapter One, Gikuyu seemed to missionary translators to offer no easy words for “soul,” “heart,” “mind,” “spirit,” “self,” or “breath.”⁶⁵ Gikuyu selves were made, fabricated through the hard labor of forest clearing. Abstract categories of self-ness were therefore few, and imprecise. *Muoyo* implied at most “life”: early dictionaries defined the term simply as

⁶³In SA II/Z/4: *Kirikaniro kiria kieru kia Jesu Kristo* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1926 (reprinted 1931)).

⁶⁴There are hints that Paul himself may have thought of the knowledge of Christ in similarly progressive terms. The old knowledge in Paul is the Greek *ginōskō*, a term which connotes seeking to know, inquiry, a progressive seeking-after. “Knowing as we are known” is *epiginōskō*, a more comprehensive term that implies recognition, knowledge, a stative rather than a progressive knowledge.

⁶⁵KNA NBSS 1/81: Barlow, “Translators’ Difficulties,” 27 April 1944.

“alive,” “animate,” “lively.”⁶⁶ *Ngoro*, another candidate, meant something like “inclinations”: one could have a *ngoro nene* and be “venturesome,” a *ngoro ya kuenda* and be “affectionate.”⁶⁷ But inclinations were suspect in a moral economy that prized material accomplishment over abstract thought: Gikuyu reprimanded each other with the proverb that the “*ngoro* eats what it wishes,” a warning against foolish hopes.⁶⁸ *Ngoro* were somehow irresponsible. *Ūgi* itself was another candidate: an early grammar speculatively offered “intellect,” “mind,” and “reason (faculty)” for the term.⁶⁹ But *ūgi* meant too much, to *athomi* and to missionaries, to be used for Christian selves. *Kiiruru* was early tried for “spirit” or “soul.”⁷⁰ The term meant “shadow,” the outline of a person’s body and, potentially, the locus of their soul.⁷¹ Shadows were hard to pin down, and difficult for missionaries to convert to a Christian soul.

Missionaries prevaricated about translating terms of self-ness, and contemplated various Swahili or Greek words for use in their catechisms. Gikuyu readers, eager for words to engage their elders, were less equivocal. A conference of Gikuyu readers from the southern Baptist station in Kambui “strongly recommended” in 1909 a list of terms, translations that reveal readers’ investment in their own selves.⁷² “Conscience,” they insisted, was *guiciria*. It was a function of local councils of Gikuyu elders to try, *ciria*, offenders who infringed on social codes by murdering relatives, stealing livestock, or bewitching others. These councils were important sites of political reproduction, in which the forensic skills of elders, their ability to sway their fellows with the power of their argument and the weight of their wealth, were brought to bear in judgment on the

⁶⁶McGregor, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*. Neither Hemery in 1903 or Hinde in 1904 defined the term.

⁶⁷McGregor, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, and Hemery, *Handbook*.

⁶⁸SA I/Z/13: Stevenson, “Specimens of Kikuyu Proverbs,” 18 October 1926.

⁶⁹Hemery, *Handbook*.

⁷⁰AIM Kikuyu Language file: UKLC minutes, 7 June 1909. The term was used in the 1920 version of Acts 4:32: “the apostles were of one heart and spirit” (*kiiruru*); Acts 5:5: “gave up the ghost”; and Acts 19:12: “evil spirits”.

⁷¹So thought the CMS linguist Leonard Beecher, *The Kikuyu* (Nairobi: Ndia Kuu Press, 1944), 18-19.

⁷²AIM Kikuyu Language file: “Conference of Kambui Christians,” 24 August 1909.

Gikuyu commonweal. Courts were where *ugi* was proved. Kambui's readers, by calling conscience *guiciria*, annexed this political judgment for themselves. The -i- particle after the infinitive stem *gu-* in *guiciria* made the verb reflexive. Conscience as *guiciria* allowed readers to judge for themselves, to extract themselves from the oversight of the elders and to establish their own codes of politics and law.

Kambui's readers similarly made decisive claims on "mind," hoping to translate Christian subjectivity into a platform for ethnic speech. For "mind" the readers offered *kiriku*, *kuirao*, *guathika*, and *ninderika nindaigua*. The first of these terms is a derivative of the verb *ira*, to tell or to say.⁷³ In the form *kiriko*, the verb *ira* becomes the noun describing a condition of being able to say, being able to articulate. The word has another, intransitive sense that would make the term passive: *kiriko* could equally mean being told, being talked to.⁷⁴ *Kiriko* as mind capitalized the old linkage between speech and thought: thinking implied talking, and talking implied debate. This pairing of thinking and speech as "mind" was highly polemical: *kiriko* as "mind" was an call to discourse, a claim that Christian conversion entitled readers to speak to their elders. The point was driven home in the other words that the Kambui *athomi* used to translate "mind." *Kuirao*, an irregular noun, was similarly derived from the verb *-ira*. The fourth term, *ninderika nindaigua*, is a compound of *ira*, to say or tell, and *igua*, a term that meant something like "comprehend," "feel," "hear," or "imagine."⁷⁵ Mind as *ninderika nindaigua* argued that "I have said I have heard." Speech, for readers no less than for elders, made for thought. What young converts hoped to prove was that they, no less than their elders, possessed the means to speak forcefully.

⁷³SA 1/2/26: Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 74.

⁷⁴The ambiguity lies in the *-ika* ending, which can be either "tolerative" or "passive". For which, see Barlow, *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom* (London: Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland, 1931 (first printing 1914)), 70-71.

⁷⁵Hemery, *Kikuyu-English Handbook*.

The Kambui readers' speculation about the meanings of "mind" and "conscience" allowed them to fashion new claims on subjectivity, a vocabulary of self-hood that owed as much to the polemical demands of Gikuyu debate as to the colonizing power of missionary language. Christian vocabulary gave them a language with which to speak. Their attempts to forge new subjects of speech became more solid over the 1910s and 20s, as a Christian language of conscience, soul, mind, and spirit came into being. *Ngoro*, the wandering heart of Gikuyu, came to be "conscience" and "mind," the locus of modern subjects in missionary thinking and a polemical intervention against the elders in readers' thought.⁷⁶ We can hear missionaries and Gikuyu readers thinking through *ngoro* in early catechisms and primers. In 1911, *ngoro* is "what directs us in the body of man, it gives him intelligence...*ngoro* is able to direct us to know (*kumenya*) right and wrong."⁷⁷ *Ngoro* was thus the location from which the activity of Christian knowing, and discerning, operated. A 1912 catechism elaborated this claim: "God enters into the *ngoro* of people and directs them in their ponderings...God has given man *ngoro* to decide (*ciria*) if they are doing well or not."⁷⁸ By 1919, readers claimed that "we know (*menya*) the matters of God (*uhoro wa Ngai*) because of being told by our *ngoro*; and because of seeing what it has made; and also because of the letters it has written, called the Books of God."⁷⁹ The translation placed *ngoro* within the classically Thomistic ken of revealed religion: we know God, argued Aquinas, through the natural world, through our conscience, and through the Scriptures. This was missionary theology at work. But it is important to recognize the new *ngoro* as a powerfully Gikuyu claim on being. By calling their soul *ngoro*, and by claiming for it the judicial functions previously assigned to their fathers, readers crafted words that allowed them to explain themselves. The *ngoro*

⁷⁶The demi-official United Kikuyu Language Committee settled on *ngoro* for mind and conscience in 1916 (*AIM* Committees, misc. 1930s to 1970s file: UKLC minutes, 12 July 1916).

⁷⁷*SA I/Z/12-13: Maurio na Metikio* (London: SPCK, 1911), 7.

⁷⁸*SA I/Z/12-13: Murio na Metikio* (Kijabe: *AIM* Press, 1912), 2.

⁷⁹*SA I/Z/12-13: Kuuria na gucokia* (London: William Blackwood, no date (but marked 1919)), 1.

became the platform for subjectivity, on which readers could build a new politics of knowing.

Subalterns who had no voice in ethnic debate, Christian vocabulary offered young readers a language with which to speak. Seemingly from the earliest years of evangelistic work in Gikuyu, young men seem to have heard in Christian terms means of engaging their elders in argument. Their tendentious translations of "soul," "conscience," and "mind" made Christian vocabulary into a rhetoric, a vocabulary of argumentation.

Claiming to know better than their elders, early readers made up their minds to convert their prostitution to foreign ways into a claim on Gikuyu power.

For readers' claim to be knowledgeable was a prelude to a further claim on ethnic politics and family wealth. I suggested in the previous chapter that their post-war hopes for *ituika* inspired youthful converts to speculate on new, material means of cleansing themselves of the burden of pollution. Their tea, clothing and soap made elders doubt their moral fiber: some thought readers were prostitutes, whoring after foreign ways. Christian language offered young men and women means to convert their moral delinquency into an argument for Gikuyu leadership. Claiming to know better than elders, asserting their right to speak, readers found in the Christian language of redemption and forgiveness of sins a means to translate themselves from prostitutes into forerunners. Especially in the 1926 first edition of the New Testament, we can eavesdrop on a heated Gikuyu debate about generational succession, the cleansing of the land, and the burden of ethnic leadership. This debate was framed within the language of Christian redemption, a compelling idea that allowed readers to imagine themselves a new collective, a nation-in-waiting, cleansed of its generational debts and ready for active work on behalf of Gikuyu commonweal.

As I showed in Chapter Two, early readers eagerly courted pollution, *thahu*, to prove themselves cleansed with the soap of salvation. Some buried dead relatives; others

dined from the bowls and cups that their parents thought were human skulls. Elders thought them prostitutes. Readers hoped to convert their demoralized delinquency into a claim on Gikuyu power. We can hear early converts putting words to their claims on virtue in the first translation of Matthew Chs. 5-7, the "Sermon on the Mount." The text, published in 1915, was rendered into Gikuyu by the CMS missionary Harry Leakey and the reader Stefano Kinuthia Kabetu, the first person baptized at the Anglican station in Kabete.⁸⁰ The sermon begins with the Beatitudes, the pithy prophesies by which Jesus called down the Kingdom of Heaven upon the heads of the Pharisees. In Gikuyu the Beatitudes become promises to readers, prophesying that their moral delinquency would be met with the material reward of political power. The Beatitudes began by promising "those without honor," *matari na mwígatho*, the "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).⁸¹ Readers knew that honor, like power, belonged to those who had proved their self-mastery by accumulating land and livestock. But their poverty made them the subject of the prophesy, firing them with a disciplined sense of unrequited merit. Readers contrasted themselves to the loud wealth of the elders and called themselves *ahoreri*, "gentle," "meek," and "quiet," in verse 4, promising that they would divide, *gaya*, the earth. This was an upstart claim on their inheritance: elders did not divide their possessions until they were ready to die.⁸² But readers felt themselves ready for disciplined adulthood: some had stolen a march on their age-mates by getting circumcised early in mission hospitals; others married female readers and paid brideprices of tea leaves and sugar to fathers-in-law. Converts thought themselves "looked down upon by reason of the matters of righteousness" in verse 10. Oppressed by elders who doubted their merit, ambitious readers rewarded themselves with the promise of political power,

⁸⁰*KNA*: Gladys Beecher papers, Reel 4: Gladys and Leonard Beecher, "The Translation of the Bible into Kikuyu, 1902-1960," n.d.

⁸¹*SA 1/2/4: Uhoro mweka uria wandikiruo ni Mathayo* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915).

⁸²c.f. Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, p. 104, who defines *gaya* as "share out," "inherit," "receive a legacy by inheritance".

uthamaki. They commended those who showed mercy, *tha*, in verse 7, and requested the generosity of wealthy patronage for themselves. But more than mere generosity, they looked for their reward, their *micara*, by reason of their good work, their *mawira mega* (verse 15). The verse asked them to wait until heaven: but the term they used for "reward," *mucara*, were the rewards they received in earthly wage labor. Elders counted their rewards for hard work, *wira*, in goats, land and people. But readers claimed that virtuous wealth, and with it self-mastery, could be earned through wages, the wages they received as compensation for their educated work. As I showed in the previous section, many of them acted out this claim by investing their wage earnings in land, and by saving up for the brideprice they owed to the elders.⁸³ Their investments cleansed cash of its delinquency, and translated wage earning into virtuous work.

The Beatitudes allowed readers to convert their delinquency, their lack of honor and self-mastery, into a prophetic claim on political leadership and a plea for benevolence, *tha*, from the elders. The rest of Jesus' sermon became a series of criticisms against the ungenerous, the elders who refused to recognize readers' claims on adulthood. In Matthew 5:22, readers warned that elders who told them *nduri bata*, "you have no importance (or weight)," would be judged; if they called them *mukigu*, "stupid (or uninstructed)," they would go to hell. Both insults were frequently hurled at readers by their irritated elders, offended at their upstart eagerness to argue.⁸⁴ Readers warned that their language marked them as enemies of God, liable to incur the Christian sanction of judgment. Elders should instead show generously patronizing wealth, *tha*, to *ahoi*, the tenants-at-will whose rights to land were granted by wealthy, landed men in return for

⁸³For *athomi* purchasing stock with the wages they earned at the mission and on settler farms, Barlow, "Mhuri," in *Kikuyu News* 26 (March 1911). See also Bruce Berman's reading of the 1912 Labour Commission report, in *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The dialectic of domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), 60, which argues that young men entered into wage labor in order to initiate a domestic cycle of family formation.

⁸⁴Marion Stevenson, "About some Kenia girls," in *Kikuyu News* 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1915), describing the cursing of one girl inquirer, Ngonina, by her father and mother.

labor and political support (Matt. 5: 42). Many readers were themselves *ahoi*, the sons of junior families, sent to mission stations by calculating patrons whose own sons tended livestock and multiplied wealth. Their plea for *tha* was thus a self-serving gesture requesting patronage. It was also a condemnation of elders' persistent denial of their rights to land. Readers complained that elders' generosity was accompanied by the sounding of the *coro*, the trumpet, before they went out to the paths to give alms, *tha* (Matt. 6:2). The verse was Jesus' condemnation of self-gratifying alms-giving: but in Gikuyu it was equally a critique of the yearly harvest sacrifices made by elders, occasions on which they sounded the *coro* and poured the fat and stomach contents of goats on the boundaries of their land.⁸⁵ These sacrifices were meant to bless the land. They were also pointed reminders of the boundaries of elders' property. This kind of *tha* was self-serving, thought the readers; it ungenerously reminded the *ahoi* of their poverty and, perhaps, bewitched them. Readers called elders' prayers *kurogoyangaga*, mumbling, stammering speech (Matt. 6:7). *Kurogoyangaga* was equally related to the verb *kuroga*, sorcery or witchcraft. Landless readers may have seen themselves as victims not only of elders' greed but of their sorcery, enacted in the mumbled 'sacrifices' in which none of them, ritual as well as social juniors, could take part.

Fired by a sense of unrequited merit, condemning elders for their ungenerous abuses of power, readers argued that Christ's redemption would restore peace and fertility in a land wracked by division and war. Bible translation fired converts' imaginations with hopes of *ituika*. Propelled by famine and influenza, *ituika* payments reached a climax in the early 1920s, as I showed the previous chapter. The New Testament, translated in full in 1926, put words to the moral revolution that readers thought they were working out in their *ituika* payments. They argued most tellingly in the language of redemption, the theology by which Christ purchased the church from the curse of the

⁸⁵C.W. Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1922), 46-48.

Hebraic law and freed it of the deadening weight of sin. The 1926 translation of Paul's letters consistently used the verb *kũũra* for "redeem." *Kũũra* meant something like "pull out," "pluck up," the sort of plucking that Gikuyu did when removing the feathers from chickens or a diseased tooth from a mouth.⁸⁶ In its noun form, *mukuri*, the term named the owner of a strayed goat who paid redemption money to the person who found it.⁸⁷ But the verb had a further connotation: it enacted the cleansing of the land, its transference from wicked pollution to clean brightness, performed at *ituika*.⁸⁸ In 1926, readers announced in the New Testament that their salvation had redeemed, *kuura*, the land from death and pollution. They drove the point home in Galatians 3:13, which announced that Christ had redeemed them, *kũũra*, from the curse, *kirumi*, of the law. A *kirumi* was the privilege of a dying elder, laid on delinquent sons. Some readers had *irumi* laid on them by fathers angered by their youthful absconding to mission stations: but their redemptive labor at *ituika* freed them from elders' anger. They announced that they were cleansed of all evil by virtue of the redemption and freed to perform good things (Titus 2:14). But their redemption was enacted not so much with wealth, with "things which rot." They were redeemed with the blood of the Lamb, which was a better sacrifice than the "things taught to you by your fathers" (1 Peter 1:18).

The Christian language of redemption cleansed readers of the curse of elders' criticisms and allowed them to claim compellingly that their private redemption freed the Gikuyu commonwealth from sorcery and pollution. They capped their argument in Revelation Chs. 12 and 13, where the angels and the "clean people," *andu atheri*, cast the dragon of the Apocalypse out of heaven. That dragon was named *ndamathia*, the mythical beast with which Gikuyu speculated on the link between power and wealth,

⁸⁶These definitions come from Beecher, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 104; and Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 248.

⁸⁷Oral interview. Gerard Gachau Kingori, Gitugi location, Othaya division, Nyeri district. 19 June and 8 July 1998; and Marion Stevenson, "The Kikuyu Language Committee," in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

⁸⁸John Lonsdale noted this juxtaposition in "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 373.

virtue and politics at *ituika*. And *ndamathia*, readers claimed in Revelation 12:9, was the Devil, *Mucukani*, and Satan, *Shaitani*. The translation was unique to Revelation: the deceiving snake in the 1924 edition of Genesis was *nyamu-ya-thi*, the “animal of the ground”;⁸⁹ the “dragon” of the Psalms, published in 1948, was usually *nyamu iria nene*, the “large animal.”⁹⁰ *Ndamathia* as the dragon of Revelation may have been a principled Christian protest against the politics of *ituika*: *ndamathia* as *Shaitani* seemed to make the ceremonies around *ituika* into diabolic spectacles. But readers had few scruples about *ituika*: most of them paid their *mathiri* gladly. It seems more likely that readers thought about dragon/*ndamathia* productively, not as the Devil but as the embodied promise of ethnic power.⁹¹ When the angels and the “cleansed people”—a term by which *athomi* often named themselves—cast *ndamathia* out of heaven they enacted readers’ own victory in the politics of *ituika*, their own mastery over the dragon of power (Rev. 12:9). When the angel announced that the salvation (*uhonokia*), virtuous strength (*uhoti*) and the kingdom (*uthamaki*) of God had come to earth (Rev. 12:10), he announced the genesis of the new regime which readers thought they embodied. Readers seem to have found in the defeat of the dragon of Revelation a way of thinking about their own virtuous defeat of the problem and potential of ethnic power. They overcame *ndamathia* not by plucking its tail hairs but by their redemptive cleanliness, their virtuous knowledge, and by the words of their speech (Revelation 12:11).

Readers’ defeat of the dragon of generational succession highlights the central point I want to make. The Bible was a rhetoric of ethnic debate, translating readers’ prostitution into a vocabulary of generational protest. Brought together by a common sense of unrequited merit, spurned for their soap and cotton clothing, readers found in the

⁸⁹Genesis 3:1, in *SA I/Z/19-20: Genesis* (Kijabe: AIM Industrial School, 1924).

⁹⁰c.f. Psalm 74:13, 148:7, in *Thaburi* (Edinburgh: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1948). Barlow and Charles Muhoro of Tumutumu rendered this text. One passage in their Psalms did use *ndamathia* for dragon: *Psalm* 91:13, “and you shall trample the young lion and the dragon.”

⁹¹This as a tentative amendment to Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau,” 373, who considers *ndamathia* as Satan to be an exercise in political diabolization by jealous *athomi*.

Word a set of stories with which to launch claims on Gikuyu power. They translated Christian categories of self-ness into a Gikuyu platform of speech, finding in “conscience” and “soul” ways of proving themselves worthy of hearing. Claiming the right to speak, they argued that their knowledge of foreign ways suited them for leadership in Gikuyu commonweal. Prostitutes to foreign power, they hoped that Christian redemption, their defeat of *ndamathia*, would usher in the moral cleansing promised in *ituika*. The Word articulated a compelling claim on generational redemption.

I suggested at the outset of this chapter that scholarly calls for “retranslation” risk assuming for academics an interpretive task long claimed by colonized people. Tejaswini Niranjana, for example, initiates a critical practice of translation that disrupts the fixity with which colonial linguists pinned down local languages and allows the foreignness of texts to speak. But Niranjana’s project (like that of her various critics) ultimately returns the task of translation to the translator herself, making translation into an expression of (subversive) genius, enacted from above.⁹² What this chapter suggests is that translation has a popular history intimately bound up with colonized people’s efforts to position themselves within ethnic and colonial discourses. These “popular” modes of translation valued new words not so much for their fixity but for their fluidity, their protean ability to figure ethnic projects. Christian words were for first-generation readers a rhetoric of debate, less a deterministic theology of good and evil and more a set of polemical ideas designed to convince suspicious elders. As I suggest in future chapters, Gikuyu men and women would, in the 1940s, re-translate Christian vocabulary to meet the moral challenges of class formation and British sorcery, finding in the Word words to serve insurgent discursive projects. Bible translation was a popular practice that expressed old moral debates with Christian words. This critical practice of retranslation denies

⁹²For one criticism of Niranjana, see Douglas Robinson, *Translation and Taboo* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 159-69.

scholars' efforts to close it off, to define a liberative vocabulary out of an authorial act of genius.

* * *

The following chapter reconstructs the moral contexts of KCA politics in late 1920s Nyeri district. Focusing on the "female circumcision" crisis of 1929, I highlight the ways that generational theory brought young readers together in opposition to missionary policies. I also highlight the limits of generational theory, the ways that family politics cut across generational allegiances, making it difficult for the KCA to unite young men. By attending to the moral contexts of KCA politics, I propose a revision of Kenya's nationalist historiography.

Chapter Five

“Then, there were no white men” Local histories of the female circumcision crisis

Early one Friday morning in November 1926, teacher Johanna Wanjau and his 60 students at Wandumbi school broke the soil in the school garden and began to plant wattle trees. Wandumbi, one of 54 small “outschools” of the Tumutumu mission station, was built in 1925 on land donated by Nguri wa Gacoki, land that he had only recently reclaimed from his junior cousin, Cege wa Kiragu. Later on that Friday morning, Cege and a number of his relatives appeared and began to pull up the wattle trees that the scholars had planted. Another relative followed, planting sweet potatoes in Cege’s wake. Two men arrived with drawn swords in hand, ready to fight off the frightened scholars should they try to replant the trees.¹ The scene was played out numerous times in the mid-1920s around Tumutumu. Enrollments dropped by half in 1927; missionaries insisted that gardens were “just as essential to a school as a blackboard” and closed numerous outschools.² It looked like a revolution to the Scots, who thought the whole affair inspired by the “world-wide Bolshevik movement” and by “outsiders” from the Murang’a-based Kikuyu Central Association. They wanted the offenders prosecuted for sedition.³

Kenya’s historians have generally agreed with missionaries about the high politics of the garden affair but reversed their value judgments.⁴ Tumutumu’s “war of the gardens” is supposed to have been inspired by cultural nationalism, carried off by a few

¹SA I/C/12 and 13: Philp to DC Nyeri, 17 November 1926.

²SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 9 June 1928.

³SA I/B/10: Philp to McLachlan, 2 February 1927.

⁴c.f. Kenneth King, “The politics of agricultural education for Africans in Kenya,” in Bethwell Ogot ed., *Hadith 3* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 142-156; Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Colonial Kenya* (Stanford: 1966), 114-17; Robert Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu and Masai from 1900 to 1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 255-56. The seminal missionary history of the late 1920s is *Female Circumcision: Memorandum prepared by the Missionary Council of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1929).

clever activists from the KCA. Again taking their cue from British accounts, most historians consider the garden matter a prelude to the well-known crisis of 1929, in which churches throughout central Kenya emptied in response to the missionary demand that all converts sign a pledge abjuring female circumcision. Both the garden affair and the circumcision crisis are supposed to have been sparked by conflict between two more or less self-aware cultural systems: on the one hand a strident, westernizing missionary Christianity; on the other the KCA, defending Gikuyu land and values against British cultural imperialism. Seen in this way, the events of the late 1920s seem almost inevitable:⁵ the KCA mobilized the “forces of Gikuyu nationalism”⁶ in reply to missionaries’ attack on circumcision, a core value of Gikuyu culture. Skillfully manipulating the issues to its advantage,⁷ the KCA launched the anti-mission campaign with circumcision as its rallying cry.⁸ This early clash between two powerful wills, the argument goes, “firmly implanted anti-colonial sentiments among the Kikuyu,”⁹ sentiments later violently expressed in the 1950s, during the “Mau Mau” rebellion.

This chapter seeks out a deeper way of understanding Gikuyu politics in the late 1920s. Earlier chapters dwelt on the poetics of Gikuyu engagement with missionary materials, the salvific rhetoric they made out of soap. This chapter turns to narrative history, specifically engaging with Kenya’s nationalist historiography. What nationalist histories of late 1920s Gikuyu politics cannot explain, I suggest, is the fearfully creative anger of Cege, the junior cousin for whom the outschool garden at Wandumbi represented something more than an ill-defined sign of cultural imperialism. For at least in the 1920s, few Gikuyu would agree that they shared a common mind, a cultural vision of the future thwarted by British colonialism. Gikuyu disagreed among themselves before

⁵Robert Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 140.

⁶Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau*, 105.

⁷Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation*, 250.

⁸c.f. Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities*, 138.

⁹Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation*, 235; Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau*, 105.

they argued with the British. It is this deep history of clan dispute, this terrifyingly local argument over land and kinship, that inspired Cege, a dispossessed junior in clan politics, to take violent action. Without understanding the lived history in which Gikuyu argued with each other over land and belonging, histories of colonial politics and literate politicians will always be shallow, arid, assuming a consensus within African cultures that was never there.

I argue as follows: in distinction to the nationalist account--an account crafted by missionaries themselves--the garden controversy was not simply called into existence by the crafty politicians of the KCA. Rather, the garden crisis was a manifestation of deep, longer-running debates over tenants' rights to land and landlords' rights to dispossess them. Land debates were driven by the commodity trade, which in the late 1920s inspired the wealthy to expand cultivation and drove the poor to wage work. Wealthy and poor argued through their mutual obligations in the garden crisis, marshaling up long-closed histories of land clearance and family definition to gain leverage in British courts. The literate politicians of the KCA were appalled: local family histories threatened to rend the fabric of unity they hoped to weave among Gikuyu. They protested their innocence to the British, and enjoined juniors to be silent, to forget their histories of conflict.

The garden controversy was a crisis in deep politics, a crisis of *mbari*, not an inspired moment in politicians' crafty manipulation of Gikuyu cultural nationalism. So too did the "female circumcision" crisis belong to the politics of kinship. Again in distinction from the nationalist account, I argue that local histories of kinship and landholding, not the arid claims of cultural nationalism, drove Gikuyu resistance to missionaries' ban on circumcision. In Mahiga, an outschool of Tumutumu, the circumcision ban confirmed old worries about land alienation and moral disorder among local landholders and school-goers. Joined in common condemnation of missionary tenants' avarice, local people guarded their homes and their daughters from decay by

distancing themselves from mission schools. In Mathira, in contrast, mission women claimed the future for the circumcision ban, claiming that mission discipline made them better mothers than their circumcised relatives.

Local debates over circumcision, in summary, were never simply determined by a common cultural consensus. Nor were they manipulated by clever nationalists. Gikuyu politics was too low to the ground, too local, to be organized by a political party. Gikuyu in the 1920s no less than before were *mbari ya atiriri*, the clan of I say to you, not so much obedient to a common mind as sharing common rhetoric of trust, and condemnation.

Growing dissent Mbari conflict and the school garden controversy

Propelled by settler demand, peasant commodity agriculture in Nyeri prospered during the second half of the 1920s. Many Gikuyu farmers planted maize, selling the surplus to Indian traders for export to Nairobi or settler farms.¹⁰ The railway reached Karatina in 1926, built with compulsory labor. Both readers and non were compelled to work 60 days.¹¹ A few complained that the builders destroyed Gikuyu villages indiscriminately.¹² Modern transport carried disaster for some. For commodity farmers, the railway was a boon. Missionaries reported that when the railway opened maize and beans were exported in such large quantities that local prices were drastically inflated.¹³ In 1927, 3,302 tons of maize and 581 tons of maize meal were railed out of Nyeri district; in 1929, Karatina farmers exported £18,295 in maize.¹⁴ Wealthy readers and some chiefs took the advantage, opening mills to grind maize and financing shops to buy grain and sell articles of foreign manufacture. In 1927 there were 85 African owned shops and 42

¹⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual reports, Nyeri district, 1924 and 1925;

¹¹KNA DC/Nyeri/1/4/3: Champion, "Rules as to communal work in Nyeri district," Karatina, 14 May 1925.

¹²KNA PC/CP/8/5/2: KCA Nyeri to DC Nyeri, 10 July 1926.

¹³S.I I/B/7: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1926.

¹⁴KNA PC CP/1/1/2: "A short history of Kikuyu province from 1911 to 1927"; DC/Nyeri/1/1/4: Nyeri district annual report, 1929.

mills in Nyeri.¹⁵ Others purchased cars and busses, running a profitable transport business along the newly-opened Nyeri-Fort Hall road. Missionaries reported that Christian readers were among the most avid in pursuing this trade.¹⁶

Hoping to profit from high commodity prices, landlords expanded cultivation. They cultivated fallowed land on ridgetops using plows and other technologies learned from Tumutumu.¹⁷ By 1931, the first year for which statistical data are available, at least 53 percent of the cultivable land in Nyeri was in production. Much of the cultivated land was under maize: Nyeri farmers sold 58.5 percent of their maize on the market in that year.¹⁸ Hyenas were, for the first time, absent from the district: even marginal land, previously left for bush, was coming under the plow.¹⁹ Much of the land was consolidated under a relatively few owners: the average householding in 1931 was 2.79 acres, more than either Kiambu or Fort Hall.

Landlords' expansive pursuit of profit threatened junior *mbari* lineages and tenants with dispossession, leading to heated debates over land tenure and family definition in the late 1920s. For landholders plowed with little regard to their juniors, and used colonial courts to redefine terms of access to clan land. Civil cases in Nyeri's native tribunal jumped from 825 in 1924 to 1,925 in 1926, the year the railroad reached the district.²⁰ Most were land cases driven by landlords' attempts to reclaim tenants' land for *mbari* use. Old contracts of trust and reciprocity between *ahoi* and *mbari* patrons were coming under pressure. Landlords hoped that colonial law would allow them to consolidate land fragments, creating continuous blocks of farmland to put under the plow.

¹⁵KNA PC/CP/1/1/2: "A short history of Kikuyu province from 1911 to 1927."

¹⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1926.

¹⁷c.f. M. P. Cowen. "Differentiation in a Kenya Location" (Nairobi: East African Universities Social Science Council, 8th Annual Conference, 1972).

¹⁸Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petit Bourgeoisie, 1905-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 36-7, citing Fazan's 1931 survey of the Gikuyu reserves. As Kitching points out, these numbers may well be an underestimate of the extent of cultivation.

¹⁹SA I/G/1: Philp, "Evidence before committee for the protection of coloured women in the Crown Colonies," 10 April 1930.

²⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual reports, Nyeri district, 1924 and 1926.

A government meeting called in Nyeri in 1929 to determine native land law illuminated landlords' hardening theory of land rights. Gathered before the DC and a visiting British commission, Nyeri chiefs and a few senior Tumutumu readers argued that the *athoni ahoi*, the intimate in-laws whose labor had cleared the forests for *mbari* in the late 19th century, could not inherit land from their patrons.²¹ *Aciarua*, men "born again" into labor-poor lineages, could "only cultivate where his adopter shows him. He does not acquire general cultivation rights, and in all things must obey his adopter." Land given to tenants was never sold outright, attested the elders: "all that is ever conveyed is a temporary and provisional right to reside, to cultivate, and to keep stock in a given area. There is always right to redemption (by landlords)." Chiefs' and elders' theory of rights closed off *mbari* land from clients of all kinds, making what were previously fertile relations of reciprocity between equals into hierarchies of belonging and tenancy. Barlow, asked to comment on the chiefs' definition of land tenure, was surprised at their hardness of heart. But *mbari* ambitions made it imperative that landlords be clear on their history.

Land, the means by which men worked themselves into adulthood, was in the late 1920s coming to be the preserve of the wealthy. So was marriage, like land an achievement of self-mastering adulthood. Some of Tumutumu's senior readers, hoping to convert their cash profits into Gikuyu respectability, invested in polygamy. Missionaries were alarmed when in 1925 converts began to marry second wives, and admonished the Kirk Session to deal harshly with offenders.²² One reader, Gideon Gatere, had become a government chief in 1924.²³ He married a second wife in 1929, and was banned from communion for years.²⁴ Of the 20 elders ordained for the Kirk Session from 1920 to 22,

²¹SA I/F/9: Evidence given at South Nyeri baraza, 25.9.29, for Kenya Land Tenure Commission.

²²TT Minister of Tumutumu to parishioners, 1925.

²³SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1924.

²⁴TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 6 July 1931.

no less than eight were disciplined for polygamy.²⁵ Most were from Mathira, members of *Mbari ya Njora*. Some readers were becoming expert in Gikuyu wealth. They and other wealthy men monopolized marriageable women. Junior men found it difficult to marry: only 60 percent of grown men in Nyeri were married in 1931, compared to 77 percent in Kiambu.²⁶ The average householder in Nyeri had 1.82 wives, considerably more than in Kiambu or Fort Hall. Marriage and landholding were becoming prerogatives of wealth.

Unmarried junior men, hoping to earn bridewealth, turned to wage labor in increasing numbers in the late 1920s. Education more than ever paid dividends. Settler demand and the construction boom in Nairobi pushed up wages even for unskilled laborers: workers in Nyeri earned 16/ per month in 1925, rising to 30/ per month by 1930.²⁷ But skilled workers earned much more: carpenters received 100/ in 1929; hospital dressers got 90/. Teachers were paid somewhat less: Stanley Kiama Gathigira, the highest paid, received 100/ but others with lesser qualifications earned from 35/ to 65/.²⁸ Unskilled workers found it more difficult to work their way into higher paying jobs through schooling. Increasingly forced to spend time working for cash, migrant wage workers found it difficult to mix bouts of schooling with labor. The average age of pupils in Tumutumu's schools dropped dramatically in 1927.²⁹ The children of the wealthy increasingly took the place of adult men in schools. Education marked out divisions of attainment between Gikuyu, now coming to be divided by the domestic anguish of class formation.

Gikuyu argued through older expectations of social order to meet the moral anguish of class formation. The most audible debates were those conducted among the literate. But as I shall suggest below, literate politics were not necessarily the most

²⁵TT "Ordinations Book, elders."

²⁶KNA VQ/1/20: Fazan, "An examination of the rate of population increase of the Kikuyu tribe," 1931.

²⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual report, Nyeri district, 1929; SA LG/1: Philp, "Evidence before the committee for the protection of coloured women in the Crown Colonies," 10 April 1930.

²⁸KNA Educ/1/926: Church of Scotland Mission claim for 1929.

²⁹SA I/E/11: Tumutumu annual report, 1927.

divisive, or deeply felt. Middle-class readers formed political parties in the late 1920s to contest elections to the government's Local Native Council. Prosperous readers from across the Tana River formed the Kikuyu Central Association. Invested in trade rather than land, they thought the wealthy Njora men of Tumutumu looked like *mbari* dictators. As young men in 1922, they had followed Harry Thuku and were dismissed from their apprenticeships by the missionary Horace Philp. Their leader in Tetu division, Hezekia Mundia, was an ex-mason who worked for the District Commissioner as a court interpreter.³⁰ He owned a tea shop that served as the office for the KCA in Nyeri, and bought a car for KCA use.³¹ His colleagues were similarly prosperous: Ayubu Thinwa, a leader in Magutu, owned a bus service in Karatina; Jusufu Kangau, also from Magutu, owned a butchery in Karatina.³² KCA men owed their wealth to cash profits, not land cultivation. Many seem to have had uncertain titles at home: Mundia, for example, was involved in a court case concerning his land at Gachika.³³ Joshua Kiboi, a divisional leader at Othaya, was junior half-brother to chief Wagura. He worried that Wagura would take his inheritance.³⁴ Kangau, a teacher at Magutu outschool, was a tenant of Chief Murigu.³⁵ Wambugu wa Maina, a teacher at Mahiga outschool, was paid with donations after he left mission employ.³⁶ The KCA in Nyeri began as a vehicle of rural dissent for prosperous traders unsure of their grounding in the new commodity economy.

Nyeri KCA men, members of junior families, had little to gain from wealthy Mathira readers' *mbari*-based prosperity. They sought instead to resuscitate hopes of *ituika*, reviving generational unity to fight landlords' aggrandizement. At a public

³⁰SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 13 December 1928.

³¹KNA PC/CP 5/1: Champion, Handing over report, Nyeri district, 1927; SA I/C/12 and 13: Champion to Philp, 10 January 1929.

³²SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 9 June 1928. For a further description of the occupations of KCA men in Nyeri, see John Spencer, *The Kenya African Union* (London: KPI Limited, 1985), 63.

³³SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log books, 1928, entry for 10 November.

³⁴SA I Z 6: Tumutumu station log book for 1928, entry for 2 August.

³⁵Oral interview: Daniel Muriithi.

³⁶Oral interviews: Elijah Kiruthi, Hudson Kimunyi.

meeting at the DC's office in 1928, Mundia declared the KCA to be in favor of payment of *ituika* goats, beer, and female circumcision.³⁷ Missionaries thought it a reversion to paganism, but other readers heard a call for generational redemption. They remembered that after the meeting Mundia slaughtered five sheep at night.³⁸ It looked like the feast of *ituika*. The KCA advocated for title deeds for individuals, a measure that would favor progressive tenants over *mbari* dynasts.³⁹ They called themselves *irungu*, straighteners, promising to straighten out elders' corruption. Mundia, Kiboi, and others accused the missionary Philp of urging government to shoot them as Thuku had been shot in 1922.⁴⁰ The KCA revived memories of Thuku. It also kindled new hopes of *ituika*.

The KCA men thought themselves the next generation to conquer the dragon of power. They read the Bible for inspiration. In 1928, two years after the publication of the New Testament, KCA readers founded a vernacular party paper and named it *Muigwithania*, one who makes people listen and agree together.⁴¹ Some of the Epistles used the term to translate Christ, the "mediator" between the new covenant and the old. The title articulated the KCA's right to be heard, to act as a conciliator between men and women, elders and youth drawn apart by the hardening interior texture of Gikuyu ethnicity. But *Muigwithania* was equally a claim on politics, on the inheritance of power promised to those who redeemed the land. One of the New Testament texts where *muigwithania* appeared was Hebrews 9:15, which claimed that the mediator (*muigwithania*) of the new covenant had come for the redemption, *gukura*, of those who sin. The redeemed, the passage continued, will receive their inheritance, *igai*, forever. By naming itself *Muigwithania*, the KCA capitalized the link between reconciliation and

³⁷SA 1/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 24 May 1929; Spencer, *The Kenya African Union*, 74.

³⁸SA 1/C/9: Zakayo Muruwakagotho, Samuel Maguta, Jason Karugu and Samuel Kahumbu to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

³⁹SA 1/F/9: *East African Standard*, minutes of KCA meeting of 25 May 1928.

⁴⁰KN4 PC/CP 8/5/2: KCA Nyeri to DC Nyeri, 10 July 1926.

⁴¹Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 153; and Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities."

power, forgiveness and politics, knowledge and authority, first worked out in the early years of the decade.

Generational theory brought KCA readers together in common hope for leadership in Gikuyu polity. But as I suggested in Chapter Two, generational theory answered few questions in itself. Generational politics were a rhetoric, a vocabulary with which to conduct family debates over personal identity and public morality. Gikuyu were still *mbari ya atiriri*, the “clan of I say to you.” Politics, even generational theory, was conducted not in obedience to a common authority but as a local argument. The parochialism of the “deep” politics of family and clan made it difficult for the reconcillers of the KCA to claim obedience: the “high” politics of literacy was, in the 1920s, conducted largely in isolation from “deep” political debate.

The tensions between “high” and “deep” politics internal to the KCA’s project were laid bare in Tumutumu’s school garden controversy of 1924-28. As I outlined above, missionaries and historians alike have been quick to attribute the controversy to the nationalist agitators of the KCA. In distinction from this line of interpretation, I suggest below that the garden dispute was a threat to the generational politics of the KCA, not a manifestation of its nationalist agenda. The garden controversy manifested long-running local debates over land tenure and family belonging, debates aggravated by the expansive greed of landlords in the late 1920s. The local violence of the garden controversy opened up divisive histories of *mbari* formation for public discussion, setting landlords and tenants against one another in intractable dispute. Gikuyu conflicts were more deeply rooted than missionary gardens. Such local conflicts were dangerous for the reconcillers of the KCA: they threatened to dissolve generational unity in a sea of *mbari* arguments. Eager to silence the local histories raised by the garden dispute, KCA readers condemned the perpetrators as ignorant fools. Progress, the KCA knew, demanded

knowledge, skill with the pen, and careful reconciliation among the warring factions of Gikuyu ethnicity.

Missionaries' gardens inspired but did not generate Gikuyu arguments. By the 1920s, missionaries were worried lest modernity corrupt Gikuyu, turning converts into "clothed loafers."⁴² Government concurred, warning that

the danger is that the village youth who receives no hand and eye training and does not get his mind opened to the joy of creative work leaves school at St. II and considers himself an educated man, is disappointed in his hopes for clerical work, falls into the hands of malcontents and becomes a nuisance to himself and to everyone else in the reserve.⁴³

"Literary education" looked dangerous to the colonial mind dominated by anthropological prejudices about the capacities of the "African mind." The Phelps-Stokes Commission, sent out in 1924 to apply the lessons of Tuskegee to Africa, offered to turn the hyphenated delinquency of the half-educated into productive governability. The Jeanes School, set up in Kabete in the commission's wake, trained teachers to connect education to the "daily occupations of the village."⁴⁴ The problem with literary education, thought the school's missionary principal, was that it was "derived from a foreign environment." Schooling should instead proceed from the known to the unknown, using lessons from the students' "home and immediate surroundings" to shape the curriculum. The aim was to effect the "translation of those traits of unselfishness, cooperation and practical usefulness which a sound education should build up in the life of each individual pupils." It was an agenda suited to the needs of colonial governance. Tumutumu acquired its first two Jeanes teachers in 1924.⁴⁵ Both were employed in outschools laying out gardens and teaching students to plant. They provided the seeds; at

⁴²SA I/E/10: Philp to McClure, DC Nyeri, 17 November 1917.

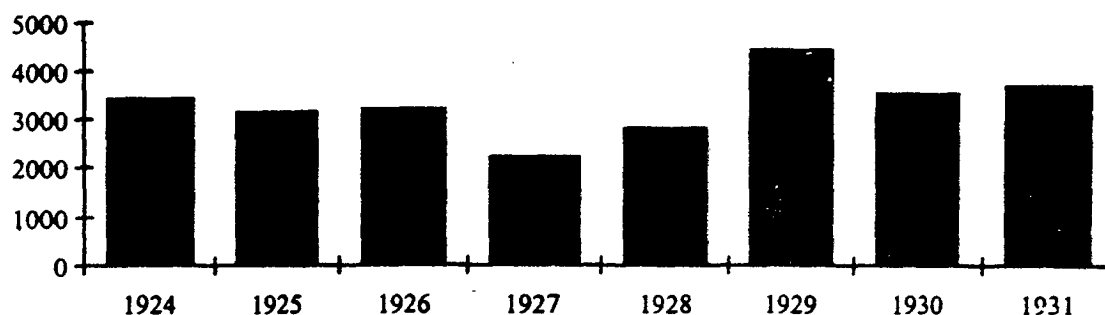
⁴³KNA Educ/1/1392: Wisdom, Inspector of Schools to Director of Education, 19 July 1928.

⁴⁴SA I/Z/8 and 9: "Jeanes School Kabete: Its origins and aims," n.d. (but 1926).

⁴⁵SA I/A/38: Philp to DC, 19 November 1926.

the end of the growing season, students were supposed to return all the produce to the mission.⁴⁶ School gardens looked like a debased form of Gikuyu tenancy, with missionaries as landlords.

Chart 2: Attendance in Tumutumu schools, 1924-31



Sources: Annual reports, in SA I/B/7

Missionaries' move into commodity farming aggravated pre-existing *mbari* debates over land and made all Gikuyu worry about dispossession at the hands of the British. From 1924 to 1928 Tumutumu was gripped by a "garden crisis." Philp reported early in 1924 that potatoes, peas, and other vegetables of European origin were being pulled out of outschool gardens.⁴⁷ Some thought them "thahu cursed." Missionaries' avarice looked to upset *mbari* fertility. The most sustained resistance, however, occurred in 1926, the year that the railway arrived in Karatina. In Wandumbi, wattle trees planted by scholars in fertile river basins were pulled up by an angry crowd who planted sweet potatoes in their place. In Kangeita, five women stole loads of firewood stacked beside the school and cut a swathe through the school garden.⁴⁸ In Mukangu intermediate school, attendees leaving the church on Sunday morning uprooted crops in the school garden. Some moved householdings up to the edge of the boundary.⁴⁹ In Kiruru's, a

⁴⁶SA I/A/31: Barlow to Cromack, 14 April 1927. After 1926, landholders were allowed to reap school gardens and keep the produce.

⁴⁷SA I/A/39: Philp to Filleul, 2 April 1924.

⁴⁸SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 18 January 1926.

⁴⁹SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 19 November 1926.

crowd pulled out seeds planted by students and planted sweet potatoes. When the scholars replanted the seeds, another crowd planted grass in their place.⁵⁰ At the height of the controversy in 1927, enrollments in Tumutumu's schools dropped to 2258 students. Missionaries closed tens of troubled schools, leaving only 35 open in 1927, down from 61 in 1925.⁵¹ Hospital attendance similarly fell as rural dispensaries were closed.⁵²

Missionaries were convinced that the controversy was orchestrated by the KCA and other "outside agitators," as Philp wrote in 1927:

I need not worry you with the details as to the rise of an anti-European spirit in certain part of the Kikuyu country continuing certain elements of the Harry Thuku movement of 1922...and of the attempts to capture our mission as being one of the few centres of loyalty to the British Crown and Government etc....three school gardens were maliciously destroyed by the orders of this new political party and I consulted with our DO who asked me to lay formal charges, which I did...the political associations have a connection with the worldwide Bolshevik movement, and also with people of Norman Ley's ilk.⁵³

Philp reported that the KCA had sent lorries full of paid agitators to cause trouble for the mission.⁵⁴ But KCA leaders seemed surprisingly interested in putting a quick end to the troubles. KCA leaders and outschool teachers held meetings long into the night in Mundia's tea shop: it was difficult to reach consensus.⁵⁵ Mundia, Johanna Kuniya and other leaders met with missionaries in 1929 and were "extraordinarily friendly."⁵⁶ They lauded the mission for its work in fostering progress in the district and favored agriculture as part of schools' curriculum. Philp, surprised, wondered if Nyeri leaders planned to break away from the Nairobi KCA. But in Nairobi Johnstone Kenyatta, editor of the

⁵⁰SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1928, entry for 8 November.

⁵¹SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 29 November 1928; SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1927.

⁵²SA I/C/1: Tumutumu hospital report, 1927.

⁵³SA I/C/7: Philp to McLachlan, 2 February 1927.

⁵⁴SA I/G/1: Philp, evidence before committee for the protection of coloured women in the Crown Colonies, 10 April 1930.

⁵⁵SA I/C/12 and 13: Champion to Philp, 6 October 1926.

⁵⁶SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1929, entry for 19 July.

KCA journal *Mwigwithania*, promised that the KCA had no intention of running down the mission. How could they pull up the palisades of the kraal in which their cattle live? Would they not fall prey to hyenas?⁵⁷ Kenyatta ended by asking that anything that harmed the church be reported to him. The gardens controversy threatened to upset the KCA's hopes for domestic order. In 1932, Mundia and others meeting with missionaries at Tumutumu disowned the perpetrators of the anti-garden agitation, calling it the "work of fools who did not understand their leaders."⁵⁸

Why did Mundia think the anti-garden agitation the work of leaderless fools? The answer sheds light on the tensions internal to the KCA's hopes for generational renewal. Ambitious straighteners, the KCA men plainly thought themselves defenders of Gikuyu commonweal, "warriors of the pen" whose literate skill could protect Gikuyu polity from British greed. They wrote letters of protest to colonial officials, claiming in English the tribal resolve and unity they hoped to manufacture in reality:

We refuse that these gardens be cultivated because the land is ours from time immemorial. We cause the affair of land to continue always: that is why we do not wish you to trouble the matter of our land because we shall not leave there forever... We cannot consent to these little gardens becoming the rule of government.⁵⁹

British greed threatened Gikuyu commonweal, and offered the KCA, skilled with pen and paper, means to demonstrate their usefulness. KCA readers wrote letters on behalf of worried but illiterate landowners, and ferried disputants to court for hearings before the DC.⁶⁰ Literate accomplishment promised to serve tribal unity, and brought reconciliation between *mbari* landlords and youthful critics. In 1928 KCA leaders and government chiefs agreed that no mission should be allowed to cultivate land for

⁵⁷KNA DC/Machakos/10B/13/1: Kenyatta, editorial, in *Mwigwithania* 4 (August 1928).

⁵⁸SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book. 1932, entry for 23 July.

⁵⁹SA I/F/9: Mundia and Allan Gicuki to Calderwood, 30 April 1926.

⁶⁰SA I/C/12 and 13: Philp to DC, 17 November 1926.

demonstration purposes in the reserves.⁶¹ Land alienation brought readers and chiefs together, promising unified politics. More, the KCA's skill converted school gardens into a claim on white settlers' land. Ayubu Thinwa, a KCA leader at Magutu, suggested in a sly letter to Tumutumu missionaries that scholars should plant up the settler Mr. Leakie's farm adjoining the school plot.⁶² By such acts of political judo, KCA readers hoped to prove themselves worthy spokesmen of Gikuyu polity.

Ambitious forerunners, the readers of the KCA thought themselves representatives of a unified generation and, potentially, leaders of a unified tribe. The garden controversy threatened their claims from within. That is why Mundia and other KCA leaders were strikingly ambivalent about the garden agitation. For the garden affair threatened to set landlords and tenants against one another in irresolvable conflict, opening up the private clan histories that the KCA hoped to subsume within generational theory. The garden affair was a crisis of *mbari* politics, generated by landlords' eager expansion of land cultivation in the late 1920s. It was fought as a battle between landlords and clients, mobilized by family histories of land clearance and alliance. Such local debates were dangerous for the reconcillers of the KCA, endangering them both as politicians and, more tellingly, as landholders.

Tumutumu's garden controversy played out as a debate between landlords and tenants over access to land. The commodity boom of late 1920s allowed landlords to expand cultivation with plows, planting up reclaimed land with maize for export. Their eager pursuit of profit generated heated, litigious argument within clans over land tenure and family definition. Gikuyu conflicts ran deeper, and longer, than Philp's garden experiment. Some landlords used school gardens to attempt to close off *mbari* argument, proving their title to disputed land by sponsoring schools and earning missionary support in court. This was the case at Wandumbi school. The conflict at Wandumbi originated

⁶¹SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 9 November 1928.

⁶²SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 9 June 1928.

with 19th century pioneers' need for labor to clear the forest. Nguku, the *mbari* founder, had sired children with a woman not his wife; her offspring were incorporated into the clan as a junior lineage.⁶³ By the 1920s, intimate agreements struck to civilize the forest became the stuff of domestic dispute. In 1926, Ngure wa Gacoka, the senior elder of the clan, had by right of *mbari* ownership reclaimed land previously farmed by Cege wa Kiragu, a member of the junior lineage. Ngure cemented his ownership of the reclaimed land by inviting the Scots to build a school on a part of it. Mission scholars planted wattle, a long-maturing crop, in the fertile river valley behind the school. The school garden looked as though it would establish a permanent claim for Ngure on the disputed land. Cege, alarmed that the scholars' gardens would render his junior lineage landless, purchased land on the other side of the river basin in an attempt to prove his title and contain school expansion.⁶⁴ His brother in law, the KCA reader Johanna Kunyiha, wrote to remind the scholars and their teacher, Johanna Wanjau, that they were but tenants on Cege's land:

I have understood the story that you publish that we stop the Gospel of God in Tetu. But it is you who have stopped it because you are highway robbers, you and the Kirk Session. You have land, Johanna, good teacher the robber, in Tetu. My issue, you good teacher, is that it is not the Gospel that brought you to Tetu but robbery.⁶⁵

School gardens looked like the most intimate form of robbery. When scholars began planting a second stand of wattle in the river basin, Cege appeared and methodically uprooted some 1,391 seedlings.⁶⁶ Two of his relatives accompanied him, menacingly parading around the football field with swords to chase away the scholars.⁶⁷

⁶³SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 13 December 1928.

⁶⁴SA I/C/12 and 13: Johanna Wanjau, teacher at Wandumbi, to Dickson and Philp, 10 November 1926.

⁶⁵SA I/A/38: Johanna Kunyiha wa Wamwea to Johanna Wanjau, teacher at Wandumbi's school, 13 November 1926.

⁶⁶SA I/C/12 and 13: Johanna Wanjau to Dickson and Philp, 10 November 1926.

⁶⁷SA I/A/38: Philp to DC Nyeri, 17 November 1926.

The schoolteacher reported that a group of younger men followed Cege, taunting scholars and planting sweet potatoes to replace the uprooted wattle.

Local debates over land tenure and family redefinition drove the violent confrontations of the garden crisis. The fearfully creative anger of Cege was not simply generated by the vague threat of missionary expropriation, or by a reactionary cultural nationalism. Cege's violent reaction to Ngure's wattle was driven by a longer, more terrifying dispute between landlord and junior family members. The local violence of the garden crisis at Wandumbi, as elsewhere in Nyeri, belonged to *mbari* politics, to the pressure of family redefinition spurred by landlords' eager attempts to profit from the commodity boom. The garden controversy was driven by crisis in the "deep" politics of kinship.

The missionary Philp, disgusted, closed the school for two years. He was convinced that the nationalists of the KCA were at the bottom of the agitation. But the dispute at Wandumbi was too intimate for KCA leaders to control. Indeed, KCA leaders seem to have seen in the garden controversy a terrifying threat to the high politics of generational theory. The sorts of clan histories mobilized to fight school gardens in Wandumbi and elsewhere threatened to rend the fabric of unity worked on by KCA leaders, setting landholders against tenants in intractably local argument.⁶⁸ More, such clan histories threatened the position of KCA men at home. Many KCA leaders came from Tetu; Philp knew of only five members in Mathira. Tetu in the latter part of the 1920s was more densely populated than any region in Gikuyuland, not excluding the regions close in to Nairobi in southern Kiambu district.⁶⁹ Its fertile land allowed extensive cultivation, particularly of maize and other commodity crops grown for export during the latter part of the 1920s. But the profits of the maize trade made land tenure a

⁶⁸John Lonsdale elaborates on this internal contradiction in the KCA in "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 374-381.

⁶⁹S.H. Fazan, evidence, in *Kenya Land Commission: Evidence and Memoranda* (Nairobi: HMSO, 1934), 1006.

live issue. Tetu was at the center of the gardens controversy: many of the schools closed in 1926-7 were in the division.⁷⁰ KCA leaders, uncertain of their own standing at home, worried that *mbari* histories, openly aired during the garden dispute, would ruin them. It paid for the KCA to be vague about history.

Eager to avoid divisive debates at home, some KCA readers thought the garden controversy cooked up in by Mathira readers blithely unconcerned with Tetu realities. One anonymous reader, angered at wealthy readers' complicity with intractable missionaries, wrote to the Tumutumu pastor Solomon Ndambi in 1926:

I want to ask you what you the readers at Tumutumu are thinking. Your learning is nonsense. It is fitting to a barbarian rather than you. You eat your mother's cunt, you ministers at Tumutumu. I know your stupidity is because you have learned at Tumutumu and you have never come to see the other places in the country. You think you are big people but that is nonsense. If we have our land taken by the Europeans where will you go and your ministers? Or will you go to England with the Europeans and teach the children of Europeans there? You are a fool along with the other ministers like your mother's baby and what will you do? You are Gikuyu, you cannot become white people.⁷¹

School gardens looked like bad politics: preachers who followed too closely after missionaries were prostitutes who should have been forerunners. But more, Mathira readers' insistence on the gardens was ignorant: it reflected their insularity, their unconcern with the real anguish of land shortage in Tetu. Ndambi and other Tumutumu pastors were impolitic: they seemed not to recognize that Gikuyu politics were too contentious to be legislated on with missionary social engineering. Divisive histories of land ownership and family definition, the reconcilers of the KCA knew, demanded careful ambiguity of leaders who hoped to bring Gikuyu together.

Poised between landed interest and political ambition, KCA leaders did not know what to do about the gardens. They prevaricated, maintaining their innocence to

⁷⁰KNA DC Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1926.

⁷¹SA I/C/12 and 13: Anonymous letter to Solomon Ndambi, 2 November 1926

missionaries and lecturing worried *mbari* juniors about the need to be obedient to leaders. The garden crisis was less an inspired moment in a linear nationalist history and more a desperate attempt by worried tenants to protest landlords' greed. Their eager rehearsal of divisive *mbari* history endangered the KCA's vision of disciplined unity, making it difficult for readers to speak. The garden controversy was a crisis of literate readers' politics, not a manifestation of their clever agitation.

The garden crisis points toward the central point I want to make about the KCA in the late 1920s. As the garden debate demonstrated, KCA politics depended on ignorance of history, demanding that Gikuyu ignore the pressingly local histories of land acquisition and family belonging that divided them. But late 1920s' debates over land tenure, played out as arguments over school gardens, challenged KCA leaders' strenuous efforts to make Gikuyu forget family history. By parading Gikuyu differences, the garden agitators taught politicians that deep politics were not so easily papered over.

Historians have been reluctant to learn the lesson. The 1929 female circumcision crisis, coming quickly on the heels of the garden controversy, has been written about in ways that mask contentiously local histories. The controversy is generally understood to be a crisis of culture: on one hand a stridently westernizing Christianity backed by colonial power; on the other the KCA, defending a core Gikuyu cultural value against modern inroads. What this analysis misses are the local debates, like that at Wandumbi school, that energized the conflict. "Gikuyu" were never of one mind about their culture: the past and the future were always argued out in local, intimate contexts. The 1920s had done little to bring intimate disputants together: as we have seen, commodity farming aggravated land disputes by reopening the closed histories of *mbari* formation. It was within these lived histories, within the local politics of kinship, that Gikuyu argued about the circumcision ban. They argued in old languages of conflict, harnessing the rhetoric of

ituika to contest the demoralizing authority of missionaries. In so doing, they worked into insurgent claims on colonial power.

The moral politics of the female circumcision crisis in Mahiga school

The history of the "female circumcision crisis" in Gikuyuland at large is now well known, requiring only a brief recounting here.⁷² Presbyterian and Baptist missionaries in Kiambu and Murang'a insisted in 1929 that all communicants should sign the *kirore*, a pledge to forgo girls' circumcision. It was an old teaching, introduced by the CSM in 1916: but by the late 1920s first generation readers, with maturing daughters, had to face the issue.⁷³ They resolved at a province-wide meeting of Christian elders, held at Tumutumu in March 1929, to go along with missionaries.⁷⁴ Spurred by the forcible circumcision of a mission girl in Kiambu, John Arthur of the CSM's Thogoto station toured the reserve seeking supporters. The KCA in Nairobi mobilized, accusing Arthur of stealing Gikuyu land and women. The scurrilous song called *muthirigu*, the "song of the big uncut girl," spread from Kabete throughout the reserves. It called loyalists women, and demanded the deportation of mission readers and chiefs. By August 1929, the Thogoto station had lost all but 250 of 2,500 communicants.⁷⁵ It looked like a political crisis to Arthur, who thought the whole affair inspired by a "Bolshevik Ante-Order."⁷⁶ Historians have often agreed with Arthur about the high politics of the crisis. But in Tumutumu, the affair generated little heat: enrollments nearly doubled in 1929, the same year that Scots schools in Kiambu were gutted. Only in Mahiga, a Tumutumu

⁷²See David Feldman, *Christians and Politics: The Origins of the Kikuyu Central Association in Northern Murang'a 1890-1930* (Ph.D., Queen's College, Cambridge, 1978); Jocelyn Murray, *The Kikuyu Female Circumcision Controversy, with Special Reference to the Church Missionary Society's "Sphere of Influence"* (Ph.D., UCLA, 1974); Strayer, *Making of Mission Communities*, Ch. 8.

⁷³For the law, SA I/C/11: Staff meeting, 31 July and 1 August 1916.

⁷⁴Tumutumu archives: Conference reports: Notes on meeting regarding female circumcision at Tumutumu, 8-12 March 1929.

⁷⁵Brian McIntosh, *The Scottish Mission in Kenya, 1891-1923* (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1969), 411.

⁷⁶SA I E/8: Arthur, "The origin and development of the education of the Kikuyu in Kenya," 2 June 1930.

outschool in Othaya division, did the *kirore* inspire mass defections. The variable trajectories of the crisis in Nyeri, more than any other evidence, demands that we attend to local histories to explain the conflict. For in the absence of overarching ethnic institutions to control the debate, the gender trouble generated by the *kirore* was fought, and resolved, within the local politics of kinship.

I want to illuminate the deep politics of the circumcision crisis by focusing on the local history of Mahiga outschool. My argument, in short, is that the crisis of 1929 grew out of a long, local debate structured by pressing Gikuyu worries over land alienation and girls' morality. The school had from the early 1920s been the subject of dispute over tenants' rights. Missionaries thought themselves freehold owners, and hoped to convert Mahiga into a center for evangelism in Othaya division. Landlords considered the missionaries impolitic tenants: their stone buildings threatened to alienate land. They pulled up surveyors' pegs, destroyed missionary buildings, and chased away visiting preachers. More, girls' morality was at stake: mission school teachers threatened to lead local girls into prostitution. When missionaries banned female circumcision in 1929, landlords' fears were confirmed: the *kirore* pledge marked out property for alienation just as surely as did the surveyor's pegs. Readers were similarly concerned: the circumcision ban transformed them from forerunners into prostitutes. Local worries over girls' morality and land alienation drove the conflict of 1929. The history of Mahiga, I suggest, challenges KCA-centered accounts of the crisis by illuminating the imaginative labor by which local people criticized the *kirore*, and argued into politics of protest.

Mahiga school was begun by the Anglican missionary Laight in 1907, a year before the Scots occupied Tumutumu. Elders disagree about the terms on which Laight occupied the land. Some remember that at the time of his arrival the land was forested, being cleared for cultivation. Laight planted lilies and trees to mark off his claim and

cleared the land of bush in much the same way as did their fathers.⁷⁷ Others remember that pioneers of the Ambui clan had already cleared the land when Laight arrived. Their fathers were compelled to give land to the mission by the government's Chief Wagura, a member of a different clan from Kimumu.⁷⁸ Wagura was one of a class of prosperous traders who worked routes in Masailand, trading Gikuyu pottery and iron for Masai livestock.⁷⁹ Like many other traders, Wagura fostered kin relationships with Masai families, and spoke Masai well.⁸⁰ The mission plot looked like Wagura's effort to extend his landholdings: he stole Ambui land to build the school.⁸¹ One elder remembered

He was a warrior and used to steal land for his many wives. He had come from Kimumu which was inhabited by the Aithegeni. He stole from the Ambui but they could not fight back because he was feared.⁸²

In the eyes of British law, Mahiga was a freehold plot of some 16 acres extent. The CMS paid annual ground rent of Rs. 5.⁸³ But the Anglicans, lacking staff, failed to occupy the land. The structures Laight had built fell into disrepair. Ambui landlords turned missionary poverty into clan profit: they planted up the land with maize, beans, sugar cane and bananas.⁸⁴ When in 1917 the Scots mission acquired the station from the Anglicans, they found stands of wattle of "considerable age and growth" planted on the plot.⁸⁵ Tumutumumu sent a teacher from Mathira to reinvigorate the school in 1920.⁸⁶ The Ambui landholders thought him a tenant, a *muhoi*. The teacher grew crops in a small

⁷⁷Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

⁷⁸Oral interviews: Elijah Kiruthi; Lawii Ndiritu.

⁷⁹c.f. Peter Marris and Anthony Somerset, *African businessmen: A study of entrepreneurship and development in Kenya* (London: Routledge, 1971), 31-46.

⁸⁰Oral interview: Elijah Kiruthi.

⁸¹Oral interview: Grace Gathoni.

⁸²Oral interview: Elijah Kiruthi.

⁸³SA I/F/9: CNC to Arthur, 22 February 1929;

⁸⁴Oral interview: Grace Gathoni.

⁸⁵KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1929.

⁸⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/4/3: Permit for Mahiga school, 13 March 1920.

garden for his own consumption, leaving other standing crops undisturbed.⁸⁷ He lived in a small house, with a thatched roof. The school boasted over 140 in attendance in 1927.⁸⁸ Some were Ambui; others were from different clans. Eighty-five people were on the communion rolls that year, up from 11 in 1923.⁸⁹ Many used their skills in record keeping and writing to good profit: Mahiga men in the late 1920s took the lead in supplying the growing population of workers in Nyeri, Nanyuki and even Nairobi with snuff, eggs and other commodities.⁹⁰ From its earliest years, Mahiga was a businessmen's venture. Schooling enriched family politics.

Tumutumu missionaries in the late 1920s hoped to turn Mahiga into a Presbyterian bastion in an otherwise Catholic region. They sent the newly-ordained pastor Paulo Kahuho to Mahiga in 1926. Kahuho was a nephew of Gacece, the *Mbari ya Njora* spokesman who had originally given land to Tumutumu mission. In 1928 Arthur Barlow himself was posted to Mahiga. His stone-walled house was a project for Tumutumu's industrial artisans.⁹¹ Junior artisans walked three days to and from Nairobi for corrugated iron; Barlow ordered a toilet set, iron bedstead, table and chairs and a wardrobe sent to station.⁹² To the Ambui whose crops grew on the land, Barlow's expensive house looked like a threat. Permanent buildings established title to land, making it difficult for landlords to reclaim land lent to tenants. Missionaries' stone buildings were impolitic, making teachers look like thieves.

Ambui landholders hoped to drive missionary scoundrels away with long-established strategies for dealing with importunate clients. They kept their children from the school, and destroyed mission buildings. The sons of the senior landholder at

⁸⁷SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1928, entry on 10 August.

⁸⁸SA I/C/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1927.

⁸⁹Tumutumu archives: Statistics: report for 1927.

⁹⁰c.f. Marris and Somerset, *African Businessmen*, 45-52.

⁹¹KNA Educ/1/1392: Weller to Director of Education, 20 August 1928.

⁹²Oral interview: Lawii Ndiritu; SA I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 17 December 1928.

Mahiga, Gathondu, pulled out the corner posts of Barlow's house at night. One of his nephews explained:

(Missionaries) borrowed (*kuhoya*) land from the clan that owned the land. Wagura was the leader then. They came to him and begged for the land but the owner of the land refused. When the mission put in posts on the site Gathondu started uprooting those posts. They were opposed to the occupation of the mission because they did not want the white man and too because he was a stranger and it's quite hard to give land to somebody you don't know.⁹³

Missionary avarice threatened to make fools of *mbari* patrons, and brought strangers uncomfortably close to home. When the mission asked Gathondu to return the posts, he refused.⁹⁴ A few months later, when the government surveyor came to settle the boundaries of the mission plot, a crowd of young men followed him and pulled up his pegs. The surveyor, frightened, fled.⁹⁵ There were rumors that Marion Stevenson, touring the reserve to teach sewing classes, was surveying land for European occupation.⁹⁶ Women stayed away from her when she arrived at Mahiga: only eight unmarried girls came, and refused to carry her luggage for her. They later returned the prayer cards and sewing material that she had lent them.⁹⁷ Just as prayer cards identified potential converts, British survey pegs marked out land for expropriation. Speculating that British power amounted to thievery, Mahiga men and women guarded their souls and their land from missionaries' grasp.

More than thievery, there is evidence that landholders feared that Mahiga school was a brothel, leading girls to prostitution. Paulo Kahuho, the pastor, the school teacher Ibrahim Karue and Charles Murigu, the hospital dresser, were all Mathira men, strangers

⁹³Oral interview: Lawii Ndiritu, with Joseph Kiodoro.

⁹⁴Oral interview: Francis Huria.

⁹⁵SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1928, entry for 20 November.

⁹⁶SA I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 21 August 1928.

⁹⁷SA I/C/7: Stevenson to Arthur, 16 August 1928.

whose moral fiber was unknown.⁹⁸ Stevenson attested that Mahiga fathers were nervous of them: teachers from a foreign place could scarcely be trusted. As one elder put it,

Gathondu knew when his daughters went there and started wearing the matonyo clothing they would become prostitutes. Matonyo clothes used to be thought of as strange. Most old people did not want their daughters to go to school. They thought a girl was wealth (*indo*) to be dealt with.⁹⁹

The Mathira teachers represented an intimate threat to familial reproduction and wealth. Fathers tried to keep girls from school. Emily Gathoni remembered that her father beat her daily when she began school at Mahiga in 1925.

When the ears were sewn back, that's when they stopped beating me. They said I was a useless person because I did not look like the others. Then I went back home but everyone hated me. Nobody loved me. And my husband went through the same ordeal. They were living near the school (Mahiga) in huts because nobody like them at home.¹⁰⁰

Readers' sewn-back ears and cotton clothing marked out their difference, their alienation. In 1924 stories circulated that the DC would not allow persons with pierced ears and beaded decorations to attend school at Mahiga.¹⁰¹ It was a comment on the sartorial demands of the mission, where sewn-back ears and cotton clothing marked Christian commitment. But more, the rumors commented on the delinquency of mission scholars, their prostituting eagerness to traffic with scoundrels.

Ambui men worried that girls' waywardness was the beginning of land alienation, the cutting edge of tyranny. Some whispered that the missionaries were in league with Chief Wagura, whose brutality was legendary around Mahiga location. A number of elders remembered that it was Wagura who insisted that Barlow and Kahuho be allowed

⁹⁸SA I/C/7: Stevenson to Arthur, 16 August 1928.

⁹⁹Oral interview: Macharia Gachanu.

¹⁰⁰Oral interview: Emily Gathoni.

¹⁰¹SA I/E/10: Philp to District Commissioner, 18 November 1924.

to settle on the land in 1928.¹⁰² Some thought Wagura wanted to use the mission to get labor for his own house. One remembered performing government work, *kiaro*, cutting logs in the forest and building a bridge over the river at Wagura's home.¹⁰³ Another testified that Wagura was "just like the Europeans. He treated all people like animals."¹⁰⁴ Missionary thievery and chiefly domination were alike: both brought outside authority close to home, and threatened to disrupt elders' productive control over their homesteads.

Turning Wagura's tyranny into a politics of protest, some local people backed the schoolteacher Wambugu wa Maina for chief in 1928.¹⁰⁵ Maina, a member of the KCA, was a trader in maize at the nearby center in Kamahia. He was a leader of the Mahiga readers: in 1925 he polled well against the Othaya chief Njagga in elections for the government's district council.¹⁰⁶ Opposition politics began to look like generational struggle. Some dissident readers called their fellows to use their cash to guard the land from outside tyranny. They asked for 1/ from every school-goer, hoping to use the money to purchase the land that the school was built on.¹⁰⁷ The leader of the Mahiga KCA branch, Joshua Kiboi, was a junior brother to Wagura.¹⁰⁸ Family politics stoked generational struggle: in 1928 he, along with a crowd of young men, was arrested by Wagura for pulling up the government surveyor's pegs around the mission land.¹⁰⁹ Chiefly corruption and missionary avarice called young men to duty to protect the land.

Missionaries' stand against female circumcision in 1928 convinced both young readers and Ambui fathers of the Presbyterians' delinquency, their morally-disabling tyranny. As I explain below, the Kirk Session's 1928 ban on circumcision seemed to local men and women further evidence of missionaries' avarice: the ban threatened to

¹⁰²Oral interviews: Onesimus Kingori; Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁰³Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁰⁴Oral interview: Onesimus King'ori.

¹⁰⁵SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1928, entry for 21 September.

¹⁰⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/6/1: DC South Nyeri, 27 February 1925.

¹⁰⁷SA I A 37: Philp to Fazan, DC Nyeri, 5 November 1928.

¹⁰⁸SA LZ/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1928: entry for 2 August.

¹⁰⁹SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1928: entry for 10 November.

destroy families, making women into prostitutes and children into wanderers. It was as a threat to their moral integrity that local people criticized the pledge to forgo circumcision. Missionaries termed them "agitators," beholden to the nationalists of the KCA. But as I suggest below, richly-textured local histories of conflict inspired the circumcision conflict at Mahiga, not the arid discourse of nationalism. Mahiga people argued through their own conflicted histories and futures in 1928. Their creative anger, based on an acute sense of injustice and by an awareness of their predicament, drove them to part ways with delinquent missionaries in 1929. Local arguments, the specific politics of kinship and landholding, drove the "circumcision crisis," for it was as a threat to kin that Mahiga people understood, and combated, the circumcision ban.

Tumutumu was the first testing-ground for the anti-circumcision ban.

Missionaries no less than Gikuyu elders had progeny on their minds. The ban at Tumutumu was driven by doctors' conviction that circumcision complicated childbirth, endangering the lives of both women and children. Horace Philp, the mission doctor, attended the circumcision of three dormitory girls at the mission hospital in 1915.¹¹⁰ He was revolted at the operator's "cruelty." In 1916 the CSM resolved to prohibit the practice in all its hospitals.¹¹¹ In the late 1920s, Nyeri women for the first time began to go to mission-run maternity centers to give birth. The first stone building at Tumutumu station was a maternity ward, built with Gikuyu money in 1924.¹¹² Missionaries attended 46 maternity cases in 1926, and 58 in 1927. Most were formerly dormitory girls, wives of prosperous readers hoping to ensure easy childbirth through missionary medicine. Philp was appalled at their difficulty in birthing: he thought circumcision hardened tissue and prolonged labor.¹¹³ One former teacher remembered that Philp shed tears after he

¹¹⁰SA I/G/1: Philp, "Evidence before the committee for the protection of coloured women in the Crown Colonies," 10 April 1930.

¹¹¹SA I/A/32: Jones to GMS, CMS and AIM missionaries, 4 August 1916.

¹¹²SA I/B/7: Tumutumu Hospital report, 1924.

¹¹³SA I/J/1 and 3: Philp, "Artificial Atresia in Kikuyu women," May 1928.

performed a post-mortem on a former student who died from complications in childbirth.¹¹⁴ In March 1928, Philp prevailed on the Tumutumu Kirk Session to ban female circumcision entirely for communicants, asking that members sign a pledge, a *kirore*, to forgo girls' circumcision.¹¹⁵ He was worried that the KCA's resolution a week earlier in favor of *ituika* goats, beer and female circumcision would lead to a resurgence of "paganism" in the district.¹¹⁶ The *kirore* was missionaries' effort to commit Christians to principled opposition to KCA reactionaries.

Kirk Session elders, most of them landlords from Mathira, were similarly worried at the KCA's resolution. Generational theory threatened landlords with protest from dissatisfied tenants. Seizing on missionary discipline as a means to argue about family politics, they contended that the ban on circumcision made for family virtue, for progress. Historians have often dismissed them as "loyalists," stooges to foreigners.¹¹⁷ That was how missionaries patronized them: obedient prodigies, future leaders of a pious citizenry. But as I showed in previous chapters, Mathira readers thought themselves forerunners, pioneers leading Gikuyu commonweal into the future. They argued that the *kirore* amounted to a new civility, a new virtue, suited to the demands of the new political order. The teacher Stevenson Githii at Wandumbi school articulated their claims in 1929:

If we wish to be regarded as civilized and fit to take part in governing Kenya Colony these old barbarian (*cenji*) customs must go...All the matters about virtue and pollution in connection with the Kikuyu girls who are circumcised or not circumcised have to go. The Christian girl will have true virtue and it will prevent her from exposing herself to the shame of circumcision, not encouraging her to do it.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

¹¹⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1928; McIntosh, "The Scottish Mission in Kenya," 408.

¹¹⁶Barlow, "Tumutumu notes," in *Kikuyu News* 113 (Sept. 1930).

¹¹⁷Bethwell Ogot's "The History of the Loyalists" is a conspicuous exception.

¹¹⁸TT Nyeri Parish Reserve: Stevenson Githii at Wandumbi to Calderwood, 25 September 1929.

The word Githii used to characterize circumcision, *cenji*, was an insult: his opponents in the KCA were uncultured, ill-prepared for new conditions. The force of Githii's language highlights the heat of the debate. For mission readers insisted that new politics demanded new forms of private virtue. They argued that the *kirore* made women more fertile, adding to household progeny and preparing Gikuyu for commerce among civilized people. The *kirore* was for mission readers a proof that family progress made for good politics, that the future belonged to those invested in fertile homes.

They were led in argument by the readers of the Progressive Kikuyu Party, a Mathira-based association of prosperous farmers. Formed to contest Local Native Council elections in 1928, their candidate from Tetu, Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho, was one of the wealthier men in the district and head of his prosperous *mbari*. He was also "one of the strongest members of the Kirk Session." He refused to circumcise his daughter, the first to do so at Tumutumu, and married her to a prosperous teacher.¹¹⁹ As landlords, PKP readers worried that the KCA's generational politics would cause trouble with tenants, upsetting domestic productivity and reopening old and dangerous histories of *mbari* formation. *Mbari* interest dictated that readers be careful about generational succession. Gideon Gatere, chief, polygamist and early PKP leader, called the KCA "hyenas" in front of the Provincial Commissioner: they ate fat sheep demanded as contributions from other people at night. He asked government to abolish the party.¹²⁰ The PKP made a point of declaring its refusal to pay goats, to drink beer, or to engage in circumcision in its constitution.¹²¹ They held meetings during the daytime, and chose the rising sun as their emblem.¹²² Their symbols pointed to their hopes for progress, for a new dawn after the darkness. They insisted that progress belonged to family prosperity,

¹¹⁹Philp, "Polling day at Karatina," in *Kikuyu News* 107 (March 1929).

¹²⁰KCA DC/Machakos/10B/13/1: "Notes on a meeting at Nyeri," in *Mwigwithania* 1 (8) (Dec. 1928-Jan. 1929), 5.

¹²¹SA L/G/5: "Maundu ma gutongoria gikundi," n.d. (but 1928).

¹²²SA L/G/1: Philp, "Evidence before committee for the protection of coloured women in the Crown Colonies," 10 April 1930.

not generational redemption: cleansed customs would bring new domestic wealth and with it, political recognition from the British. Their leaders said so in 1929, in a letter to the *East African Standard*:

When we consider our old barbarous customs and how other nations have advanced and we have been left behind, we see that the beginning of civilization is in the honouring of women, because the strength and power of a people come from its women...we of the PKP hate customs which bind the Kikuyu and prevent them from knowing the true religion, and going forward in civilization and becoming a strong people, able to receive their inheritance in mind and body. We want them to be whole in body, able to speak the truth, and give evidence in their cases, so that the Government can trust us as being a full grown nation with clean customs.¹²³

The PKP readers hoped their wealth, bolstered by the evidence of missionary medicine, would earn the trust of government and allow them to speak matters of national politics. *Mbari* property, not *ituika*'s competition, seemed the surest route to political power. Missionary medical engineering and Gikuyu landlords' ambitions coincided at Tumutumu to condemn female circumcision as backward, regressive, a matter to be regulated through church law.

Mission readers' theology of prosperity seems to have carried the day throughout Mathira division. Attendance at schools skyrocketed, rising from 2,855 in 1928 to 4,434 in 1929, the same year that crisis gutted churches elsewhere in Gikuyuland. The most dramatic rises came in outschools in Mathira: attendance at Chief Murigu's school in Magutu ballooned from just over 100 in 1927 to 800 in 1929. Most new students were young, children of prosperous farmers cashing in on commodity profitability.¹²⁴ Mathira landlords seem to have seen a bright future in the *kirore*. They invested in schooling, sparking a revival at Tumutumu while most other Protestant churches in Gikuyuland

¹²³SA VZ/8 and 9: Letter from Arthur Tutu and Meshak Muurage to *East African Standard*, quoted in "Memo prepared by the Kikuyu Missionary Council on Female Circumcision," 1 December 1931.

¹²⁴SA VE/11: Tumutumu Annual Report, 1929.

suffered. Missionaries exulted, attributing the relative lack of upset in Tumutumu to their success in “defeating” the KCA during the garden crisis of 1926. The mission had already weathered the nationalist storm, they thought. The absence of fuss over circumcision testified to their success in building a strong, committed church.

But in Mahiga, the Kirk Session’s ban on circumcision sparked a wholesale defection from the church. The differences between Mathira and Mahiga, more than any other evidence, highlights the limits of missionaries’ KCA-centered interpretation of the crisis. For Christian readers were never of one mind, never a unthinking constituency to be manipulated by clever missionaries—or by inspired nationalists. Christian ideas, I suggested in previous chapters, embodied a rhetoric with which to argue about old political projects. In Mathira, landlord theory annexed the *kirore* to serve the interests of family progress. In Mahiga, the circumcision ban added to long-running debates over land and girls’ morality, making young men and old agree about the need for moral redemption, *ituika*. All sides employed dualistic languages of moral choice to condemn their opponents. Local histories, and local debates, vitally shaped Gikuyu reactions to and investments in the circumcision ban.

In Mahiga, the *kirore* proved Ambui elders’ long-standing worries about the Mathira men and land alienation. More, the ban threatened school-goers’ claims to be *mambele*, those in front, by turning learning into perversion. The Mathira minister Kahuho announced the church’s stand on the matter one Sunday in May 1928. He wanted all church members to sign the *kirore* promising to leave the practice of female circumcision. Grace Gathoni remembered the service in this way:

The church sent a letter about female circumcision from Tumutumu. On a Sunday, Kahuho after the service read the notices that he had. I was in the service. He read that no-one would be allowed to circumcise the girls and those who are opposed to this would do so in writing. Also those who supported it also do so in writing. When he read it, people started murmuring. And he said, “Please, *menyai i nyumba ya Ngai*” (please, know this is the house of God). At

that moment, Joshua Kiboi and Petro Wamumbuini stood up and said, clenching his fist, "Who are you calling the police?" In Kiboi's ears, the word please sounded like the word police. "Don't you know the police are in Nyeri?" At that time another elder held Kiboi's coat from the back to have him sit down, and to avoid him hitting the minister. Kahuho stood up and said, "If you want to start a war, don't do it in the presence of women." The matter stopped there but as people left the church, they went saying they will not go back again to that *githomo*.¹²⁵

prevent

Kahuho's "please" sounded like "police" to the listening ears of readers like Kiboi. He knew that Kahuho's English, however politely phrased, threatened to bring outside authority to bear on private disputes, making the most intimate of family decisions into a matter of decisive force. Kiboi's reminder--"don't you know the police are in Nyeri"--was an effort to mark off a space for vernacular debate, staving off the threat of outside dictatorship. The division at Mahiga began as with an argument over law, over the church's right to dictate to families on matters of private choice.

Kiboi's violent anger at Kahuho highlights Mahiga readers' deep disappointment at the circumcision ban. The mission vow seemed like betrayal: it made readers out to be fools, not forerunners. Dunstan Kiboi, a Mahiga KCA reader, wrote as much in 1931: the mission, as he put it in a despondent letter to the DC:

left us from May 1928 up to date for the new custom against circumcision which has not pleased anyone in our tribe of the Gikuyu.¹²⁶

The mission had strayed from readers' path to the redeemed future, turning them from forerunners, citizens of a cleansed polity, into fools. As I show below, their disappointment inspired worried Mahiga readers to make three cutting criticisms of the *kirore*. First, in the *kirore* missionaries presumed to intrude on family matters best left to private discussion; second, uncircumcised women were likely to become prostitutes,

¹²⁵Oral interview: Grace Gathoni.

¹²⁶Mahiga Dunstan Kiboi to DC, 28 October 1931.

wasting Gikuyu fertility; and third, the ban on circumcision confirmed Gikuyu fears that outschools were the leading edge of land expropriation. All three criticisms of the *kirore* expressed Gikuyu men's apprehensions that the circumcision ban would lay waste to fertile households. The *kirore* was a crisis of gendered order, demoralizing women and making men fear for the future. But more than an undifferentiated fear about female prostitutes, the *kirore* inspired real, pressingly local worries about land and progeny. For in the pledge that Kahuho asked his hearers to sign, Mahiga readers detected the signs of an invasive power, marking out Gikuyu property for expropriation just as surely did British surveyor's pegs.

In the first moral context of Gikuyu criticism, missionary laws presumed to dictate to families about matters best left to private discussion. The *kirore* looked like a dictatorship, subjecting family matters to rigid outside interference. Kiboi had said as much in violent argument with Kahuho in church. The Mahiga reader William Kihara restated the case to the Tumutumu elders in 1928, encouraging them to leave the matter up to families' choice.

As regards the question of circumcision, it's better for you to remove doubts for I cannot put my signature for things I am not aware of. Again, I don't have words to say that I shall circumcise or not. I pray God to give me a child. I don't want to be in doubt because I come from people who circumcise and I am also circumcised. I am not discouraging those who know the benefits of circumcision not to circumcise or those who know the loss to circumcise.¹²⁷

Men like Kihara were pragmatic about circumcision practices. Children were a blessing, the reward of prayer and hard work: householders should be free to deal with them as they wished. For circumcision had always been a family matter. Prosperous *mbari* elders organized and sponsored circumcision rites, hosting girl relatives in their homes for weeks of instruction, eating, and healing. Circumcision was a domestic proof

¹²⁷SA I/C/12 and 13: William Kihara to Elders, 20 April 1928.

of men's reputation and women's integrity. The anti-circumcision pledge hardened the intimate politics of familial fertility into a matter of law. Readers like Kihara, agreeing with their elders, thought it better to leave such matters to *mbari* decision-maters. It was a criticism that the Mahiga readers shared with other Gikuyu, worried that missionary intransigence would needlessly complicate family debate. From Kiambu, Ezrom Kamande promised the missionaries that he supported the *kirore*, but advised caution:

Such a issue should first be tackled by the elderly and trusted ones before it is handed over to the young. The Gikuyu say that "a skin is not as good as a hide," that is that the elderly man must proceed with an act before it is done by a youth.¹²⁸

The dissidents' first criticism, then, was that the *kirore* was presumptuous: no church should presume to make such intimate decisions for families. It was elders' responsibility to ensure that children were disciplined and mature. Church courts, made up of young and inexperienced men, should better leave such matters to the wisdom of age.

The second criticism of the *kirore* dwelt on its consequences for families' integrity. The *kirore* made all men worry that uncircumcised women would become wayward, that their unrestrained sexuality would make Gikuyu posterity go to waste. This was a the primary theme of the *muthirigu*, the "song of the big uncircumcised girl," sung widely in Mahiga in 1929 and 30. Missionaries thought the song introduced from Kiambu: it was first sung at a combined Local Native Council meeting in Nyeri late in 1929.¹²⁹ They argued that it was inspired by radicals working for independence, and asked the DC to jail the singers.¹³⁰ But the song took on its own life in Mahiga, and spoke vividly of local concerns about women's sexuality and men's production.

¹²⁸S.A I/A 40: Ezron Kamande at Gituamba Lands, PO Mitubiri, to Arthur, 8 November 1929.

¹²⁹S.A I/A/38: Philp to Pease, DC Nyeri. 21 December 1929.

¹³⁰S.A I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report. 1931.

Emily Gathoni and others remember that the song was most often sung by young men, especially in market places or along the road near Mahiga school.¹³¹ Mission teachers, worried, told their students to take to the bushes if the singers invaded the school.¹³² Ester Mwihaki Mbau, who sang *muthirigu* as a young woman, remembered that the song was often directed at William Waweru, one of the leading elders left in the mission. It went

William has lost his way (he is infertile), his wife has miscarried, and they are asking one another, "who is going to take care of us?"¹³³

The *kirore* sapped mission readers' fertility, dissolving households and making parents worry about children's discipline. Missionaries' rules made men into women and women into men, disrupting household order. Another song sung in Mahiga warned mission scholars of gender trouble:

I cannot marry a *kirigu* (uncircumcised girl). She told the husband she will make the baby sleep, then beats him.¹³⁴

Uncircumcised mission women were insubordinate. More, they did little to reproduce men's households, as another song attested:

I am not going to marry one *kirigu*, when she finds cultivation difficult, she will be climbing *mariki* (a slippery, weak tree).¹³⁵

Uncircumcised women lacked resolve, the moral fiber required to dig the land. Having failed the test of adulthood, they could not be trusted to invest their sweat in

¹³¹Oral interview: Emily Gathoni wa Waciira.

¹³²Oral interview: Danson Kamenju.

¹³³Oral interview: Esther Mwihaki Mbau.

¹³⁴Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

¹³⁵Oral interview: Gerard Gachau King'ori.

productive labor. Production and reproduction were intimately linked in Gikuyu thought: as I showed in Chapter One, women's work in the fields evoked the birthing of children. The circumcision ban upset household order, endangering posterity and making men and women worry about the future.

Clothed in mission garb, uncircumcised women were likely to become prostitutes. Readers in Mahiga and elsewhere were particularly worried about Nairobi, where uncircumcised girls, lazy and uncommitted to families, seemed likely to fall into evil living. Jessi Kariuki, the vice-chair of the KCA, thought that missionaries should clean up the city before they interfered with Gikuyu gender relations. In a letter to the CSM missionaries, he asked for hard figures on the number of "uncircumcised girls in the schools, those who have come to Nairobi and those who have gone elsewhere." He also asked for the number of circumcised girls who had gone to the city and come home. The evidence, he projected, would prove that "those who are protected (from circumcision) are the first to join prostitution." Kariuki thought church elders primarily at fault.

I would like you to explain to me how you caused Mbaraniki to have a township. All people find that the Mbaraniki township is visited by lazy women and it has become like their hiding place to enable them to practice prostitution and after a few days they come to Nairobi. People complain that the township was started by elders from (Thogoto) and this information of women visiting there is soiling Christianity and causes people to complain about the church. Do you not see that the elders from your church do not get things straight and do not have good cooperation? They just look badly and make Christianity amenable to abuse.¹³⁶

Kariuki accused the missionaries of failing to control the dangerous urban jungle of Nairobi. The *kirore* led women astray, making them lazy and irresponsible. More, churchmen dangled the lure of Nairobi before their eyes, tempting them with illicit pleasure. Churchmen's irresponsibility, not the disciplining practice of female circumcision, was what threatened Gikuyu.

¹³⁶SA I/G/1: Jessi Kariuki at Pumwani to CSM Kikuyu, 6 January 1933.

This debate over discipline and social control of irresponsible women was also about land, the third moral criticism leveled by critics against the *kirore*. In Mahiga possibly more than elsewhere in Gikuyuland, missionaries' ban on female circumcision seemed to mark out Gikuyu property for expropriation. Barlow came to live in his furnished stone house on the Mahiga plot in April 1929. Within days, he received a note asking "by what authority I had come to occupy the land."¹³⁷ The note was penned by Gathonde's son, a KCA reader, on behalf of the landlord. Barlow sought out a meeting with the landlord, who said he had never agreed to the erection of a European house. He had little objection to the Mathira teachers staying on the land: Barlow said he thought them relatively harmless *ahoi*. Barlow himself, however, was a definite threat: within days of his occupying the land, young men uprooted survey beacons marking the plot.¹³⁸ *Mbari* claims to land rights were at stake; Gathonde hoped to force Barlow to see reason. Singers of *muthirigu* taunted school-goers, calling them children of foreigners.¹³⁹ The mission readers felt strongly enough about the matter to fight with fists to prove their Gikuyuness. Other dissidents signed a petition asking that Kahoho and the Mathira teachers be deported.¹⁴⁰ Clan interest dictated that Barlow, an impolitic, avaricious tenant, be shipped off with them. For some worried that missionaries and other whites wanted to marry uncircumcised girls.¹⁴¹ The *kirore* looked like an upstart try by missionary tenants at thievery, turning landlords' generosity into private gain.

The "female circumcision" dispute in Mahiga, like elsewhere in Gikuyuland, was for landlords a crisis of property rights. Missionaries' ban on circumcision threatened to sap Gikuyu land and wealth, desiccating the land and making households go to waste. But even more materially, the circumcision ban proved elders' worries about tenants'

¹³⁷SA I/F/9: Barlow to Mrs. Philp, 19 April 1929.

¹³⁸SA I/C/7: Arthur to Barlow, 24 April 1928.

¹³⁹Oral interview: Henry Muchiri Mbage.

¹⁴⁰SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1930, entry for 29 March.

¹⁴¹Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

designs on their property. Landlords' expanded commodity production in the 1920s, I demonstrated above, led to heated litigation about family definition and land tenure. This debate over tenants' rights was urgent around Mahiga: the school inspector estimated the population at 500 per square mile in 1928, almost as many as in Tetu.¹⁴² But similarly in the southern Gikuyu districts of Murang'a and Kiambu, the crisis over *kirore* played out as landlords reworked their relations with outschools and teacher/tenants. In Kiambu no less than Mahiga, Scots missionaries worried about rumors attesting to their imminent departure. The KCA, some said, would inherit the buildings after the Scots left.¹⁴³ In at least one outschool, Ngecha in Kiambu district, landlord and pastor dueled each other for control of the school building.¹⁴⁴ Missionaries worried that their legal titles to outschool property would scarcely stand up in court, since everything had been built with donated materials.¹⁴⁵ The Ngecha elders, like other assertive landlords, appreciate the position: they wrote to John Arthur to remind him that they had built the school "with their own hands, without any cooperation from the mission."¹⁴⁶ Landlord theory was useful in keeping missionaries, like other greedy clients, in their place.

In Mahiga and elsewhere, Gikuyu men thought the *kirore* an impolitic effort by missionary tenants to dictate to landlords. Their assertiveness made them dangerous. Writing from the Rift Valley, an anonymous reader said as much to Arthur in 1929.

Is it not you who teach us that one has a right to do whatever he likes with his own things? Are these things (girls) not our property (*indo*) like the Savings Bank into which you have entered to cause confusion? Your behavior is like a thief whilst you are professing that to covet is not good. Is the God that wished us to be to circumcised untrue and yourself the true God? Or, was he a fool?...Perhaps you preachers, you have two sharp catching ends like those of the leeches... You preachers have closed the way of God with all your lies. The circumcision has

¹⁴²SA I/E/11: Weller, industrial training inspection report, 20 August 1928.

¹⁴³SA I/B/13: Arthur to McLachland, 26 February 1931.

¹⁴⁴SA I/C/3: Civil case of Josia Kangethe wa Kihanga, minister at Ngecha church, Keheko's location, Dagoretti, 20 December 1929.

¹⁴⁵SA I/C/8: Calderwood to Missionary Council, 15 June 1932.

¹⁴⁶SA I/C/3: Elders of Ngecha to Arthur, 6 January 1930.

been practiced since long ago among us, and you do not produce more children than we do and we circumcise. God has taught us to circumcise, and he is our God (*Ngai*).¹⁴⁷

Missionary tenants were leeches on Gikuyu property. The characterization posed *mbari* interest against duplicitous clients, and warned landlords against unthinking benevolence. Later, in the 1930s, landlords would work out this redefinition of patronage in colonial courts, seeking to limit clients' rights to land. In the immediate context of 1929, missionaries' *kirore* seemed to threaten patrons with nothing less than dispossession. Barlow's house spoke of the danger of alienation to European settlers; more, it was a domestic threat to Gikuyu prosperity. It is for this reason that the worried singers of *muthirigu* directed their songs against "those whose houses were shining with corrugated iron roofs," as one Mahiga reader remembered.¹⁴⁸ The shining roofs of the Mathira teachers' houses spoke of their alienation, their intimate threat to Gikuyu men's wealth.

In summary, then, the *kirore* made landlords worry about land alienation, threatened rural households with outside dictatorship, and made men fear that women would become prostitutes. Missionaries' ban on circumcision looked like a deliberate attempt to corrupt Gikuyu homesteads, alienating both land and women. Their heated criticisms of Presbyterian delinquency obligated young men to take action. Fired both by a sense of familial duty and by generational ambition, youthful readers at Mahiga pulled off *ituika* against dissolute missionaries. They marched, as a body, away from the school in 1930 to erect up their own school, called Kagere. One elderly man, a boy at the time of the split, remembered that

¹⁴⁷SA I/G/1: Anonymous handwritten letter (in Gikuyu) from Kijabe to Arthur, 20 August 1929.

¹⁴⁸Oral interview: Muriuki Kiuria.

Then, there were no white men. There were only blacks. There were two teachers: Paulo Kahuho and Joshua Kiboi. Joshua stood on the side with his followers and those behind Kahuho stood behind him. This was done to end the differences that were there once and for all. Kahuho got very few followers and Joshua got very many who went in a line to Kagere. Kiboi just took them to Kagere and asked them elect a leader. This was because he didn't have much education. They appointed Willy Jimmy Wambugu.¹⁴⁹

Those who remained at the mission were children.¹⁵⁰ Only one older man remained, William Waweru.¹⁵¹ Ninety communicants were struck from the rolls at Mahiga.¹⁵² Ambui readers were among those who left for Kagere. But students from other clans joined them.¹⁵³ The crisis transcended local *mbari* interest. The leader of the schismatics, Joshua Kiboi, was the younger brother of Chief Wagura. He had supported Thuku in 1922: one reader remembered he loaned Thuku a horse for use in Nyeri.¹⁵⁴ The split at Mahiga evoked Thuku's politics: it looks like a generational handover. This seems to be how the dissidents imagined it. The name that the young men gave to their new school, Kagere, was the name for the bush used to sweep sorcerous materials out of households.¹⁵⁵ Kagere school promised to renew readers' prosperity from the malevolence of missionaries, and reinvigorated their generational claims to be cleansed of pollution. They built a temporary prayer house on land donated by Zakaria Macharia, an ex-reader banned for polygamy.¹⁵⁶ It was a bamboo structure, long, with a high roof.¹⁵⁷ It looked like the *ituika* house where the secret knowledge of politics was passed from elders to youth. It was built with donations from readers; later, in the 1930s, prosperous

¹⁴⁹Oral interview: Onesimus Njuguna Kingori.

¹⁵⁰Oral interview: Beatrice Nyawira.

¹⁵¹SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1928, entry for 15 July.

¹⁵²TT Kiama kia coci ya Tumutumu: minute for 19 July 1930.

¹⁵³Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁵⁴Oral interview: Elijah Kiruthi.

¹⁵⁵T.G. Benson, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (London: Oxford, 1964), 108.

¹⁵⁶Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁵⁷Oral interview: Lawii Ndiritu.

traders would invest their cash into a stone building.¹⁵⁸ Readers thought they were building a new polity: as one Kagere student put it,

People here were from many *mihiriga* (clans). The people of the independents became of one *muhiriga* because they came to have one name. That was the one of Gikuyu. They did this by becoming one church and helping one another (*ngwataniro*).¹⁵⁹

Ituika, I suggested in previous chapters, was a rhetoric of ethnic debate, a means to make claims to virtue and to typify opponents. At Kagere, *ituika* was a dualistic vocabulary of moral action that condemned missionaries for their moral delinquency. Confronted with hard evidence of moral decay in schools, worried that Presbyterian law would dictate to householders, young men redeemed themselves from corruption by investing in the public good. As I shall show in future chapters, their patriotic claims that “independent” schooling amounted to a morally redeeming investment in the future would drive the local politics of education at Kagere in the 1920s.

I shall follow Kagere’s path to *ituika* in future chapters. For the moment, anticipating here the argument of Chapter Seven, it is important to point out that the young men of Mahiga were not the only ones who harnessed the language of cleanliness and pollution to serve present polemical purposes in the late 1920s. Mission women, too, proved to be adept at using the old Gikuyu rhetoric of virtue. Called prostitutes by worried men, in some cases forcibly subjected to the circumciser’s knife, mission women argued that the *kirore* made them more morally upright, and more reliable, than their circumcised relatives. They used using new technologies of writing call men to account for their slurs and innuendo. Their creative claim to be virtuous drove public debates

¹⁵⁸Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi; see also next chapter.

¹⁵⁹Oral interview: Esther Mwhaki Mbau.

over gender and household order, debates that continued, I show in future chapters, into the 1930s and 40s.

Around Tumutumu, mission women formed the *Ngo ya Tuiritu*, the “Shield of Young Girls,” in 1928. The association was made up of wives and daughters of mission readers, many members of the PKP. The group protected girls who wanted to avoid circumcision. One early member remembered fending off angry fathers seeking to reclaim their daughters from the mission boarding school.¹⁶⁰ The women were often subject to hostility: Daniel Muriithi, son of an early member, remembers crowds gathering outside his mother’s house to sing *muthirigu*. They called her a servant of the whites.¹⁶¹ But mission women had their own ambitions. They argued that the *kirore* made them more virtuous, more fertile, than circumcised women. The association wrote to the Nyeri Local Native Council, a body of male readers and chiefs, in 1931 to ask them to ban circumcision. They gave five reasons:

1. We have heard that there are men who talk of female circumcision and we get astonished because men do not give birth and feel the pain and even some die and others become infertile and the main cause is circumcision.
2. Because of that the issue of circumcision should not be forced. People are caught like sheep; one should be allowed to but her own way either of agreeing to be circumcised or not without being dictated on one’s body.
3. Because the Gikuyu say women cannot give birth without being circumcised, and because Gikuyu girls have given birth to children even having not been circumcised, what then is the reason for circumcision? We cannot see any reason.
4. Because among the Gikuyu they have shown that if a girl fails to give birth she can be returned to her father even if she is circumcised, where then is the profit of circumcision?
5. What we ask from the government because Gikuyu men have more power than women, is that women be assisted in their complaints by the government to avoid further suppression.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

¹⁶¹Oral interview: Daniel Muriithi.

¹⁶²SA I/C/12 and 13: Nyambura wa Kihurani, Raheli Warigia wa Johanna, Alice Murigo wa Meshak to LNC South Nyeri, 25 December 1931.

Women, like the men of the PKP and the KCA, had posterity on their minds. Proven reproduction *mādē* for convincing politics. The women of the *Ngo ya Tuiritu* argued that circumcision wasted household fertility. The *kirore* would shield women from pain in childbirth and ensure posterity for *mbari*. It was an argument grounded on the evidence of the previous decade, when missionary Galyl had convinced some of the fertile virtues of hygiene. But more, the plea of the *Ngo ya Tuiritu* highlights the ways that mission women used new missionary disciplines to moderate their man problem. Men (and women) singing *muthirigu* called mission women unclean, infertile, insubordinate. Mission women hoped to convert men's condemnation into personal virtue.

Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki's aborted marriage illustrates the ways that new practices served virtuous ends for creative mission women. Cecilia, daughter of first-generation readers at Tumutumu and one of the first members of *Ngo ya Tuiritu*, agreed to marry a fellow reader in the early 1930s.¹⁶³ She was a teacher at Chogoria at the time, far from home. She sewed four white dresses in anticipation of a church wedding. But her prospective husband's relatives worried that her teaching had corrupted her:

(My fiancée) asked his brother to take the dowry on his behalf to prepare things as he came for the wedding. But his brother stayed without doing anything until he came. When he came, he told him that he did not wish that we get married ostensibly because I had moved all over when working and that I was not a clean girl. So instead of going to take the dowry, he came to say that there was no *uthoni* (no visiting of in-laws in preparation for marriage).

Cecilia's teaching made her likely to be wayward, causing male relatives to whisper that she was a prostitute. Angry but in love, Cecilia at first agreed to elope with her fiancée to Nairobi. It would be a marriage that killed kinship: her father would

¹⁶³The following account is excerpted from Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki* (unpublished ms. in possession of Cecilia Muthoni, Tumutumu, 1982).

receive no bridewealth for her. Her husband left for Kakamega for work; she, remaining home, reconsidered.

When I was left I prayed to the Lord to let me know what to do next. The Lord showed me that my Christianity cannot allow me to follow someone like a dog for I had always said I will not be defeated by my mother in marriage, that I will go to church with a white dress just like her. And because I had these dresses, they would not be in vain.

The prospect of eloping made Cecilia worry about her reputation. Her white dresses, carefully sewn under the instruction of missionary seamstresses, stiffened her resolve. The dresses became for her a means to talk about virtue, to call her worrisome fiancée to account.

I therefore wrote a letter telling him that I was unable to follow him without a wedding...if he would agree the bans of marriage to be published here and after publishing, I would be given a letter by the minister to take it to the minister at Kakamega to preside over the wedding.

The public announcement of her marriage would prove her virtue, putting off rumors of prostitution and allowing her to enter marriage virtuously, not as a dog. Her fiancée, however, was unconvinced. He replied to her letter informing her that he had terminated their engagement. Cecilia, angry, resolved that "he had to buy the dresses prepared for the wedding." She wanted reimbursement for her labor. But more, she hoped that a court case would demonstrate that he, not she, was at fault for ruining the marriage.

I would only let the people who had known our friendship which was for many years to know that its not me who made it fail for I would not like girls to be taken that they cannot keep a promise.

The dresses became for Cecilia a material way to prove herself virtuous, faulting her fiancée for his delinquency. Confronted with whispered rumors about her sexual misdeeds, Christian teaching became for Cecilia a language with which to prove herself virtuous. Public bans of marriage would have allayed prostitution rumors; failing that, a lengthy court case offered her means to condemn her fiancée for his irresponsibility. Cecilia pursued the case through district court and, later, to the Supreme Court, eventually winning restitution for her lost labor, material for the dresses, and costs of traveling and postage. She thought the outcome "God's plan." But Cecilia's story reveals more than Providence's working.

White dresses, like the *kiore*, were for mission women highly material ways of proving themselves virtuous. Worried about men who called them whores, fiancées who doubted their virtue, women argued that their diligent work made them virtuous. Some, like Cecilia, proved their virtue in colonial courts, calling husbands to account for their slurs. Others argued about virtue in oral argument, in angry exchanges with the singers of *muthirigu*. They hoped to prove themselves virtuous, sexually disciplined, to combat rumors of prostitution. More, their claims to be virtuous called delinquent husbands to account, and marked out a language of marital debate in the next decade.

* * *

The stir over the *kiore* soon lost heat. It had never been pressing around Tumutumu, as I noted above: Mathira landlords were too satisfied in the late 1920s to be overly worried about missionaries' indiscretions. In Thogoto and Chogoria, both with good schools, attendance figures recovered within a few years. Even in Mahiga, site of the most intimate of conflicts over land and female belonging, a few readers found ways to compromise. Church attendance, down to 10 after the rolls were purged in 1929, had risen to 60 by 1934.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴SA 1/Z.6: Tumutumu log book for 1934: entry for 22 April.

But the gender and land troubles of the late 1920s had divided readers. The old divisions between clan and generational interest coalesced into two broadly defined rural patriotisms in the 1930s. One party, the PKP, were mostly prosperous *mbari* farmers. They advocated clan prosperity, but divided over literacy's potential to knit together new politics. Family interest made unity difficult. The other party, the KCA, was a mixed bag of dissident landlords and worried tenants. Ambitious straighteners, they worked to birth unity with the language of generational redemption and, later, through the technology of literacy.

Both parties faced question of how to knit the deep politics of Gikuyu ethnicity into the disciplined stuff of a tribe, a people demanding British recognition. As I have shown in this chapter, Gikuyu ethnicity was not so much obedient to common authority as contentious, fiercely suspicious of outside interference. The parochialism of deep history upset readers' hopes for unity. The garden controversy made KCA politicians worry about history: local arguments over land and belonging threatened to dissolve consensus within a sea of particular rights and wrongs. The circumcision controversy brought readers and elders together, not (in distinction to the nationalist account) in obedience to a common cultural mind but as a horrified, gendered reaction against missionary delinquency. Common hopes for moral renewal brought Gikuyu together. But the persistent questions of deep politics, the divisive histories of kinship, would continue to challenge readers. How they met the challenge of leadership is the subject of the following two chapters.

For not all shared readers' hopes for the future. The 1920s left Gikuyu more divided by the terror of class formation than by political ambition. Neither party of readers spoke for illiterate migrant workers, dispossessed by landlords' expansive commodity profits. Rumors circulated in 1930 that a great snake was coming to bite the

readers, those of the mission and those of the KCA together.¹⁶⁵ The rumors centered in Tetu, site of the most intense land disputation during the 1920s. It was a common snake (*nyamu ya thi*), not the *ndamathia* of generational lore. But the dispossessed may have begun dreaming of their own *ituika*, one less promising for ambitious readers. It was a prospect that frightened readers, and sketched out a vocabulary of class conflict in the decade to come.

¹⁶⁵SA I/C/12 and 13: Teacher at Nyeri (Solomon Ngari) to Calderwood, 31 October 1930.

Chapter Six

Writing *Gikūyū* A social history of orthography and spelling

Orthography spells out political projects for Gikuyu. The novelist Ngugi wa Thiongo's 1986 decision to write exclusively in his native language articulates his hope that vernacular writing will draft a new politics of cultural authenticity for Gikuyu people.¹ Ngugi's Gikuyu is underwritten by a conscientious orthography, as his collaborator Gakaara wa Wanjau explains.

In 1980 some Gikuyu writers, myself among them, discovered that there were differences, which should not exist, in the way they wrote words in their language...(the linguist Karega Mutahi) explained to us the rules which are followed in writing in all the languages of the world. The most important rule is to write the words according to the way native speakers themselves pronounce them. This shows the Gikuyu words must be written according to the way the pure Gikuyu pronounces it.²

Ngugi and Gakaara's writing eliminates words that originated in English or Swahili, words such as "mūtoka" or "thigara" that define "motocar" or "cigār." The use of English words in the vernacular, writes Gakaara, evokes the crowing of the "colonialist rooster," the noisy sound of cultural imperialism.³ By purging their language of foreign words, and by writing in ways that are supposed to represent the speech of 'pure Gikuyu', Ngugi and Gakaara hope to defuse the "culture bomb" of English imperialism and free their language to express the struggles of African workers and peasants.⁴

¹For Ngugi's statement, see *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey Press, 1986).

²Gakaara wa Wanjau, *Mwandikire wa Gĩgĩkiyu Karing'a* (Karatina: Gakara Press, January 1991), 3-6. Translated in Cristiana Pugliese, *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu nationalist: the life and writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1995), 92.

³See Gakaara's short story "Ugwati wa Muthungu Muiru," the "Danger of the Black European"; in Pugliese, *Author*, 98-99.

⁴Ngugi, *Decolonizing*, 28.

Ngugi has inspired a heated debate about the politics of language choice in "post-colonial" literature.⁵ What this starkly dualistic debate ignores are the creative ways that colonized people, in Africa as elsewhere, rewrote both European and vernacular languages. These popular hybrids mark subject peoples' efforts to domesticate colonial languages and alphabets, to transpose foreign technologies to speak to vernacular needs.⁶ In their eagerness to write into a pure Gikuyu, Ngugi and Gakaara risk obscuring the ways that intellectuals before them rewrote the Word, creating synthetic scripts that spoke both of ethnic ambition and anti-colonial critique.

For Gikuyu have long used hybrid scripts precisely to break down the stark choice between English and vernacular writing. Protestant missionaries, working in the early 1900s to translate the Bible, invented a disciplined orthography to lead Gikuyu readers to the Word. But Gikuyu wrote their letters in ways that refused the missionary sentence on their language. In the correspondence of private trading organizations and local school committees, readers experimented with words, fusing English grammar and script into Gikuyu writing. Missionaries mocked this adulterated writing with the hybrid name "ki-thungu" (from *muthungu*, "foreigner") and rather feared its ironic play with grammar and vocabulary. Readers seem to have hoped that their writing game would allow them to domesticate English. They made English words into a vernacular vocabulary of patriotism, hoped to work the fractious disputants of "deep" Gikuyu politics into citizens, members of a nation-of-words, demanding recognition and trust from the British.

It is important to recognize in orthography a question with a history: Gikuyu letters defined a field of social action that made powerful claims on politics. For

⁵For Africa, see Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui, *Swahili State and Society: The Political Economy of an African Language* (London: James Currey, 1995); see also Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁶This point is informed by James Lockhart's study of Nahuatl's incorporation of Spanish terms in the 16th century, in *The Nahuas after the conquest* (Stanford, 1992), Ch. 7; and by Vicente Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

missionaries, government officials, and Gikuyu converts, marking vowels and consonants articulated claims on social organization and moral discipline. Debates over orthography were debates about the possibility that literacy would create new standards of public trust and private discipline to match the older, orally proven virtues of Gikuyu ethnicity. A history of orthography in the first instance offers insights into the tensions of empire, revealing the ambiguous and hotly-contested foundations on which different British imperialisms laid their hegemonies.⁷ Gikuyu writing was fiercely debated between the different factions of colonial power, between Catholics and Protestants, missionaries and government officials. This essay begins by reconstructing the genesis of Protestant writing, a disciplining system that carefully parsed out sentences, adjudicated words' meaning and mapped grammar onto the spelling of Gikuyu verbs. Protestant writing embodied missionaries' hope that reading would lead converts to the Word, that texts alone would bear the full weight of discipline to far-flung Christian communities. Catholic orthography, in contrast, was a less rigidly grammatical system that relied on spoken language, on the public reading of priests and catechists, as a precondition of understanding. The competition between Protestant and Catholic orthographies, I show in the second part of the essay, was about competing notions of the place and the location of reading within textual Christian communities. But colonial officials, eager to consolidate their hold on African bodies and tongues, had no time for the parochial concerns of missionary evangelism. In 1933 metropolitan linguists from the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures introduced a new phonetic system of writing Gikuyu, a system that brought the language into line with tens of other African languages similarly standardized. Officials hoped the new orthography, which turned on the letters *ε*, *ə* and

⁷c.f. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in Cooper and Stoler eds., *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

η, would make inscrutable vernaculars into scientific vehicles of progress and enlightenment.

Gikuyu readers met the new orthography with angry voices, raised fists and sustained protest. Their hopes for writing diverged markedly from the standardized sentence of imperialism. The final part of the chapter details readers' efforts to make literacy spell out claims on ethnic leadership and colonial entitlement in the 1920s and 30s. As I showed in Chapter Four, the "deep" politics of kinship and clan made it difficult for any political party, any outside authority, to claim leadership over Gikuyu. Tumutumu's garden crisis terrorized the literate readers of the KCA, threatening to set men and women against one another in endless, local argument. Faced with "deep" politics' challenge to their moral authority, readers worked Gikuyu into a nation-of-words using fused languages, playing language games that blurred English terms into Gikuyu sentences and turned foreign grammar and spelling into a domestic vocabulary of trust. Their creative dealings with the burden of English helped them to define a new vocabulary of ethnic leadership, convincing their suspicious elders that literacy could spell out ethnic unity. "Ki-thungu" also allowed readers to extend moral judgment on British power, and wrote them into claims on colonial citizenship.

Mapping meaning: Protestant orthography and spelling

Protestant orthography marked missionaries' efforts to hold up their end of a long and closely-argued debate with their converts, a vernacular conversation structured by colonial rule but vitally shaped by Gikuyu ambitions. The post-war popularity of Christianity demanded new modes of discipline of missionaries, new means to chasten and instruct converts who learned far beyond the reach of missionaries' voice. Reading became for Protestants a way to make converts bear the burden of Christian discipline for themselves. Texts were meant to be road-maps, carefully-coded directions that led

readers to the Meaning that lay behind them. Through careful reading and disciplined thought, Gikuyu would be brought face to face with the chastening Word of God. Protestant orthography was a discipline of evangelism, a means to fix Gikuyu intellects on the road to salvation.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, missionaries began publishing catechisms from the earliest days of evangelistic work in Gikuyu. The first texts to be widely distributed were the gospels of *Luke* and *Matthew*, published in 1915 and sold throughout Gikuyuland for 25 cents a copy--a full day's wage.⁸ They were printed in what came to be the standard Protestant orthography, set by the missionary-organized United Kikuyu Language Committee. Protestant orthography was shaped by three impulses, summarized here and discussed below. The first impulse mediated the relationship of the written word and the spoken word pronounced by Gikuyu. Protestant writing was meant to be phonetic: it was to proceed from discrete sounds, represented by distinct letters and phonemes, toward whole words and phrases. The second impulse concerned the relationship between words and their sentences: Protestant grammar was meant to map words' meanings onto spelling. The construction of words and sentences was to be wholly grammatical and self-evident, allowing the reader little space for interpretation or deduction from the context in which the word was located. The third impulse took up the place of the vernacular within a wider colonial language economy. Gikuyu writing, Protestants thought, should adhere as closely as possible to the spelling and presentation of Swahili, the standardized language which would mediate between the static, tribal world of vernaculars and the open, free expression of English. By keeping Gikuyu close to Swahili, and by carefully marking their vowels, Protestants spelled out their hopes for their converts.

⁸SA 1/Z/4: *Luka* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915); *Mathayo* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1915). For prices and distribution, SA 1/A 20: Leakey to Arthur, 1 October 1915. For wage data, KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual report for Nyeri district, 1916.

The phonetic spelling of Protestant orthography turned on seven symbols for the seven vowel sounds pronounced in spoken Gikuyu. As early as 1908, missionaries of the demi-official Kikuyu Language Committee (KLC) insisted that Gikuyu possessed seven vowel sounds and assigned each vowel with a distinct sign.⁹ KLC practice was subjected to scientific scrutiny in 1913, when Harry Leakey, an early CMS linguist, took one of his adherents to Germany to sit with Prof. Meinhof¹⁰ and an Italian phoneticist.¹¹ This meeting confirmed the practice of writing Gikuyu with seven vowels, agreeing that any attempt to limit the number of vowels scripted in the language would lead to “hopeless ambiguity.” The vowels were written thus in the KLC orthography:

a e i o ũ u

The two vowels which were additions to the English alphabet--i and ũ--ensured that Gikuyu writing could make careful distinctions between similar-sounding words. The extra vowels signaled the “half-closed” sounds which the linguists perceived to stand between the “open” and “closed” sounds of English vowels.¹² By writing thus, linguists guaranteed that *hiha* (squeeze) would not be rendered as *hīha* (clean up excrement) or as *heha* (be cold, breathe). Nor would *roga* (bewitch) be mistaken for *rūga* (jump) or *ruga* (cook); *rira* (weep) be written as *rīra* (scare birds), *rera* (float), *rara* (sleep), *rorā* (look), *rūra* (be bitter), or *rura* (be green); nor, importantly given colonial concerns with

⁹AIM Kikuyu Language File: UKLC minutes, 7 June 1909.

¹⁰Carl Meinhof, a German philologist, was the author of numerous texts on “primitive” languages, including *An Introduction to the Study of African Languages* (London and New York: AMS Press, 1915; translated by A. Werner in 1973). Meinhof argued for the study and classification of African languages first in order to trace all languages back to their originary meta-language, and second so that “they must be penetrated by European knowledge, filled with the spirit of Europe and become the vehicle of European thought, so that our energy and intelligence can duly cooperate in the raising and opening up of distant worlds.” (Meinhof, *An Introduction*, 21).

¹¹KNA MSS (BS) 1/1 UKLC minute book, 1933: Barlow, “Memorandum on Proposed New Orthography,” 1933.

¹²The diacritical marks were apparently Meinhof’s suggestion, derived from R. Lepsius’ *Standard Alphabet* (London and Berlin, 1863).

hygiene, *maṭ* (water) ever be mistaken for *mai* (excrement).¹³ Vowels thus guarded against the collapse of written words into one another. Additional consonants were also called into service to limit ambiguity in writing. By writing *ng'*, a velar nasal consonant which evokes the sound in the English "singer," Protestants ensured that *ng'ano* (stories) would be distinct from *ngano* (wheat), and that *ng'ong'o* (jump up on my back) would not approximate *ngongo* (ridges).

The phonetic impulse in Protestant underpinned missionary theology, guaranteeing the power and permanence of the Word's meaning. Incorrect pronunciation led to confusion, or worse, to irony dangerous to missionary authority, as Marion Stevenson noted in 1912:

Some people are afraid of our making the language appear too complex by writing it more phonetically, but in reality we make it easier both for the native and for the foreigner. We tell the native that the little black signs called letters represent the sounds he speaks, and it is infinitely easier for him if we can give him distinct sign for each sound. When we slump two or three sounds, to him absolutely distinct, under one sign, naturally he is confused. As for the foreigner, after he suddenly discovers that for months he had sung lustily "you are being strangled by Jesus, you are being strangled by Jesus" (*ūgwitwo*) under the impression that he was saying "you are called by Jesus" (*ūgwītwo*), he is thankful to hear of some method by which may in future save him from such mistakes.¹⁴

Gikuyu sorcerers, *arogi*, sometimes strangled the animals with which they made their dangerous concoctions. Converts might be similarly strangled by the missionaries who, as current rumors testified, were known to drink out of skulls and to eat those who

¹³For these examples, Barlow, "Memorandum on Proposed New Orthography," July 1933. When a 1933 government pamphlet on hygiene rendered *maṭ* (water) as *mai* (excrement), John Arthur of the CSM threatened to withdraw all missionary publications from the government printer (*SA I/J/2*: Arthur to Gilks, 26 May 1930).

¹⁴Stevenson, "The Kikuyu Language Committee," in *Kikuyu News* 37 (August 1912).

opposed them.¹⁵ That no proof of malevolent *urogi* should pass though their lips, or still less be inscribed into the divine texts themselves, was imperative for missionaries--and for the assessors who depended on them for their livelihood and position.

Protestant pedagogy translated phonetic writing into meaningful Words. The Alliance syllabus of 1919 began by teaching readers phonemes "until they can read any individual word by breaking it up into syllables."¹⁶ Standard II readers learned "grammar: the noun, adjective, and pronoun and their agreement according to the classes." Writing began with "strokes, pothooks and easy letters" and proceeded to "use of punctuation marks, all the letters, words and capitals." Missionaries carefully tracked students' progress in writing, demanding that exam candidates carefully write their letters in print, not cursive.¹⁷ The mark of successful reading in Standard III was understanding of Scripture: pupils "must be made to read in turn fluently and accurately and above all must be able to explain in their own words the meaning of a passage read." Protestant pedagogy led readers to the Word through its syllables. Phonetic orthography guaranteed that each syllable would represent the same sound, connoting the same meaning when combined with other syllables to make words.

Phonetic writing thus produced accurate reading. By writing with seven vowels, Protestants attached words unambiguously to objects and guarded against dangerous mispronunciations and misreadings. Protestant grammar similarly underwrote words' meanings by lining up nouns and verbs with military precision. Grammatical spelling coded sentences' meanings: words were road maps, leading readers on a chase to locate the referent particle within the construction of the verb or to match the agreements

¹⁵For skulls, oral interview: Onesimus Kingori (and others); for missionaries eating their enemies, Mrs. Henry E. Scott, *A Saint in Kenya: A Life of Marion Stevenson* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), 207.

¹⁶SA I/E/8: Education code, prepared by the Alliance of Protestant Missions, 15 January 1919.

¹⁷SA I/E/10: Stevenson, "Print writing," 15 April 1924.

between adjective and noun. By following the map, readers were led to the meaning that lay behind words.

Missionary concerns with grammatical spelling took added urgency in the late 1920s and early 1930s, propelled by concerns over Gikuyu strategies of reading and writing. The nationalist Kikuyu Central Association's journal *Mwigwithania*, which began printing on an intermittent basis in 1928, used Protestant spelling and orthography but omitted the diacritical marks over Protestant vowels. *Mwigwithania* also tended to employ a variety of spellings for Gikuyu nouns and verbs, a practice which, CMS translator Harry Leakey thought, led to "confusions unbounded." Leakey demanded that Protestants further define and propagate intelligible spelling and orthography.¹⁸ The problem of popular Gikuyu writing led to displacements in the meanings of words, playing "ducks and drakes with our beautifully logical rules of spelling."¹⁹ Gikuyu writing threatened to turn reading into a game, the outcome of which could not be coded into sentences themselves. I examine this writing below.

Challenged by the transgressions of Gikuyu writers, the 1930s saw vigorous Protestant attempts to stem what missionaries saw as a slide toward dangerous ambiguity in writing. The Kikuyu Language Committee, moribund since the 1910s, was revived to meet the occasion; a florescence of word lists and memorandums on grammar were published, designed to ensure uniformity among translators. Protestants in the 1930s began to write their vowels doubled as a way to make obvious the construction and operation of verbs within sentences: to signal the remoter past of past tense, for example, translators wrote *ni maarĩte irio*, they have eaten food longer ago, instead of *ni marĩte irio*, they have just eaten food.²⁰ The doubled "a" marked the juxtaposition of the third

¹⁸KNA MSS (BS) 1/4: Kikuyu spelling, 1933-48: Leakey to CMS missionaries, n.d (but 1933). I discuss the spelling of *Mwigwithania* below.

¹⁹SA I/D/66: Barlow to Greaves, 21 November 1938.

²⁰This and the following examples are taken from Barlow's memorandum "The Spelling of Kikuyu," no date (but 1937), in SA I/K/1. The principle of doubling vowels for grammatical reasons was agreed upon

person plural prefix, *ma-*, with the tense marker *-a-*. So too was it necessary to double vowels in order to signal the presence of the reflexive pronoun: in *Ni gwĩtema nāĩtemire*, I cut myself, the first *ĩ* came from the first person pronounal prefix *ndĩ-*, while the additional *ĩ* signaled the prefix “myself.” Doubled vowels were employed to allow for the concordance of verbs with the nouns to which they referred: *Ni mũũũmũrĩte?*, “Have you (pl.) barked it (the tree--*mũti*)?” required three “ũ”s, one which came as “mũ” to refer to the second person plural, the second which agreed with the noun *mũti*, and the third which came with the verb *-ũma*. In at least one case, four consecutive vowels were necessary to adhere to KLC usage: “*mĩhĩndo nĩĩĩndigĩĩrie*”--the cords (of death) have wrapped themselves about me--appeared in the Psalms.²¹

The spelling-out of multiple vowels laid bare the operative relationships of verbs, nouns and adjectives in sentences. Protestant verbs mapped sentences’ meaning within themselves, and invited careful decoding of readers. This coded spelling was driven by Protestant fears that deductive reading--reading which relied on the context within which words were located to determine their meaning--subjected Gikuyu to “psychological strain” and, ultimately, led to misunderstanding and confusion.²² Protestant writing in the 1930s led readers into a careful deciphering of texts. Reading required discipline, and by virtue of disciplined reading, readers were brought face to face with the Word of Protestant theology.

But as Protestant orthography invited readers into a decoding interrogation of sentences, it equally brought them into a wider conversation about the place of vernaculars within the colonial language economy. Missionaries worked to make Gikuyu as close as possible to the spelling and presentation of Swahili, the standardized language

in 1913 (*TT Swahili and Kikuyu Orthography* file: “The Orthographical Findings of the United Kikuyu Language Committee,” minute for August 1913).

²¹ *TT UKLC* notes: UKLC, “Simplified rules for the spelling of Kikuyu,” 1942.

²² c.f. *SA I/K/10*: Barlow, Memorandum, 25 April 1939.

which would they hoped mediate between the tribal world of vernaculars and the open, free (and therefore dangerous) expression of English. Gikuyu orthography and spelling was supposed to lead speakers naturally into conversation and reading in Swahili, a language which boasted of an extensive religious literature in translation. Swahili also led Gikuyu into conversation with local government officials, who learned Swahili to communicate with their subjects. By keeping Gikuyu spelling close to Swahili, missionaries located vernacular readers within the circuits of communication and command required by the twinned impulses of evangelization and colonial control.

Missionary and official thinking about vernaculars in relation to other colonial languages were driven by certain assumptions regarding the stability and coherence of the "African mind." African thought was supposed to be inextricably bound up in the language of the "tribe" in which they lived: language, and political structure, meant that Africans thought things only insofar as their language and history allowed them. Diedrich Westermann, the German linguist and former missionary whose theories about language and thought were enormously influential in the late 1920s and early 30s, put the case for linguistic functionalism in this way:

Mental life has evolved in each people in an individual shape and proper mode of expression; in this sense we speak of the soul of a people and the most immediate, the most adequate exponent of the soul of the people is its language. By taking away a people's language we cripple or destroy its soul and kill its mental individuality....any educational work which does not take into consideration the inseparable unity between African language and African thinking is based on false principles and must lead to the alienation of the individual from his own self, his past, his traditions, and his people.²³

This assumed coherence between Africans' language, history and thought was the philosophical foundation underlying missionary efforts to translate Christian texts into

²³Diedrich Westermann, *The African To-day and To-morrow* (London: IALC, 1934), 121.

Gikuyu. The same assumption meant that missionaries and government officials doubted Africans' ability to learn colonial languages such as English. Gikuyu engagements with English were, in the official mind, fraught with danger: Gikuyu speaking English conjured up images of the disaffected dilettante, the clothed savage whose "swollen head" would lead him toward political agitation and subversive activities. In Nairobi, the Anglican Canon Burns worried that English would expose African Christians to "oceans of doubtful and vile literature," posing dangers both to European women and to the political authority of the colonial state.²⁴ The "unsettling" effect of education in the English language was evident for missionaries particularly among primary school leavers, those who had left schooling with a "smattering" of English. Many sought employment in independent schools, which consistently taught English language to young children; in some cases, English was the vehicular language of instruction.²⁵ The results of this kind of education, missionaries thought, were disastrous: students left school having adopted the outward signs of 'civilization' but without absorbing the kind of disciplined self-reliance which Protestants required of their students. Unsettled and caught between the old life of the tribe and the new world of the colony, half-educated *athomi* were likely to cause trouble.²⁶

Missionaries' response to the frightening figure of the half-educated English-speaking Gikuyu was to propose Swahili as a mediating language between the stable world of vernaculars and the dangerously fluid world of English. Swahili, missionaries thought, was enough akin to local languages so as to be easily acquired: as natives advanced in education, they would "become conscious of their own creative gifts, and will realize that their own language (Swahili), developed and enriched concurrently with

²⁴Robert Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, , 1978), 94-95.

²⁵Oral interviews: Hudson Kimunyi, Joseph Muriithi.

²⁶The same fear shaped French colonial language education, for which see Fanny Colonna, "Educating Conformity in French Colonial Algeria," in Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.

their intellectual advance, is the one medium of expression of the special genius of their race."²⁷ Gikuyu speaking Swahili, thought missionaries, would be more connected with their history, their "selves," and would therefore be insulated from the destabilizing effect of English. They would also be made privy to a growing Christian literature in Swahili, a literature which, even into the 1940s, far exceeded that available to them in Gikuyu.²⁸

Missionaries smoothed readers' transition from their own language to Swahili by blurring the orthographical and phonological lines between the two languages. Gikuyu translators consistently inserted Swahili words into Gikuyu texts, using them to signal words which had no immediate equivalent in Gikuyu. Thus, Gikuyu readers learned the meanings of the Swahili words for "spirit," "accuse," "crown," "temple," "prophet," "angel," "demon," "room," "door," "ship" and its accouterments, "gold" and other gems, "wine," "vinegar," "letter," "book," "pen," "pencil," "to read," "write," and "shoe."²⁹ So too did translators adopt the Swahili version of proper names in the Bible—a practice which, in turn, meant that many of the early Gikuyu baptismal candidates adopted Swahili names for themselves.³⁰ By this means, missionaries ensured that Gikuyu readers would practice and learn Swahili words and pronunciation even as they learned to read their own language.

Missionaries maintained the coherence of the Gikuyu/Swahili interchange by causing the vowels and consonants of Swahili to retain their phonetic value in the Gikuyu alphabet. The Swahili velar nasal consonant "ng" was adopted for the similar sound in

²⁷SA I/E/8: Canon Broomfield of Zanzibar, "Expressing the Genius of African Peoples," 5 April 1950.

²⁸The Gikuyu New Testament would not be available until 1926; the Zanzibari Swahili version of the entire Bible was available in 1895.

²⁹KNA NBSS 1/81: Barlow, "Translators' Difficulties," 27 April 1944. The practice of adopting Swahili words where Gikuyu vocabulary was lacking was sanctioned at the UKLC meeting of June 1912, recorded in *TT* Kikuyu orthography file: "The Orthographical Findings of the United Kikuyu Language Committee."

³⁰For adopting Swahili-ized proper names, see UKLC minute of June 1913, in *TT*: Kikuyu orthography file: "The Orthographical Findings of the United Kikuyu Language Committee." For early *athomi* adopting Swahili names, *TT*: Ministers file: *Mariitwa ma kubatiithio*, no author, no date (but early 1930s).

Gikuyu; thus the Swahili word for cow, *ng'ombe*, was spelled *ng'ombe* by Protestants after 1904.³¹ The Swahili fricative consonant “th” similarly was adopted by Gikuyu translators.³² The “closed” vowels “u” and “i” in Swahili were written as “u” and “i” in Gikuyu texts, thus ensuring that, as one missionary wrote, “students would not learn that ‘u’ represented one sounds in Kikuyu and another in Swahili.”³³ The two Gikuyu “half-open” vowels standing between “u” and “o” on one hand and between “i” and “e” on the other were written “ĩ” and “ũ,” marked with diacritical marks despite the fact that they occurred much more frequently than the “closed” sounds in spoken Gikuyu.³⁴ The five vowels of Swahili thus retained their phonetic value in written Gikuyu, while the two additional vowels of Gikuyu were marked. Missionaries therefore ensured that Gikuyu writing would evoke Swahili sounds, meshing the two languages in order to smooth readers’ transition between the two languages. Where did Gikuyu end and Swahili begin?

The curriculum of colonial schools enacted the smooth transition. From 1909, missionaries used the vernacular as the language of instruction in Standards I through III, while Swahili became the vehicular language in Standards IV and V.³⁵ English was introduced to the selected few who passed through the upper standards with the intent of becoming pastors or evangelists in the service of the church. This policy was modulated in 1919, when the government Education Commission reversed earlier practice and mandated that Swahili should give way to English on “patriotic and practical grounds.”³⁶ By 1929, however, Swahili was restored to the curriculum by a colonial government

³¹McGregor’s 1904 dictionary presents cow as *ng'ombe*, but Hinde’s in 1903 offers *ngombe*.

³²TT Kikuyu orthography file: Leakey, comments on orthography, April 1934.

³³KNA MSS (BS) 1/6: UKLC comments on Lyndon Harries’ “Orthography of Kikuyu,” February 1947.

³⁴c.f. UKLC minute for 7 June 1909, in *AIM: Kikuyu Language* file. The frequency with which marked vowels occurred in Protestant writing was one of the most frequent objections to it.

³⁵This curriculum was determined at the famous “Kikuyu Conference” of 1909, for which see *Report of the United Missionary Conference* (Nairobi: AIM Press, June 1909).

³⁶SA 1/Z/8 and 9: Education Commission of the East African Protectorate report, 1919.

eager to facilitate easy communication among the three East African colonies it sought to bring into "closer union."³⁷ Swahili from 1929 was introduced in the first four years of schooling, and became the vehicular language in Standard V. English was introduced in Standard V and became the vehicular language in secondary school. Missionary schools thus positioned Swahili as the mediating language between Gikuyu and English, smoothing, they hoped, readers' "transition" from tribal stasis to dangerous modernity. They equally ensured that the number of students learning English would be relatively few, limited to those passing the standardized exams out of primary school.

Gikuyu readers regarded the imposition of Swahili on primary school students--and the corresponding closing-off of English instruction--with something approaching alarm. The 1929-30 "female circumcision" dispute in which thousands of readers left missionary-run schools and formed "independent" organizations was, as I suggested in Chapter Four, a crisis in morality, a Gikuyu attempt to guard households and women against delinquent missionaries. But the struggle over schooling was equally about literacy, about the possibility and potential of reading and writing to bring together the fractious disputants of moral ethnicity in order to forge a new "nation of words." The sort of linguistic discipline demanded by colonial schools, and by the conventions of Protestant writing, grated against Gikuyu readers' ambitious attempts to appropriate English for their own purposes. By the 1920s, Gikuyu readers had worked out a complex fusion between languages and ethnic politics, a fusion which brought Gikuyu and English lexicons together in order to do service both in local and colonial debates. Readers, both mission and independent, seem to have sought to bring together the different languages which divided them. They slurred their pronunciation of Swahili, making it, as one

³⁷c.f. SA I/Y/1: Meeting of the Kenya Missionary Council. 3 December 1929. For a history of colonial language policy, T.P. Gorman, "The Development of Language Policy in Kenya with Particular Reference to the Educational System," in W. Whiteley ed., *Language Use in Kenya* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 397-453.

school inspector noted in 1936, sound more like Gikuyu than Swahili.³⁸ As I will show below, readers equally played with Gikuyu and English, bringing the two languages together in order to say more, and write more, than they otherwise could.

Missionaries called this fused language, spoken by the “half-educated,” by the hybrid (and mocking) name “ki-thungu” (from *muthungu*, “European”). The hyphen in both terms marked missionaries’ anxiety that readers’ play with languages would undermine the Christian identities of words, leaving Gikuyu in a dangerously undetermined state of flux. Swahili instruction--and a rigidly determined Gikuyu orthography and grammar--chastened the ambitious *athomi* and coalesced hyphenated confusion into meaningful, solid words. By insisting on the self-confident integrity of words, Protestant spelling and orthography held up the missionary end of a long vernacular conversation about discipline, progress and knowledge.

But the fiercely coded sort of writing employed by Protestants was equally shaped in conversation with Catholic orthography and theology, a system which worked from different assumptions. Orthographical debates between Catholics and Protestant were about the place of literacy in the new politics made possible by *githomo*. That which divided them reveals the different ways in which Christian theologies imagined reading the Word in Gikuyu.

Writing to read: Catholic orthography

Debates between Catholics and Protestants over Gikuyu orthography were about the place of reading within the discoursing communities envisioned by missionaries. Protestants located texts and individual reading at the center of *githomo*, and expected their readers to internalize and appropriate the word in a process of cognitive decoding.

³⁸SA I/E/3: Donovan, Inspector of Schools Central Province, report on inspection of Tumutumu schools, 1936. The practice of “Gikuyu-izing” Swahili was widespread in Tumutumu and elsewhere.

In contrast, Catholic evangelism and ecclesiology turned on the vocalized exchange between God and the priest, and between the priest and the hearer, as enacted in the picture above. The ear, not the eye, was the privileged zone of exchange: in confession, in the Eucharist, in the recitation of the Rosary and catechisms, converts were ushered into the church through the vocal proclamation of the Word.³⁹ Catholic faith, as the ethnographer Fthr. Cagnolo put it, was not about the “wind of opinions”; rather it was founded as a “codex of unshakable truths revealed by God himself” and articulated to those who would hear by priests and sisters.⁴⁰

If Catholic discipline turned on the chastening and instructing voice of the priest, Catholics were correspondingly suspicious of the license that Protestants gave to their “readers” to interpret and understand the Bible text. Cagnolo complained that

Protestant missionaries of every denomination are all anxious to place the Bible in the hands of the natives. Therefore they hastened to teach the Akikuyu reading and writing as if in that consisted the training of the new man, and at the end of their training, they are dismissed with the magic book in their hands, with freedom on interpretation as the only rule, no matter if they chose for their example, the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, or the sin of David, or even the polygamy of Solomon.⁴¹

The “new man” envisioned by Catholics would not be a *muthomi*: rather, he would be a *mũthikĩrĩri*, a hearer, living on mission stations, “sacred oases in a desert of paganism” as Cagnolo called them, “whose life is ruled like a religious home with the church bell, which gathers everybody to prayer morning and night and causes all to fall

³⁹A point made by Vicente Rafael with reference to 15th and 16th century Catholic work among Tagalog people in the Philippines, in his *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁴⁰Fthr. C. Cagnolo, *The Akikuyu: Their customs, traditions, and folklore* (Nyeri: Consolata Mission Printing School, 1933), 281.

⁴¹Cagnolo, *The Akikuyu*, 279.

on their knees at the ringing of the Angelus three times a day."⁴² The sound of the bell, and the insistent voice of the priest, would direct hearers toward the "unshakable codex" of Christian faith embodied in the sacraments of the church.⁴³

The first Catholic grammar, produced for the use of new missionaries in Gikuyuland, was brought out in 1903 by a French Holy Ghost Mission father working near Nairobi;⁴⁴ in 1910 the Consolata fathers in Nyeri published their first grammar.⁴⁵ Publishing for the consumption of Gikuyu converts began in 1915, when the Consolata Fathers in Nyeri began to produce *Wathiomu Mukinyu*, the "True Friend," for the reading of Catholic adherents drafted into the ill-famed Carrier Corps in Tanzania. The Nyeri press also produced primers and catechisms on the same press for the use of a growing group of Catholic adherents.

Wathiomu Mukinyu and other Nyeri Catholic publications consistently employed an orthography which positioned writing as the derivative of inspired speech and careful hearing.⁴⁶ Writing was meant to be read aloud by Gikuyu who would sound out difficult

⁴²Cagnolo, *The Akikuyu*, 275.

⁴³Government education officials regarded the Catholics with something between suspicion and scorn, at least in part because they lived in conditions officials—and Protestants—found offensive. The DC Embu noted of the Catholic mission in Kieni in 1933: "The mode of living of the fathers is, in my opinion, such that the natives are hardly likely to be favorably influenced. The children were very dirty, while their clothing was definitely filthy. The dining room was small and dirty and little if any improvement upon the native conditions. The kitchen was filthy, while the kitchen table was one of the more unpleasant sights of my career in this colony." (KNA DC/Embu/9/1: DC Embu to PC Central Province, 17.10.33)

⁴⁴Fthr. A. Hemery, *A Handbook of the Kikuyu Language* (Nairobi: Roman Catholic Mission Press, 1903).

⁴⁵Consolata Catholic Mission evangelists arrived at Tutho in central Kenya in December 1902; by 1904, no less than seven mission stations had been established. (Silvana Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture and Christianity: Self Examination of an African Church*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984, 40.) Catholic evangelism was driven by the high population of Italian priests and sisters who worked in Nyeri: by 1932 there were 29 Consolata priests, 9 lay brethren, and 55 sisters in northern Gikuyuland, compared with 20 total Presbyterian missionaries. (Cagnolo, *The Akikuyu*, 267 for Catholic figures; for Presbyterian figures, H.R.A. Philp, *A New Day in Kenya*. London: World Dominion Press, 1936, 150.)

For a succinct history of the Consolata and Holy Ghost missions in central Kenya, see Lawrence Njoroge's *Catholic Missions in Kenya: The case of the Spiritans and the Consolata, 1870-1970* (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1991).

⁴⁶There was another Catholic orthography, propagated by the French Fthr. Bernhard at the St. Austins mission near Nairobi. This orthography employed seven vowels (marked with French diacritics) and was eventually abandoned by the Nairobi missionaries.

words and phrases as they read. Catholic pedagogy gave shape to this kind of vocalized reading. A 1930s reading primer enjoined teachers to begin by placing pots, vegetables, hoes and knives on a table in front of the classroom and to lead students in repeating the names of each object, writing the names on a board in front of the class as the name was pronounced.⁴⁷ Only after students had learned to recognize words, to read them and to articulate them vocally, were students finally given the written primer which taught them the Gikuyu alphabet. Where Protestant pedagogy built words from discrete vowel sounds, distinguished by carefully vowels, Catholic writing departed from the sense of reading, from the shape of words and objects.

Catholic writing was thus not meant to be decoded: it rather relied on the flow of language, on readers' recognition of objects and their corresponding names, to determine words' meanings and to locate them within the contexts of sentences and phrases. Catholic orthography dispensed with the system of seven vowels advocated by the Protestants, using instead the A, E, I, O, U of the English alphabet. The additional two Protestant vowels, wrote the editor of *Wathiomo Mukinyu*, existed for the use of missionaries and other foreigners only; "no Kikuyu reader would be at a loss to know whether to read them as 'broad' or 'narrow'. That is why they are written as in Swahili and English and all other languages and why the symbols \bar{i} and \bar{u} of the Protestant Alliance have been refused."⁴⁸ Catholic orthography did away with the velar nasal consonant "ng" which they considered "needlessly breaks up words," using instead the sign "ng" to cover both the nasalized and the non-nasalized velar consonant.⁴⁹ The Catholic alphabet thus was practically indistinguishable from the English one, allowing for easy printing at any press--another reason adduced by Catholics in favor of their orthography.

⁴⁷Consolata Catholic Mission, *Wegithia Othomi* (Nyeri: Mission Printing School, 1936).

⁴⁸TT "Orea twandikaga" in *Wathiomo Mukinyu*, July 1935, 8-9.

⁴⁹TT Kikuyu orthography file: Merlo Pick to UKLC, 26 April 1934.

Catholic orthography also did away with many of the careful rules of Protestant spelling, although it did preserve some distinctions between words. Catholics only doubled vowels when Gikuyu elongated the vowel or articulated it twice in speech; the doubled, tripled or quadrupled vowels of Protestant grammar found no place in Catholic spelling. Nor did Catholics use the apostrophe to signal the elision of the first person pronoun when placed before the consonant "h", preferring instead to simply spell the word as pronounced and to allow readers to deduce its presence. Catholic spelling also coalesced the terminal vowels of words with the first vowel of the following word, marking the coalescence with an apostrophe to mirror Gikuyu speech. Finally, Catholics consistently used the fricative consonant "z" to do duty for the consonants "th" and "dh" employed in Protestant spelling and grammar, reasoning that "we have departed from Swahili orthography in many points and uniformity is no longer a strong reason, if it means inconvenience to the Kikuyu."⁵⁰ Catholics did endeavor to spell some words in ways that distinguished their meanings from other similarly constructed words: *korea*, to eat, was distinguished from *korya*, to question, and *kurya*, name.⁵¹ But the circumscribed orthography employed by Catholics meant that the distinctions between words were difficult to maintain in writing.

Catholic spelling and orthography thus partially detached the spelling of words from the objects to which they referred. The script allowed written words to mingle comparatively freely on the page, tied to no particular verb or sentence construction. Written words were animated in speech: the sensation of reading aloud conferred upon ambiguously spelled words their meaning and location within larger phrases and contexts. The meaning of written words could hardly be adduced from careful reading. Only the vocal speech of the priest or the catechist would determine their locution.

⁵⁰ TT Kikuyu orthography file: Merlo Pick to UKLC, 26 April 1934.

⁵¹ TT Kikuyu orthography file: Merlo Pick to Barlow, 1 December 1932.

Protestants thought Catholic orthography “gibberish.”⁵² Catholic writing, complained Leakey, mixed “medieval teaching jumbled up with Latin expression” with the pure word of God, making religious texts practically indecipherable to ordinary Gikuyu readers.⁵³ Barlow called Catholic spelling “a disgrace to our learning,” arguing that it would “practically ruin the spelling of Kikuyu in phonetic terms” and was therefore an inadequate vehicle of God’s Word.⁵⁴ By giving words to sentences, and to the sensation of speech, Catholic orthography militated against the kind of reflective and disciplining reading Protestant expected. Protestant anxieties over Catholic writing were as old as the Reformation. In Gikuyu, old theological differences spelled out competing disciplines of reading among new communities of reading converts.

Standardizing letters

To the official colonial mind, endless debates over orthography were reflective only of missionaries’ strident parochialism. Different ways of writing and spelling Gikuyu were dangerous: they drove Catholic and Protestant converts into competition, dividing ‘tribal’ communities and subverting respect for the rule of chiefs and headmen. The state moved to resolve the “orthography problem” in 1928, when the linguist Diedrich Westermann of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IILC) proposed that Gikuyu be brought into line with the new phonetic alphabet for African languages proposed by the institute.⁵⁵ The alphabet proposed for Gikuyu was a derivative of a comprehensive “phonetic” alphabet proposed by the IILC for numerous

⁵²SA I/K/1: Barlow, “The Spelling of Kikuyu,” 1936.

⁵³KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Leakey to CMS language workers, n.d. (but 1933).

⁵⁴TT Kikuyu orthography file: Barlow to UKLC, 8 May 1934.

⁵⁵Westermann first met with the Gikuyu missionaries in 1928, prior to the publication of the IILC’s “Practical Orthography of African Languages.” A transcript of the meeting is in TT: Kikuyu orthography file: Language conference in CNC’s office, 8 March 1928.

languages in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁶ Its rationale, as the IALC pamphlet outlining the alphabet put it, was the “unification and simplification” of the writing of African languages. By insisting that the letters of the proposed alphabet would connote the same voiced sound across political and ethnic boundaries, the IALC eliminated the “confusion” of disparate systems of writing and rendered African differences up to British empire.

The IALC carried off this standardizing project by carefully cataloguing the sounds voiced in African speech, assigning a phonetic symbol to each. The Institute’s primer divided the tongue and the nose into different areas, describing how each action of the vocal apparatus produced different sounds and urging readers to make the sounds for themselves.⁵⁷ By so doing, the primer reasoned, the European learner of native languages could dispense with the necessity of native instruction when learning to read and speak: most natives were “not fitted by nature or by education to teach their language; they are totally incapable of explaining any linguistic phenomena.”⁵⁸ Instead, students should rely on trained scientists, phoneticists, who would begin by drilling prospective learners in the primary phonemes of the language, and from thence to sounds and their distribution, until the student can “say all the sounds of the language with ease in all kinds of combinations.”⁵⁹ The phonetic alphabet thus made Africans’ oral articulation portable, rendering it down into discrete sounds to be learned and recombined by silver-tongued European learners.

⁵⁶Fante, Twi, Ga and Ewe of the Gold Coast, Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa in Nigeria, Mende, Temne, Soso, Konno and Limba in Sierra Leone, and Nuer, Dinka, Bari, Madi and Zande in Sudan were among the languages which adopted the IALC spelling. c.f. International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, *Practical Orthography of African Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930). The only sustained discussion of this initiative that I have located is Jeff Peires, “The Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu revisited,” in *History in Africa* 6 (1979): 155-75.

⁵⁷Diedrich Westermann and Ida Ward, *Practical Phonetics for Students of African Languages* (London: International Institute of African Languages and Literature, 1933).

⁵⁸Westermann, 4.

⁵⁹Westermann, 7.

The IALC proposal for Gikuyu consisted of an alphabet which largely preserved the Romanic consonants but dispensed with the Protestant vowels. The diacritic marks of the Protestant orthography, the *ngobia*, were to the IALC an unscientific relic; they gave "a blurred outline to words and thus impair their legibility."⁶⁰ In place of the offending Protestant vowels, and in tension with the limited Catholic vowels, the IALC proposed the following:

Protestant	Catholic	IALC
a	a	a
e	e	ɛ
ī	e	e
i	i	i
o	o	ə
ū	o	o
u	u	u
ng'	ng	ŋ

The IALC orthography assigned the Roman letters e and o to the "half-closed" sounds to which Protestants had assigned ī and ū; correspondingly the letters ɛ and ə did duty for the "half-open" sounds represented by e and o of Protestant orthography. This reversal was an attempt to limit the number of occurrences of unusual letters in written Gikuyu: "half-closed" sounds were by far the most frequent in speech.⁶¹ But this move distanced Gikuyu from the pronunciation and spelling of Swahili, assigning ɛ and ə to the "half-open" vowels e and o of Swahili.

Protestants complained that the new writing broke down the assimilative connection between Swahili and Gikuyu. They also argued that the addition of ɛ, ə and ŋ gave the language an "outlandish appearance" which would intimidate non-native learners and make the language appear incomprehensible.⁶² The common Gikuyu name

⁶⁰IALC, *Practical Orthography*, 5.

⁶¹SA I/E/13: Grieve to Director of Education, 16 March 1933.

⁶²TT Kikuyu Orthography file: Barlow to Westermann, 17 March 1928.

“Njoroge,” for example, would be rendered “Njərəgε,” or even “Njrxrgv,” if printers followed the suggestion of the Director of Education to use X for ə and V for ε until the new type arrived.⁶³

Protestant objections notwithstanding, the Kenya Government moved quickly to gazette the new orthography on 27 March 1934.⁶⁴ The IALC alphabet was supposed to rationalize Gikuyu, consolidating the language and bringing it into the trans-national narrative of empire worked out by British officials and colonial linguists. Its introduction in central Kenya in 1933 was met not with the accolades of enlightened natives but with the raised voices and heightened tempers of irate *athomi*, whose hopes for writing diverged markedly from the deadening sentence of imperialism. The lines along which their protest developed shed light on Gikuyu intellectuals’ efforts to make orthography underwrite a new politics. Gikuyu letters spelled out readers’ hopes that literacy would make a nation of words out of the fractious debaters of “deep” politics.

Readers’ writing

The intensity of Gikuyu reactions to the IALC orthography proposals in 1934 took missionaries and government officials aback. From the AIM station at Githumu, Fred McKenrick reported that a meeting of teachers had stated “most emphatically that they did not know a single Kikuyu who desired the change.”⁶⁵ The AIM teachers complained that older people would never be able to learn the new orthography and would therefore be unable to read newly published texts. They also complained that the new letters would “isolate” Gikuyu from other Bantu languages, making it look “strange and incomprehensible.” Beecher at the CMS station in Kahuhia reported that older men opposed the change, fearing that their ability to read would be usurped by the younger

⁶³KNA MSS (BS) 1/4: Dougall to Beecher, 7 April 1934.

⁶⁴SA 1/K/9: Kenya Government Gazette, 27 March 1934.

⁶⁵TT UKLC notes: McKenrick to Beecher, 10 July 1934.

athomi then in school.⁶⁶ CMS women, too, thought that “those who had learned to read and write with much sorrow will be prevented from reading their New Testaments to their children.” At the Scots station at Tumutumu, angry *athomi* stormed out of the meeting where the orthography was introduced, shaking their fists and raising their voices. They loudly argued that the new orthography made Gikuyu “look foolish.” Besides, the new letters seemed a ploy make the readers buy more missionary books.⁶⁷ All Gikuyu thought that the new letters were, in Beecher’s words, “dangerous.” The IALC proposals were quickly suppressed by a government fearful of agitating the Gikuyu intelligentsia.

Officials and missionaries thought that Gikuyu reactions to the new orthography were simply intemperate, driven by intellectuals’ anger at not being consulted before its introduction.⁶⁸ But their outraged readings of the orthography proposal evoke more than readers’ wounded pique. The new orthography, I suggest, was dangerous because it threatened to turn a language of trust into a mark of division. In summary, then, of the remainder of this chapter: IALC letters i.)made fractious disputants of the imagined citizens of readers’ new nation-of-words, an objection that arose from readers’ hopes that literacy would embody a language of citizenship; and ii.)turned back readers’ ambitious colonization of foreign tongues, thwarting their creative efforts to make English words and disciplines into a practiced claim on colonial entitlement.

The first objection arose from readers’ hopes that literacy would become a language with which to knit together the divisive, disputing, “deep” politics of Gikuyu ethnicity. As I showed in Chapter Four, family politics recognized no outside authority, no common cultural mind. The “deep” politics of ethnic debate were divisively local, conducted as elders and youth, landlords and tenants argued through moral expectations

⁶⁶KNA MSS (BS) 1/4: Beecher to Pitt-Pitts, 18 June 1934.

⁶⁷SA 1/Z/6: Tumutumu log book for 1933, A.R. Barlow’s entry for 29 July.

⁶⁸TT Kikuyu orthography file: Beecher, “The Orthographical situation at Kikuyu,” 1939.

of upright conduct. Deep politics made it difficult for any party, any trans-local association, to speak authoritatively. Faced with the burden of leadership, readers of the 1920s and 30s hoped to found a new vernacular nation-of-words, using handwriting and print to mark a discursive unity for their people and a share of power for themselves. They argued that the disciplines of bureaucracy--record keeping, receipts, stamps--made for responsible leadership. Cash Books, I show below, became for them a way to demonstrate their moral discipline to suspicious elders. IALC letters shattered this imagined nation-of-words, and threatened to turn vernacular scripts of trust into vehicles of heightened conflict.

Readers of the 1920s argued that literacy, and the new technology of print, would protect Gikuyu virtue from the demoralizing effects of modernity.⁶⁹ Faced with the divisive power of colonialism, where uncircumcised women rode with their heads uncovered in motorcars and wandered from their homes to Nairobi to engage in prostitution, readers claimed for literacy the unique ability to protect gendered virtue and internal political order.⁷⁰ New times demanded new leadership. The Kikuyu Central Association leader Parmenas Mockerie said as much in a 1928 letter offering advice to Stanley Kiama Gathigira, newly elected to a post on the government's Local Native Council in Nyeri. Gikuyu needed good leaders, he argued, to protect their land, "so that we cannot be like *ahoi* (tenants at will)."⁷¹ Without good leaders, Gikuyu were likely to be turned off their land just as they themselves had driven the Gumba out before them 75 years before. Strong leadership would also allow Gikuyu to plant European crops like coffee and tea which could be sold abroad so as to "assist the development the tribe and

⁶⁹This paragraph, and the one that follows, owe much to John Lonsdale, "'Listen while I read': the Orality of Christian Literacy in the Young Kenyatta's making of the Kikuyu," in Louise de la Gorgendière ed., *Ethnicity in Africa* (Edinburgh, 1996), 17-33.

⁷⁰For women in motorcars, George Ndegwa in *Mwigwithania* i, 8 (March 1928); for women wandering into prostitution, Wanjiru wa Kinyua, in *Mwigwithania* i, 12 (May 1929), both in *KNA DC/Machakos/10B/13/1*.

⁷¹SA I/F/9: Parmenas Mockerie at Kahuhia to Stanley Kiama, n.d. (but 1928).

us to get rich."⁷² The proper exercise of political power would allow Gikuyu to prove their wealthy self-mastery and protect them from the moral dissolution of the landless.

But the leadership of elders was not sufficient: elders were not "knowledgeable people" and hence "could not be able to handle cases fairly and justly and can be misused by other people unjustly." Unskilled in the new dispensation of literate politics, elders were likely to be made the unwitting dupes of colonialists or of other tribes. The politics of the elders was a politics of reputation, and of oral argument: it was therefore a local politics. The minutes and memoranda of the colonial state demanded new leadership, argued Mockerie, leaders who were skilled in writing, particularly in English. Readers who knew English could name themselves, create their own reputations: any reader would find it easy "to get a Doctor or a Mister if he goes for further studies." Literacy in colonial languages allowed for self-improvement; it also fostered the unity, *uiguano* of the tribe. The story of the House of Babel provided a negative example for Mockerie: it was never completed "because the people of the same tribe got dis-united and could not listen to each other." Speech was not a sufficient foundation for the new builders, the *athomi*, trying to build a new nation of words. Only writing would do: had not Booker T. Washington gotten the "Negros from their ignorance" through his "writing and reading"? "If we chose foolishness," concluded Mockerie, "we will live foolishly and apart." Only literacy allowed for the unity necessary to meet the pressing demands of political leadership.

Athomi of the 1920s hoped to convert their youthful waywardness in missionary schools into a claim on political power. They argued that literacy knit together new defenses against the dangers of change: it protected property and gendered order in a world where Gikuyu land, power, and wealth were under pressure. The discipline of

⁷²Gikuyu were prohibited from growing coffee for export until the late 1940s. for which see Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (London: James Currey, 1997), 167-69.

reading, not the vocal call of *atĩrĩrĩ* (I-say-to-you) would define the discursive boundaries of new polity imagined by *athomi* like Mockerie. Literacy simultaneously extended and codified Gikuyu ethnicity, rendering moralizing discourse into the pages of texts like Mockerie's letter or the reading of the KCA's journal *Mwigwithania*. Readers, recognizing the potential and vitality of this claim, read the newspaper aloud to gathered crowds of readers and elders in teashops and bars. As one informant, William Githaiga, remembered,

It was like religion. We preached to the other people. Even to those old people who could not read, those people who bought it, who knew what it said, they read it to them.⁷³

The early 1930s offered *athomi* the opportunity to drive the sermon home. The Kenya Land Commission of 1932-34, sent out to see if there was a case for the compensation of African land alienated by white settlers, put great demands on readers' command of Gikuyu and English. The commission heard testimony and accepted written memoranda in all three Gikuyu districts from elders, chiefs, and young *athomi*. Thousands attended the public hearings.⁷⁴ Elderly landholders wrote petitions in English describing the alienation of their land with the help of a pre-printed form provided by the KCA.⁷⁵ Others drew up their own maps, digging out buried stones and looking for the *itoka*, lilies, marking old boundaries to help elders remember the lay of their land.⁷⁶ Shirt- and pants-wearing *athomi*, eager to prove their skills to their fathers, acted as scribes. Other readers proudly wrote their own memoranda, in English, for the reading of

⁷³Oral interview, William Githaiga, 10 July 1996. Other *athomi* similarly remember reading *Mwigwithania* aloud to their elders.

⁷⁴Rita Breen, *The Politics of Land: The Kenya Land Commission (1932-33)* (PhD Michigan State University, 1976).

⁷⁵Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence and Memoranda vol. 1* (London: HMSO, 1934), 259.

⁷⁶For maps and the digging up of *ithaka* boundaries, *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri Annual Report, 1933*.

the commission. *Athomi* claims on ethnic leadership were loudly proclaimed in the hearings: as the reader Stanley Kiama argued, "we are better educated than (the elders of the Local Native Council). We could not refrain from writing when we saw that the elders did not know what the Commission was doing..."⁷⁷ The Land Commission was met with an unprecedented display of literacy from readers, allowing them to refurbish their claims to ethnic leadership.⁷⁸

Literacy in 1933 earned readers mastery both of colonial politics and personal life. The IALC's ε, θ and η spelled disaster to nervous readers. The new letters threatened to turn the literate in upon themselves, dealing a debilitating blow to their claims that literacy gave them a privileged point of entry into ethnic leadership. It is in this sense that we can read readers' complaints that senior men, fearing the ridicule of their juniors, would not be able to learn the new letters; that women who had learned to read would now be unable to read the Bible to their children.⁷⁹ The new letters threatened to fracture the tenuous moral unity of reading posed by *athomi*. Reading and writing would no longer bring unity: the rebuilt Babel could never rest on the divided foundation of ε, θ and η. The IALC would instead visit ridicule and strife to adults who would not think of attending reading classes with their children. So too would the new orthography marginalize the poor, those unable to purchase books in the new print: some readers thought that the new orthography was simply an effort to coerce readers into buying more books, at high prices.⁸⁰ Reading would become the privilege of the wealthy, those who could afford to buy books. The new orthography threatened to turn vernacular lexicons of unity into marks of division.

⁷⁷Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence and Memoranda*, 84-85.

⁷⁸For analyses of Gikuyu strategies at the KLC hearings, Lonsdale, "The Prayers of Waiyaki: Political Uses of the Kikuyu Past," in David Anderson and Douglas Johnson eds., *Revealing Prophets* (London: Currey, 1995), 240-291.

⁷⁹*KNA MSS (BS) 1/3*: Beecher to Pitt-Pitts, 18 June 1934.

⁸⁰*SA VZ/6 (A)*: Tumutumu 1933 log book, entry for 29 July.

But to turn now the second objection to the new orthography, readers' horror at the sentence of ethnic conflict passed by ϵ , θ and η was matched by their fear that the letters spelled the end of their ambitious efforts to write themselves into the new language of colonial entitlement. In the meetings of local trading companies, in school committees, and in their correspondence with government officials, readers of the 1920s practiced the English words of colonial bureaucracy. Their erudite rehearsal of English terms allowed them to turn foreign words into a Gikuyu language of trust, proving their interpretive power to suspicious elders. But in practicing English, adopting its grammar and locution into vernacular writing, readers equally made claims on colonial officials. They hoped that the English would notice their practiced ease with bureaucratic language, and reward them for their hard linguistic work. Their fused writing extended moral judgement on the British, subjecting colonial power to vernacular expectations. The IALC letters threatened to pull Gikuyu and English asunder, creating an impassable barrier between readers and colonial power and making Gikuyu tongues, and hopes, look "foolish."

Gikuyu readers worked into their ambitious claims on English in organizations like the Kikuyu Traders Association (KTA), a group of relatively prosperous readers organized in 1931 to support the developing 'independent' school at Kagere, about which I wrote in Chapter Four. The KTA called cash-wealthy men to invest their profits at home: it underwrote a stone school building in 1932 at a cost of over 1,000 shillings, and equipped it with chairs, tables and a bell.⁸¹ Individual members subscribed ten or twenty shillings each to meet the expense.⁸² As I shall show at length in Chapter Six, the KTA's investment in schooling was a claim on ethnic power in a moral economy where the generous use of wealth marked out leaders. More, KTA members seem to have thought

⁸¹ *Mahiga* Kamakwa KTA, "Mahiga Independent School," 1.8.32.

⁸² *Mahiga* "Members, Tetu Kikuyu Traders Association," n.d. (but 1932).

themselves morally obligated: those who contributed to the school would “make their country clean,” refurbishing the integral ties between land and virtue, schooling and progress.⁸³ The KTA hoped to cleanse their community of divisive argument over female circumcision by turning their private profits into a Gikuyu commonwealth.

But leadership took discipline. Writing, the disciplines of record keeping, promised to prove readers' responsibility, and fostered obligating ties of trust among members. Leaders sought unity among themselves by signing an oath promising not to divulge the secret information, *kirira*, of the organization to outsiders.⁸⁴ Public writing resolved dangerous disputes: in 1932 the secretary put an end to a long-running argument over the association's correspondence with the District Commissioner when he “explained everything by writing on the blackboard, and people heard with joy what had been done.”⁸⁵ Regular members joined the association on paying a fee of one shilling, after which they affixed their signature to a declaration signaling their intent to “obey everything that is written in these rules, and written in the agenda.”⁸⁶ Most signed the declaration and other documents like it by writing their baptismal names, in English, and abbreviating their Gikuyu names to letters: Wambugu Maina, the sometime president of the association, signed “W.M. Willy Jimmy”; Kiboi Wariua, the secretary, signed “K.W. Dunstan.”⁸⁷ The ability to write was a condition for membership in the KTA.⁸⁸ In order to speak in public meetings, members had to submit written agendas to the secretary in

⁸³These and the following quotations are from *Mahiga* “Report: Uria Agikuyu mangithii mbere,” 16 March 1932, no author (but probably Willy Jimmy Wambugu).

⁸⁴*Mahiga* Meeting at Stephano Waciira's, 29 May 1931.

⁸⁵*Mahiga* Agenda, KTA meeting on 18 December 1932.

⁸⁶*Mahiga* “Watho wa Members,” n.d. (but 1931).

⁸⁷c.f. “Watho wa members” and other correspondence in *Mahiga* papers, especially *Mahiga* scholars to DC Nyeri, 28 October 1931.

⁸⁸Compare with McKenzie's observations on Maori chiefs' signatures on the Waitangi treaty: McKenzie, “The sociology of a text: oral culture, literacy and print in early New Zealand,” in Peter Burke and Roy Porter eds., *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 161-197.

advance.⁸⁹ Agendas were generally read out loud as the first item in KTA meetings, together with the minutes of previous meetings. This practice was copied from the colonial practice of agenda-making, a District Commissioner's device to control the direction of sometimes fractious meetings. But the reading before KTA meetings opened up space for the performance of literacy, where *athömi* could articulate their mastery over both vernacular language and English, the language of colonial power.

The agenda of the Kikuyu Traders Association meeting at Kamakwa on 1 August 1932 gives evidence of the kind of worked-out linguistic fusion set in play by readers' efforts to make English literacy into a claim on Gikuyu politics. The meeting, convened only one year after the formation of the association, was meant to discuss ways in which the KTA could organize its bureaucracy in face of criticisms about misappropriation of funds. Rumors circulated throughout 1931 that Willy Jimmy Wambugu, the president of the Mahiga school and an official in the KTA, had misused association funds by entering into clandestine business arrangements with Osman Allu, a Indian merchant.⁹⁰ Association books showed a shortfall, but lacking receipts, no-one knew for certain how much had been in the account.⁹¹ Elders and some suspicious readers feared that Wambugu's dalliance with the merchant signaled his prostitution to foreign ways. They requested the District Commissioner in December to ban non-native purchasers from the Nyeri district and specifically asked that Indians like Allu should "not have anything to do with native wives."⁹² Money was at the root of this dangerous dispute. The unregulated use of money, critics feared, might seduce the association's leaders to join

⁸⁹Mahiga "Watho wa Members," no. 7.

⁹⁰Mahiga petition from Willy Jimmy Wambugu, n.d. (but 1931).

⁹¹Mahiga "Mahiga school agenda," 29 September 1931.

⁹²Mahiga KTA managers to DC South Nyeri, 2 December 1931.

the Indians in leading their wives away from them.⁹³ The wealth of Gikuyu men was, at least until the depression of the 1930s, counted in goats, not cash. Goats could be branded by their owners, marked with tattoos (*njora*) which identified the clan from which the animal came and allowed for easy return of strays.⁹⁴ Cash could not be so marked: it belonged to no one, and circulated freely without any hint of its origin. Such uncontrolled wealth, elders and other critics feared, was dangerous, liable to lead the cash-wealthy to immorality.⁹⁵

The KTA agenda, handwritten by the secretary Dunstan Kiboi, harnessed the power of writing for service in this crisis of leadership, generated by “deep” political debate over morality. It read as follows:

Meciria ma Independent school Mahiga

1. Kwamūrania mawira maya:

a) Kwega atumia mbembe cioma marute o mutumia 100 lbs eri marute ikunia rimwe na icaririo ningi na iroragwo nĩ karani ūria ūkungania Shgs. akauga rirĩa niaigana ciakwendio. Ciendio Shgs icio ikandikwo thĩni wa Cash Book na ikaigwo ithanduku hamwe na iria ingi.

b) Shgs ciothe cia mĩhothi niwega inengagĩruo karani rirĩa mwamũkiri wacio mbere itanaiguo Ithanduku nake akanengera ūria mũigi akandika thĩni wa Cash Book akĩiga.

c) Hatiri shg ona imwe iri na rutha kũigwo ithanduku itandikitwo thĩni wa Cash Book kana kurutwo itari nyandike.

d) Gũtirĩ mũndũ ūrĩ na rutha ona ūũku kwĩra karani namba ati nindutite shgs kana niuetetuo tĩga anengeruo na moko. Karani angĩkoiga ati Shg ndamionire ma andikitie mbukuini yake na arute.

e) Shgs ikirutwo thĩni wa Ithanduku no kinya hagiage sign ya murute na akonania gĩtumi mbukuini kia wira uria arutĩre.

f) Mwene ithanduku ndari na rutha gwikia ona nuthu ya cent thĩni w ithanduku itari nyandike thĩni wa mbuku Cash Book. Ningĩ ndari na rutha kuruta ona nuthu cent itari nyandike thiini wa mbuku...

⁹³For African and British men's fears over women's prostitution, particularly centered around women who went to Nairobi to trade or seek work, see Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way*, 91-101; and Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁹⁴Oral interview, Edwin Baro.

⁹⁵The same moral fear drove Tswana concerns over cash in southern Africa, for which John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1997), Ch. 4.

h) Mukui hīngūro ndari rūtha gūthiī kweia muigi Shgs marute kana kūhingura ithanduku mbuku ya Cashier itari ho. Ningi atikira na akarīha mwene. Ningi ndari na rutha kuongera mūdū ūngi hingo tiga we mwene kana urīa ūgathurwo nī kiama na Mutongoria wakio.⁹⁶

Ideas of Independent School Mahiga

1. Explaining the issues:

- a) Its good when the maize is dry, each woman gives 100 pounds, two are to contribute two sacks. A clerk is to be found to look at them who also collect the money when he says there is enough to sell. The sale price in shillings is then written in the Cash Book and then put in the box together with the others.
- b) Before the contributions are written in the Cash Book, they are to be given to the clerk who will give them to the treasurer to put into the box.
- c) No shillings, even one, is to put in the box before it is written into the Cash Book.
- d) There is no-one with permission to tell the clerk the amount, except what he is given by hand. The clerk could tell him the shillings which he has not seen are written in the box and he takes them out.
- e) Before any money is taken from the box, whoever is getting the money has to sign and should show the work he is to do with it.
- f) The one having the box has no permission to put even half a cent into the box without writing it in the Cash Book. Also he has no permission to take out even half a cent unless I write it in the book...
- h) The one carrying the key has no permission to open the box when the book of the cashier is not there. If money goes missing, the keeper will have to pay. No other person should be included in the committee unless the kiama and its leader agree to this.

The memo brought the "Cash Book," an English bureaucratic discipline, into a Gikuyu argument over wealth, morality and responsible leadership. Kiboi argued that the Cash Book, backed by careful signatures, keys, and locked boxes, made for responsibility and trust. The Cash Book recorded the value of the maize sold by women, and ensured that no wives would dally with Indian merchants—or irresponsible readers. Writing assigned owners to money, and held leaders responsible for its careful disbursement. The Cash Book thus abated the danger of communally-held money, re-attaching wealth to people and making cash an avenue toward the corporate good. The Cash Book also

⁹⁶Mahiga Meciria ma Independent school Mahiga, 1 August 1932.

proved the imaginative power of the association's leadership: access to it was carefully controlled, and its interpretation was vested with a few literates. The Cash Book was thus a useful tool to regulate dangerously uncontrolled cash: but more, it came into this Gikuyu debate as an icon, imparting an interpretive power to the association's bureaucracy.

The Cash Book helped to define the character and practice of bureaucratic power and proved readers' claims that literacy made them responsible leaders. This "roping-in" of English was played out in other texts concerning words like "soul," "chief," "District Commissioner," "boundary"--words which have no intrinsic Gikuyu meaning but which came to mean something out of conversations between elders and readers, men and women, Gikuyu and missionaries. By bringing English words and disciplines into Gikuyu debates, readers signaled their mastery over foreign ideas and demonstrated their fitness to act as interpreters of colonial power for their illiterate elders. English words were not so much foreign or "magical" as they were persuasive, useful for converts searching for words to describe and defend their leadership to their elders.⁹⁷

But the roping-in of Cash Book meant more than responsible ethnic leadership. It also signaled readers' efforts to practice English, to mull over its words, so as to enter more effectively into the colonial discourse of citizenship and entitlement. Cash Book came to mean responsible leadership in part because readers wanted to prove to colonial officials that they were worthy recipients of grants-in-aid, the largesse which the state dispensed to well-run schools. Government regulations governing the administration of "grants-in-aid" to new schools required a Weberian systematism, with registers and cash books figuring prominently among the requirements.⁹⁸ Record-keeping was a technology

⁹⁷c.f. Ajay Skaria, "Writing, Orality and Power in the Dangs, Western India, 1800s-1920s" in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). 14-15.

⁹⁸c.f. SA II/E/23: South Nyeri District Education Board, "Grants to elementary schools," 20 November 1936.

of colonial power, a means by which the state kept track of its subjects: but few ambitious Gikuyu had scruples about the state's oversight of their schools. The Mahiga school committee first applied for a government grant in 1931, but were rejected because of persistent disputes between the committee and the local chief, Githae.⁹⁹ By 1932, it was clear that the Kagere school would be "recognized" by government, if not financially aided: in November the government Inspector of Schools visited Kagere to evaluate the committee's organization.¹⁰⁰ Record-keeping was first among his suggestions. By 1933, a year after the Cash Book allayed elders' fears of unregulated wealth, Kiboi could proudly ask the D.C., in English, to "show favor to our application because we have not tired of building our school properly."¹⁰¹ His practiced ease with the language of bureaucracy paid off: the application was granted, the DC noting that the school committee had been reorganized along "more sound lines."¹⁰²

The Kagere readers' practice with Cash Book was a pre-text for their entry into the bureaucratic language by which the colonial state entitled its subjects. Vernacular debates like the one over Cash Book enabled ambitious readers to work through the meanings of foreign words, making them speak both to long-standing ethnic debates and to colonial disciplines. This Gikuyu domestication of English was accompanied by another movement, less noticeable, played out in the orthography and spelling with which Kiboi wrote Gikuyu. As Kiboi brought English into Gikuyu, so too did Gikuyu move toward the English alphabet. Kiboi's handwritten Gikuyu evoked Protestant orthography--but many of the diacritical marks, the *ngobia*, so central to Protestant writing were omitted. Kiboi employed them indiscriminately, seemingly as it was

⁹⁹SA I/G/6: Nyeri Local Native Council meeting, 29 December 1931.

¹⁰⁰A record of his visit is in *Mahiga* "Maundu maria Inspector ararie hingo uria ari Mahiga I.S.," 8 November 1932.

¹⁰¹*Mahiga* Kiboi to DC Nyeri, 13 October 1933.

¹⁰²SA I/G/6: Nyeri Local Native Council meeting, 16 March 1933.

convenient for him to make the additional mark. *Rũtha*, "permission" or "leave" (in Protestant orthography) was rendered variously as *rutha*; *thĩni*, the preposition "inside," was here *thĩni* or *thiini*. Nor did Kiboi follow Protestant rules concerning the doubling of vowels: under heading a), to take one example, the verb *ikandikwo*, "and they (the shillings) are then written" would, in Protestant spelling, require a doubled "a", *ikaandikwo*, to signal the juxtaposition of the consecutive verb tense *-ka* and the verb stem *-andika*. (to write). Kiboi similarly elided the grammatical conventions favored by Protestants: the phrase under heading a), *Ciendio Shgs icio ikandikwo thĩni wa Cash Book na ikaigwo ithanduku hamwe na iria ingi* (the sale price in shillings is them written in the Cash Book and then put in the box together with the others) omits the verb ending *-ira* on the verb *ikaigwo*, the prepositional ending which would make the verb *ikaigĩruo*, "put in (the boxes)." Kiboi repeated this attenuated construction of "put in" under headings b) and c).¹⁰³

Protestant Gikuyu words were aligned with each other in fiercely determined relationships, signaled by doubled letters, seven vowels, and verb endings which allowed words' meanings to be adduced from a process of investigative decoding. Writing for Protestants was a map meant to lead readers to the truth behind words. Kiboi's writing, in contrast, gave words' meanings to the sentences in which they were located--and by extension, deferred the meaning of words, leaving interpretation up to the work of the reader. His writing placed words in proximity with one other but did not attempt to code their relationship. Reading this text was not so much about decoding as it was about sense, about the relation of words to one another. Reading relied on the play of words, not on the cognitive map-reading of the reader. Kiboi's writing maintained a gap between script and meaning that Protestants had sought to close. By doing so he allowed

¹⁰³Protestant Gikuyu spelling used verb endings such as *-ira* to do service for English prepositions such as "to," "at," "for," and "in." For a discussion of prepositional endings in Gikuyu, see Barlow, *Tentative Studies in Kikuyu Grammar and Idiom* (London: Blackwood, 1914), pp. 66-75.

for continued investment into the sense of language, the reading aloud by which KTA bureaucrats proved their claims on power.

In this respect, Kiboi's Gikuyu resembled the play of words in the English language. English words are self-righteously independent of each other: verbs carry no hint of their relations to nouns within themselves, deferring the action which they signal to the next word, or to the phrase, of the sentence in which they are located. English verbs depend on sentences, on words' relations to each, to determine their meaning. To take an example: in the sentence translated above, "The sale price in shillings is then written in the Cash Book and then put in the box together with the others," the verb "put" offers no hint of its relation to "boxes," nor does it signal what is being put, "shillings." The meaning of the verb "put" is deferred, dependent on the presence of the preposition "in" and on the nouns "shillings" and "box" to determine its meaning within the sentence. Gikuyu in the Protestant system of writing would admit no such deferral: the verb *ikaigirwo*, as the Protestants spelled it, signaled its relation both to "shillings" and to "the boxes" within itself, through the initial vowel "i" (which agreed with "shillings") and through the verb ending "-irwo," which directed the action of the verb toward the noun. By spelling the verb "put in" *ikaigwo*, Kiboi evoked a grammatical construction that belonged more to English than to Protestant Gikuyu. Kiboi's verb, like English verbs, depended on the noun "boxes," *ithanduku*, to determine its meaning. The verb itself bore no mark of the noun to which it refers. Kiboi put words in promiscuous juxtaposition with each other, as in English, and relied on readers' deductive power to make sense of their relation.

Protestants regarded the kind of game entrained by Kiboi with distrust. Gikuyu writing like this, thought Barlow, was pure "ki-thungu" or "ki-miceni"; it was "school

Kikuyu" which imposed English grammatical conventions on Gikuyu writing.¹⁰⁴ Missionaries worried that writing like Kiboi's "played ducks and drakes with our beautifully logical rules of spelling" and thus opened texts to "misunderstanding and ambiguity."¹⁰⁵ Kiboi's writing game nonetheless attracted many Gikuyu.

Mwigwithania, the KCA journal published from 1928 to 1935, employed only five vowels and, like Kiboi, played with Protestant conventions of spelling. Even though *Mwigwithania* cost three times the price of the government Swahili language paper *Habari*, the government paper consistently had to be given away. *Mwigwithania* sold out every issue. *Mwigwithania* also outsold the Catholic paper *Wathiomu Mukinyu*, the "True Friend," even though the Catholic paper was a seventh of the price of *Mwigwithania*.¹⁰⁶

Kiboi's writing, like that of *Mwigwithania*, marked a creative fusion between English and Gikuyu. Kiboi's practice of omitting diacritical marks, and eliding important verb endings, was not simply a labor-saving device, a lazy man's way of writing the language (though it may also have been that). Kiboi's way of writing attempted to phrase Gikuyu concerns within the bureaucratic language of English, while at the same time domesticating English words to bear on Gikuyu debates over wealth, ethnic power and leadership. The fusion between these two languages said more than Gikuyu alone would permit: it was a new creation, allowing readers to practice their mastery over foreign tongues and their belonging within the powerful discourse of colonial rule.¹⁰⁷ By making

¹⁰⁴For *athomi* writing as "ki-thungu" and "ki-miceni," KNA MSS (BS) 1/2: Barlow to Irvine, 16 November 1934. For "school Kikuyu," Barlow's evaluation of Eliud Mathu's translation of the school pamphlet "People of Many Lands," in the same file, Barlow to Beecher, 30 November 1938.

¹⁰⁵SA I/D/6: Barlow to Greaves, 21 November 1938.

¹⁰⁶For circulation comparisons, see Leonard Beecher, *Language Teaching in Kikuyu schools: studies in the teaching of English and other languages in the Kikuyu schools of Kenya colony, East Africa*. (M.A. thesis, University of London, May 1937) p. 64.

¹⁰⁷White missionaries may have enacted a similar fusion of English and Gikuyu, for similar purposes: their frequent uses of Gikuyu and Swahili words such as "uhoro" (news, Gospel in Christian lexicon) in letters to home audiences established missionaries as careful mediators between the linguistic strangeness

Gikuyu look like English, Kiboi and others made the English look like Gikuyu, subjecting them to the moral standards by which Gikuyu ethnicity judged virtue and rewarded merit. It was a linguistic move that allowed Gikuyu to extend moral judgment on colonial power and gave them words to claim an entitlement of wealth and a share of power for themselves.

Kiboi's memorandum demonstrates that Gikuyu readers worked up the energy to engage with English in vernacular debates, using languages that bridged ethnicity and tribalism, Gikuyu and English, the locality and the colony.¹⁰⁸ This discursive working-up has little to do with the "colonization of consciousness," though it does owe its shape to the powerful pull of English.¹⁰⁹ Kiboi's appropriation of Cash Book was rather an attempt to deal creatively with the burden of English, to suborn it to the requirements of leadership, so as to make it speak of readers' aspirations to half-hearing colonial officials.

The 1933 proposal to impose *ε*, *ə* and *η* on Gikuyu orthography struck at the heart of *athomi* mastery over their own language; by extension, it threatened their assimilative attempts to fuse English and Gikuyu for use in the twinned political debate of ethnicity and colony. It is in this light that we can read complaints that the new orthography made Gikuyu look "foolish" and strange, that the new orthography would "degrade" the language.¹¹⁰ When the Githumu teachers complained that the orthography would make Gikuyu "isolated" from other languages, and when the Tumutumu people complained

of Africa and the rational flow of words in English. In writing to each other, missionaries used Gikuyu to say what was unsayable in English. The verb *-kuroga*, to "bewitch," was frequently used by missionaries in reference to an adherent who had gone astray. Such a person, they wrote, had been *kurogwo-ed*. c.f. SA I/A/22: Arthur to District Commissioner, 22 April 1916.

For a history of systematic English appropriations of vernacular words, see Richard Bailey's *Images of English: a cultural history of the language* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁸A point owed to John Lonsdale, "Jomo, God and the modern world," forthcoming in Jan-Georg Deutsch ed., *African Modernities*.

¹⁰⁹c.f. Gayatri Spivak, "The Burden of English," in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 134-57.

¹¹⁰For the IALC orthography as degrading, see SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1934.

that their language would look "foolish" with Greek letters, they evoked their fear that the integral linkage between Gikuyu and English, between domestic and ethnic self-mastery and political power would no longer operate in a divisive colonial economy. Readers sought to speak and write one language, a language that would both establish their credibility in interior debates over the architecture of ethnic leadership and communicate their ambitious desire to take part in the exterior debates of tribe and nation in the colony as a whole. The new orthography threatened this creative fusion, promising to make Gikuyu intellectuals into diphasics, speaking one abstracted language to their kin and another to government officials. The strangeness of the new orthography made it uniquely dangerous.

* * *

Athomi hopes for their writing got a wider hearing in 1939, when the Kikuyu African Teachers Union (KATU), a group of intellectuals from Kiambu and Nyeri, put forward its own solution to the lingering "problem" of Gikuyu orthography. The standardizing IALC orthography had been withdrawn in 1934 by government officials surprised at the force of Gikuyu protest. KATU intervened with its own orthography in an attempt to forward the "progress and development of the country."¹¹¹ KATU's orthography allowed for only five vowels, those of the English alphabet, arguing that there was no need to introduce "new symbols" like ϵ and \bar{i} and \bar{u} --in Gikuyu writing. η and ng' were similarly unnecessary, wrote KATU, since "the sentence *Nganga, twara nganga kenanga-ine* [left untranslated, without italics or quotation marks] is quite intelligible without difficulty." The meaning of ambiguously-spelled words would be determined when words were "placed in their proper context." Missions, concluded the memorandum, should adopt this five vowel orthography so as not to

¹¹¹SA I/K/10: Kikuyu African Teachers Union, "Kikuyu Orthography Recommendations," 1939.

“hinder our progress by blocking a system which could raise literacy in Kikuyu for the good of all.”

KATU's orthography, like Kiboi's, placed Gikuyu writing at the service of Gikuyu readers. This orthography distanced writing from the Protestant discipline of decoding, and assumed that readers would make sense of words not by virtue of their spelling but because words stood in relation to contexts, to sentences. The untranslated sentence which KATU cited in the midst of its English-language memorandum--*Nganga, twara nganga kenanga-ine* --invited readers to practice this game of reading. The first word, *Nganga*, could only be the personal name *Ngang'a* because the remainder of the sentence was a request of the named person. But the word *Nganga* in itself offered no evidence of its meaning: in the absence of the distinguishing consonant “ng” (or *ŋ*), *Nganga* could as easily be the infinitive of the verb *-ng'ang'a*, to be stiff, obstinate; the noun *nganga*, guinea fowl; or the noun *ng'anga*, dross, black stones.¹¹² *Nganga* became the name *Ngang'a* because it stood in relation to the command *twarā*, take. By virtue of its location within a sentence, *Nganga* could be recognized as the name of a person commanded to “take the guinea fowl (or iron dross) to the marketplace.” But the word in itself gave no clue of its meaning, or of its operation within the sentence.

KATU's orthography evidences the kind of linguistic fusion practiced by readers like Kiboi and other Gikuyu writers. Gikuyu writers attempted to meld their own language with the look and feel of English, to make Gikuyu and English grammar and orthography approximate each other. This worked out vernacular fusion made the English alphabet do service for Gikuyu phonemes. It equally adopted some of the conventions of English grammar into Gikuyu sentences. The result was a linguistic confusion, a mixing together of languages which spoke both of *athomi* ambitions and of the

¹¹²The various meanings for *Ngang'a*, *ng'ang'a*, and *ng'anga* and *nganga* are culled from the Beechers' *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), in *SA* 1/2/26.

demands ethnic and colonial discourse placed on them. Unmarked by exotic italics or quotation marks, Gikuyu sentences like KATU's could shade into English and participate in colonial arguments.

The colonial state did not resolve its "orthography problem" until 1949. Missionaries, Catholic and Protestant alike, agreed in 1948 to use the IALC phonetic alphabet.¹¹³ They had the apparently enthusiastic support of Jomo Kenyatta, newly returned from anthropological training in London.¹¹⁴ The state intervened by adopting the Protestant Gikuyu system, but left off its troublesome diacritical marks.¹¹⁵ Government, explained the Chief Native Commissioner, was reluctant to adopt any orthography which would "set Kikuyu off from the rest of languages in Kenya."¹¹⁶ The colonial government's resolution to the orthography debate was driven by the demands of an increasingly bureaucratic administration.¹¹⁷ Such a system forbade attempts to write vernaculars in an 'exotic' fashion, for practical as well as ideological reasons. Africans by the 1940s were supposed to be citizens, not tribesmen. Their writing was to mark their belonging to a bureaucratic state.

The colonial sentence on the problem of orthography has not ended debates on Gikuyu writing. Where the state adopted a weak form of Protestant writing in an effort to consolidate the bureaucratic nation which it imagined was coming into being, post-colonial critics have attempted liberate Gikuyu writing from the oversight of the state, employing vernacular writing as a mark of resistance to the totalizing force of the English language. Less obvious are the ways in which Kenyans continue to remake the multiple

¹¹³KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Calderwood to Barlow, 19 Feb. 1948.

¹¹⁴SA I/C/10: Barlow to Calderwood, 29 July 1947.

¹¹⁵KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Robert Philp, secretary UKLC, confidential circular to committee, June 1949. Some sense of Catholic disgust is evident from Merlo Pick's introduction to *Ndaĩ na gĩcandĩ: Kikuyu enigmas* (Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 1973).

¹¹⁶SA I/K/10: Robert MacPherson, "The Kikuyu Alphabet," n.d. (but 1948).

¹¹⁷For which, Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 282-92.

languages they speak, bringing them together both in casual conversation and in political dialogue.¹¹⁸ Writing, reading, and by consequence orthography continue to stand at the intersection of different political projects now in train in post-colonial Kenya.

Conclusions

Ngugi and Gakaara's rewriting of Gikuyu orthography owes little to the ambitious domestication of English practiced by Kiboi, KATU and the writers of *Mwigwithania*. The Gikuyu grammar and orthography embraced by contemporary nationalists resembles the writing created by Protestant missionaries: and indeed, in its concern for the integrity of words and writing, Gikuyu nationalism and Protestant discipline have much in common. Words, both for nationalists and Protestants, carry the weight of meaning, and reality, within themselves. The flux of undetermined meaning, of words of "foreign" extraction, do not belong in this discipline. In reading, Gikuyu are supposed to go back to origins, to the Word of Protestant theology or to the Culture of nationalists. Reading brings readers face-to-face with the essence of texts, with the Being that gives language shape. Ngugi and Gakaara's participation in Protestant writing is not simply accidental: it arises out of a view of identity which equates language and origins, and which looks suspiciously at the play of history.

Dunstan Kiboi's writing may signal a way out of this impasse. Kiboi's appropriation of "Cash Book," and with it the apparatus of British accounting, signals that subjects are everywhere fusing words and disciplines in syncretic ways that say little of authentic foundations. But the hyphenated irony of "ki-thungu" equally demonstrates that the popular hybridity of colonized people need not end as terse statements of difference, interruptions in a colonizing conversation. "Cash Book" was more meaningful than irony: it took on a complex of vernacular values over the course of

¹¹⁸Lynette Behm Nyaggah, *Cross-linguistic influence in Kenyan English: The impact of Swahili and Kikuyu on syntax*. (Ph.D. UCLA, 1990).

compelling and demanding Gikuyu debates about leadership, power, and wealth, driven by readers' efforts to prove their trustworthiness to the doubting politicians of "deep" ethnic debate. English words and grammar shaped a vernacular language of virtue, allowing readers to transfer their ethnic leadership into effective claims on colonial power.

Chapter Seven

Bureaucracy's boundaries Land tenure and Gikuyu political parties in the early 1930s

The last chapter engaged with the language choice debate in African literature by asking whether such stark choices are necessary. Gikuyu readers, I argued, have long brought the different languages they write together, fusing foreign words into vernacular script to serve political purposes. English was for readers an internal claim on ethnic power, and a language of engagement with the British. This chapter complicates the argument, particularly by asking what readers could not say in writing, what remained outside bureaucratic politics. Gikuyu could never make up their minds about Cash Books. Inspired by the divisive politics of land tenure, they argued about bureaucracy, intimately tied to questions about public power. Land politics was bitterly contested in the early 1930s, as landlords and tenants argued about tenancy and belonging in colonial courts. When the British asked the two Nyeri political parties to offer a definitive account of Gikuyu land tenure, neither could answer. What they found unsayable, I suggest, precisely exposes the limits of bureaucratic politics. For writing was supposed to make Gikuyu into citizens, shaping standards of public trust in which they could invest their labor. Land politics was divisive, turning citizens into local infighters. Family history, the divisive politics of kinship and land, was the proving-ground on which readers' claims on citizenship were bound to be tested--and the vocabulary with which they were most often broken down.

That Gikuyu conducted such basic debates about the philosophy of writing and power is unexpected, given the assumptions of contemporary scholarship on writing and orality in Africa and elsewhere. Literacy is generally taken to be a technique to be mastered, a skill to be acquired, inducting oral societies into modern forms of politics. Jack Goody is the most masterful exponent of this view: as he puts it in a recent book,

Writing has tended to promote the autonomy of organizations that developed their own modes of procedure, their own corpus of written tradition, their own specialists and possibly their own systems of support.¹

For Goody and others, writing makes modernity possible. Literacy is the fundamental turning point in human evolution, the moment at which oral savagery gives way to modern discipline--science, logic, rationality.² It follows that the mentalities of literate societies differs fundamentally from that of literate societies. Walter Ong provides a list of such differences: oral societies, he writes, are traditional rather than speculative; tied to human activity rather than divorced from it; situational rather than abstract.³ Writing, in other words, transforms politics.

This chapter takes a different view. It suggests that bureaucracy was for Gikuyu a rhetoric before it was a mindset. The technologies of literacy offered readers ways of conducting old arguments, means of talking about personal virtue and capacities for leadership. There was no making up of the literate mind among Gikuyu, no revolution of politics that ushered in associational, principled, modern forms of political procedure. The Cash Book, like other forms of literate procedure, was for readers (here reversing Ong) a highly temporal, situational, contingent form of power, an experimental means of claiming authority in oral debates over family politics and public power. Gikuyu, readers included, could never make up their minds about writing: they had too much to argue about.

The chapter unpacks the possibilities and limits of the politics of literacy by examining Gikuyu debate over land tenure in the early-1930s. As I show in the first

¹Jack Goody, *The logic of writing and the organization of society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 90.

²c.f. Walter Ong, *Orality and literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: 1982), 29: writing underlies the shift from "magic to science...from the so-called pre-logical to the more and more rational state of consciousness....from Levi-Strauss's 'savage' mind to domesticated thought."

³Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. For an Africanist critique, see Landeg White and Leroy Vail, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 23-26.

section, the Great Depression made land tenure a particularly divisive issue. Worried over litigation, readers' two political parties--the Progressive Kikuyu Party, and the Kikuyu Central Association--were asked by the British Judge Carter in 1932 to offer a definitive accounting of "traditional" land tenure. Neither party could speak authoritatively. I use their silence as a window into the conflicted nature of bureaucratic politics. In the second section, I explore KCA politics on a territorial level and locally, in Mahiga location. Territorial politics remained ignorant, untheorized, ungrounded in Gikuyu moral debate. But in Mahiga, local politics drove KCA men to make creative investments in bureaucracy. Bureaucracy fleshed out readers' vision of generational redemption, structuring forms of citizenship in which Gikuyu could invest for the future. These claims on citizenship were highly local, less a definitive vocabulary of political identity and more a rhetoric of ethnic debate. In the third section I explore how readers of a different party, the PKP, argued about literacy to come to terms with family conflict. A party of Tumutumu landlords and tenants, the PKP hoped to make Christianity work for family progress. But the PKP was intimately divided: landlords' attempts to consolidate holdings set them against worried tenants. Judge Carter's report broke the PKP into warring factions, divided both by land politics and by worries that writing would turn into sorcery. Bureaucratic procedure, I conclude, was a highly temporal intervention in local arguments over leadership and morality, a means for readers to prove themselves trustworthy--and a vocabulary with which to argue about betrayal.

Depression and the stock market in Nyeri

Early in 1930 the bottom fell out on Nyeri's commodity-based prosperity. Worldwide depression meant trouble for maize farmers, both Gikuyu peasants and European settlers: by the beginning of 1931 the price of Kenya's maize on the international market had fallen to 50 percent of its price in 1929. In 1934, Kenya's

exports earned what they had in 1922 and 23, before the agricultural boom.⁴ Declining export earnings led British settlers to trim expenses. The number of Africans in wage employment in the estate sector dropped by 25 percent from 1929 to 1933.⁵ Skilled government employees suffered together with unskilled plantation workers: the railway trimmed its rolls from 15,600 in 1930 to 1,200 in 1933.⁶ Nairobi's labor force similarly shrank: lacking funds, public construction projects ground to a halt.⁷ Employers cut wages by 15 to 50 percent in 1931; by 1935 unskilled laborers earned 33 percent less than they had in 1926. State officials and settlers, worried at declining export earnings, hoped to turn the domestic market into profit for embattled whites. The Marketing of Native Produce Ordinance of 1935 and other government legislation used quality controls and marketing restrictions to funnel peasant produce into settler-run purchasing monopolies.⁸ Peasant maize farming was supposed to float settler profit. But large-scale employers like the railway and Nairobi firms, disdaining high-priced marketed maize, preferred to buy cheap maize directly from Africans. Facing competition from peasants on the internal market and lacking capital from foreign exchange, small-scale British settlers became landlords in the early 1930s. Many loaned their land to Gikuyu squatters in return for labor and milk.⁹ Cash was in short supply: it paid for settlers to be vague about the White Highlands.

In the Nyeri reserve, declining commodity earnings led to desperate shortages of cash and made nervous readers worry about land litigation. In January 1930 prices for

⁴Robert Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu and Masai from 1900 to 1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 186-87.

⁵Tignor, *Colonial Transformation*, 189.

⁶Sharon Stichter, *Migrant labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1895-1975* (London: Longman, 1982), 95.

⁷c.f. Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 80-82.

⁸Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London: Currey, 1990), 168-70.

⁹Lonsdale, "The Depression and the Second World War in the Transformation of Kenya," in Killingray and Rathbone eds., *Africans and the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 97-142.

grain began to fall as good rains throughout the district produced a surplus of maize. Late in the year, peasant exporters in Nyeri earned only 30/ per ton of maize, down from 60 to 65/ in 1929.¹⁰ Many farmers responded by withdrawing their maize from the market. Missionaries reported that as a result farmers had little cash to spare in 1930.¹¹ Missionaries gladly bought the hoarded grain for consumption in the mission dormitories and hospital, but worried when cash-poor farmers gave maize to the church instead of currency. A special offering in 1933 drew 15/ worth of maize and three hens.¹² The Kirk Session implored members to give currency instead of produce.¹³ Church finances suffered: by 1932 the African church was close to £100 in debt.¹⁴ Salaries for pastors and teachers were cut by 5 to 20 percent in 1933; cash allowances for evangelists were eliminated.¹⁵ Missionaries hoped to increase cash giving by distributing marked envelopes to members, and tracking receipts in a register.¹⁶ Envelopes made it impossible to substitute grain for coin during the offering. But Hezekiah Mundia, KCA reader, tea-shop owner, and trader in maize, complained that the envelope system was too rigid. "We should be allowed to give what our hearts desire," he wrote in 1929.¹⁷ Envelopes made it difficult to parlay excess maize into church tithes, threatening the cash-poor with ecclesiastical sanction.

For the collapse of the maize market hit hard at the cash-dealing traders of the KCA, but benefited some commodity farmers and wage earners. The number of trading shops in Mihuti, home to a large population of migrating wage workers, dropped from 10 to 5 in 1930.¹⁸ Facing disaster, traders in maize throughout Gikuyuland banded together

¹⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Annual report, Nyeri district, 1930.

¹¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu Annual report, 1930.

¹²SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1933, entry for 12 February.

¹³TT Kirk Session minute book, entry for 14 February 1931.

¹⁴SA I/B/7: Tumutumu Annual report, 1932.

¹⁵SA I/C/11: Arthur, "Letter to mission staff," May 1933.

¹⁶SA I/C/3: Calderwood to Arthur, 25 March 1929.

¹⁷TT Nyeri Parish reserve: Hezekiah Mundia at Nyeri to Calderwood, 21 June 1929.

¹⁸KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Annual report, Nyeri district, 1930.

to form cooperative marketing societies, hiring buying agents to sell the grain.¹⁹ One such society, the Kikuyu Traders Association in Nyeri district, purchased a maize mill in 1931 and complained bitterly of Indian perfidy in the maize trade.²⁰ The Local Native Council rented a godown at the railway head in Karatina to the traders, who paid 1/ a month each for its use.²¹ But lacking a ready market for processed maize, the KTA, like other Gikuyu trading associations, was defunct by 1933. The cash shortage crippled maize traders.

But the decline in maize prices indirectly benefited some commodity farmers, who invested abundant maize in goats and sheep. A long-running drought in Ukambani and Somaliland drove desperate pastoralists south in the late 1920s. They traded their small stock for Gikuyu grain with which to feed cattle.²² Even with low maize prices, the terms of trade benefited Gikuyu farmers. The price of Kamba goats fell from 15 to 20/ to 4 to 5/ in 1929; more significantly, one headload of maize could purchase a goat.²³ By 1934, Nyeri district was flooded with small stock: prices were 700 percent less than in 1928.²⁴ New butcheries sprang up throughout the district. Maize farmers managed the cash shortage by trading cheap maize for cheaper livestock in non-cash exchanges.

The precipitous slide in the price of goats made readers, especially those who had built expensive houses on land to which they had insecure title, worry about litigation. For cheap goats made it possible for even relatively impoverished wage earners to reclaim land from wealthy tenants. Land values had, from the earliest years of forest clearing,

¹⁹c.f. Robert Tignor, *The Colonial Transformation of Kenya: the Kamba, Kikuyu and Masai from 1900 to 1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 299-300.

²⁰Mahiga Dunstan Kiboi and G Modesta and Harun N, KTA, Kamakwa, to District Commissioner, 2 Dec 1931.

²¹c.f. Mary Wanyoike, "Karatina: Economic Changes and their Impact on the economic activities of Mathira Division, Nyeri District, Kenya, 1902-1963" (M.A. Thesis, University of Nairobi, Dec. 1991), 79-80.

²²Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petiti Bourgeoisie, 1905-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 218.

²³KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1929.

²⁴KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1934.

been figured in livestock: stock exchanged for land bound clan leaders to tenants in mutual commitment to work. The cheap goats of the 1930s made it possible for wage earners to purchase sufficient goats and sheep to lay claim to *mbari* land. Cheap goats, potentially at least, deflated land values. The D.C. reported in 1934 that wage earners were attempting to lay claim to clan land with Kamba goats purchased with cash.²⁵ Readers, those of them originally tenants or junior *mbari* members, feared that Kamba goats would reverse years of successful litigation and inspire landlords to reclaim the land they had lent them. Progressive farmers were particularly at risk: the cheap goats of the 1930s could be used by landlords to reclaim land on which tenants had built expensive stone houses and planted long-standing crops.

All readers responded to the threat of cheap goats by shoring up influence in colonial courts. A group of Tumutumu elders complained in 1934 that the chiefs and "pagan" elders who ran the tribunals that adjudicated land cases regularly asked for bribes, and were biased against Christian converts. Stanley Kiama, son of a tenant, angrily recounted paying 10/ in bribes in one land case; Jonathan Ngang'a, another tenant, paid 22/ to feed the tribunal and 22/ to hire a car for transport.²⁶ Litigation was expensive: the D.C. estimated that an average land case in 1933 cost 150/.²⁷ The Tumutumu elders wanted tribunals elected, paid with salaries instead of bribes. They also asked that all fees "be written in the book, and the court has no permission to ask for another thing, even food for the journey, without writing it in the book." Record books and elections promised to hold tribunal elders accountable, and gave literate readers, skilled with typewriters and paper, the advantage in court cases with illiterate elders.

Hoping that literacy would improve their standing before the law, readers sought out new means to establish their responsibility and trustworthiness in court. The

²⁵KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1934.

²⁶SA LC/12 and 13: "Questions put to a small meeting of Christian elders," 9 February 1934.

²⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1933.

Tumutumu Kirk Session prudently ruled in 1928 that Christians should not take the *muuma*, the dangerous wasting oath by which two litigants called down death on themselves should they lie about their case.²⁸ Christian principles made for a happy politics, allowing litigious readers to escape from dangerous oaths. They preferred Bible oaths instead. But readers worried that the non-Christian elders would not take Bible oaths seriously: tribunal cases too often went against Christians who refused the proof of *muuma*.²⁹ Worried over accusations of insincerity, readers insisted that Bible oaths signaled conviction. One mission representative told the Nyeri LNC in 1935 that "mission adherents do not fear the Kikuyu oath because they have departed from Kikuyu customs. They respect the Book."³⁰ The Book promised to make Christians seem responsible to suspicious elders.

Litigation spurred readers to insist on new standards of public responsibility, and lubricated their anxious claims on political power. By 1931 readers had convinced the DC to give 20 percent of the seats on the tribunals to mission representatives.³¹ By 1933 Christians were in the majority on the Tetu tribunal.³² Readers also became chiefs: Gideon Gatere in 1925; Muteithia, formerly a hospital dresser, in 1934; Muhoya wa Kagumba in 1936.³³ Readers also seized to family power in the early 1930s. Many paid *muhiriga* goats, the goats of the clan, to their fathers to prove their readiness to exercise leadership in family and clan politics.³⁴ A few Christians quibbled over the principle. At a public meeting on the matter in 1933, one reader complained that they had paid their fees to church: why should their fathers also ask for payments?³⁵ Clan politics looked

²⁸TT Presbytery of Kenya file: Presbytery meeting, 12 October 1933.

²⁹TT DC and Forest Officer file: Barlow to DC Embu, 4 June 1935.

³⁰SA I/G/26: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 29 January 1935, comment by Muhoya wa Kagumba.

³¹SA I/A/38: DC Nyeri to Tumutumu, 26 January 1931.

³²SA I/C/12 and 13: DC Pease, "Tetu Native Tribunal," 1 Sept 1933

³³SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu log book for 1934, entry for 26 March; Tumutumu log book for 1936, entry for 14 March.

³⁴SA I/A/39: Barlow to DC, 2 February 1932.

³⁵SA I/G/6: Baraza at Council House, 27 April 1933.

like a waste to some. But the majority of ambitious readers agreed that Christian principle should not interfere with the exercise of public power, unity to Gikuyu, as Chief Murigo argued:

The Kikuyu are one whatever their religion: did not Christians become chiefs and did they not sit on the Tribunal? No one should divide the Kikuyu into separate sections...if a man wanted to sit on the kiama and decide questions of law and custom he should pay for it.³⁶

Readers could agree that it paid to be vague about the principles of paganism. Public power guarded their progressive homesteads against the upstart claims of junior *mbari* members, managing the goat crisis with colonial law.

But litigation divided readers privately even as it brought them public responsibility. For readers could not agree about land law. Their private interest shaped the most important divisions. On one hand, tenants and others with insecure title to land, many of them younger men, worried that cheap goats in the early 1930s would turn them off their land. They wanted to redefine land tenure as individual freehold, giving them unencumbered rights to the land they occupied and protecting the expensive stone houses they had built.³⁷ In 1936 the Tumutumu reader Stanley Kiama Gathigira, son of a tenant involved in numerous land cases, argued before the Nyeri Local Native Council that landlords' right to reclaim land lent to tenants should be entirely eliminated.³⁸ Permanent title promised tenants like Kiama security from landlords and others who used Kamba goats to fund land cases.

Other readers, landlords who exercised seigniorial rights over tenants' land, thought Kiama insane, a heretic. The permanent freehold title that Kiama advocated would extinguish landlords' claims on clan land, threatening *mbari* with nothing less than

³⁶SA I/G/6: Baraza at Council House, 27 April 1933.

³⁷SA I/A/40: Barlow to DC, 15 August 1930.

³⁸SA I/A/41-2: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 24-25 June 1936.

legally-sanctioned dissolution. Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho, Tetu reader and landlord, thought whoever wanted land given to individuals "does not know God and...is not concerned with the welfare of the Gikuyu country."³⁹ Gikuyu polity was at stake: Kiama's freehold argument made him both an insurgent and a pagan. For the sake of the common good, landlords wanted *mbari* rights to land maintained under the law.

The debate posed private property against landlords' rights, individual labor against *mbari* authority. The argument was hotly contested, especially in the immediate vicinity of Tumutumu. Jonathan Ngang'a, early reader and head of a junior lineage of *Mbari ya Njora*, complained in 1936 that land shortage was stifling household accumulation: "we are overcrowded due to the fact that we have no available land were some of our people could move and make their homes."⁴⁰ Land shortages at Tumutumu spurred some readers, many losers in litigation between landlords and tenants, to migrate to the northeast in the early 1930s. There was relatively empty land near settler farms at Ngorano, though of inferior quality. Missionaries reported in 1933 that numbers of Tumutumu readers were moving into the area.⁴¹ Many were formerly tenants of *Mbari ya Njora* and other Tumutumu *mbari*, worried over hardening definitions of tenure and attracted at the prospect of empty land.⁴² Disappointed by the bitterness of family argument, the Ngorano migrants created less divisive forms of social organization, as one elder put it:

There are no *mbari* here. Elders used to set boundaries by pouring fat. People who stay in this area came from very far...so it can happen that people in the same area can belong to the same *mbari*. So even here such boundaries bringing together people of different *mbari* do exist.⁴³

³⁹SA I/C/9: Zakayo Muruwakagotho *et. al.* to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

⁴⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/2/1/4: Ngang'a for Mbari ya Karuoro to LNC, 15 July 1936.

⁴¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1933.

⁴²TT Statistics file: "List of ordained alders and their wives," 1937 lists two former Tumutumu readers, Daniel Mageria and Hazrun Muciri, as elders at Ngorano; see also oral interview, Hezron Muciri, David Ngora *et. al.*

⁴³Oral interview: John Muriithi.

Remembering the bitterness of their departure from Tumutumu, the Ngorano migrants hoped that fat and the common labor of clearing the bush for cultivation would bring them together. It was a happy politics: on the border with white settler farms, Ngorano's migrants protected Gikuyu land from further alienation with their virtuous cultivation. Muriithi remembered that the migrants poured fat even up to the boundaries of the farms, hoping to redeem stolen land from avaricious whites.⁴⁴ The migrants soon founded a school, built at the junction of the roads that led to the gardens in Kagati.⁴⁵ One early student remembered that the teachers appealed to passerby on the path: "first come we pray to God and then you go to the farms and dig."⁴⁶ Prosperous civility, literate prayer and anti-settler cultivation went together.

The cheap goats of the early 1930s divided readers at home, funding family strife and spurring heated arguments over land tenure. The Carter Commission, sent out in 1932-33 to see if there was a case for returning British settlers' land to dispossessed Africans in Kenya, highlighted readers' divisions and made impossible demands on the creative politicians of the KCA and the PKP. As I show below, Carter asked for what Nyeri's political parties could not give: a definitive accounting of land politics. Both parties hoped that record-keeping would bring fractious *mbari* disputants together, establishing a language of trust with which to make claims on the British. Neither party could risk pronouncing on the "deep" politics of land, especially while the cheap goats of the 1930s threatened to open up long-closed land cases in British courts. Land history was too divisive, too parochial: it threatened to set Gikuyu against one another in endless, local argument. Judge Carter's report challenged readers' claims to public authority precisely by parading the divisive histories they hoped to forget.

⁴⁴Oral interview: John Muriithi.

⁴⁵SA I/A/39: DC South Nyeri to Barlow, 29 December 1933 for Ngorano school permit.

⁴⁶Oral interview: Gathoni Gachigua.

The revealing politics inspired by the commission in the southern Gikuyu district, Kiambu, have been well documented by John Lonsdale and others.⁴⁷ The government chiefs of the Loyal Kikuyu Patriots, heads of their respective *mbari* by the early 1930s, argued before the commission that an honorable past merited British recognition. Gikuyu landlords had purchased, not stolen, land from the Dorobo inhabitants of Kiambu, incorporating them seamlessly into land-clearing *mbari*. When the British arrived, lineage heads had loaned land and laborers: the British were clients, not conquerors. Greedy British tenants had broken with Gikuyu trust, alienating *mbari* land in the White Highlands to settlers. More than 400 Kiambu lineages brought evidence before Judge Carter, detailing the extent of their landholdings before the British arrived. Landlords' *mbari* history--what Lonsdale calls "dynastic theory"--proved that local clans had rights to land: more, it made Europeans look like ungrateful clients. Judge Carter should reward generous *mbari* landlords with secure title to Gikuyu land, and return the farms alienated to avaricious whites. The chiefs' opponents in the Kikuyu Central Association countered dynastic politics with promises about individual accomplishment. The KCA petitioners before Judge Carter in Kiambu argued for individual tenure for both rightholders and tenants. Where the chiefs wanted seigniorial rights over tenants, the KCA requested individual title for improving farmers. Freehold title guarded readers' stone houses against landlords. Neither landed dynasts or the progressive farmers of the KCA spoke for the dispossessed: the KCA advocated for the return of the stolen lands, but did so relatively quietly. Land dispossession, in Kiambu as elsewhere in Gikuyuland, had to be treated carefully.

⁴⁷See in particular Lonsdale, "The Prayers of Waiyaki: Politics Uses of the Kikuyu Past," in D.M. Anderson and Douglas Johnson eds., *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History* (London: James Currey, 1995), 240-91; Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau From Below* (London: James Currey, 1996), 101-11.

Nyeri's readers argued differently before Judge Carter.⁴⁸ The contrast between Kiambu and Nyeri evidence, more than any other evidence, demands that we attend to locally-specific histories of conflict to explain Gikuyu politics in the early 1930s. For the Nyeri presenters disagreed with Kiambu's chiefs and politicians about the past, especially about the terms by which Gikuyu had got access to land. Fifty-one Nyeri *mbari* presented claims before the commission; the Local Native Council, the Tumutumu-based Progressive Kikuyu Party, and government chiefs gave evidence. None of them found the dynastic theory proposed by Kiambu's chiefs entirely useful. Nyeri chiefs happily used dynastic history to prove British cupidity: headman Nderi wrote at length about his father's generous alliance with government officials and his subsequent dispossession.⁴⁹ But when it came to the story of Gikuyu settlement and land acquisition, chiefs and readers agreed that dynastic history--which argued that Gikuyu had got land in a peaceful purchase from the Dorobo--was best ignored. Nderi thought the Dorobo lazy, saying "they used to wander about, they did not live on one place."⁵⁰ He assured Judge Carter that Nyeri had always been Gikuyu country, that no land had been bought from the Dorobo. One group of Nyeri *mbari*, using printed KCA forms from Nairobi, at first claimed to have purchased land from the Dorobo. Later they reconsidered, writing in a hastily-revised application that they had "inherited lands from our forefathers."⁵¹ The dynastic account of land acquisition seemed dangerous on reflection. All agreed that the past history of *mbari* formation was of little consequence: what was important was land for the future. Nyeri men were united in their worries about land pressure: the Local Native Council elders wrote that settler land alienation had produced squatters "who are

⁴⁸The British administrator H.E. Lambert noted differences between Nyeri and Kiambu testimony in *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit* (University of Cape Town: School of African Studies, 1949), 77-79. Lambert thought the Nyeri respondent "deliberately lying for political purposes."

⁴⁹Evidence of Nderi wa Wangombe, in Kenya Land Commission, *Evidence and Memoranda*, vol. III (London: HMSO, 1934), 92-93 (hereafter *KLC*).

⁵⁰*KLC* 107.

⁵¹*KLC* 373:

wandering about Kenya today landed and homeless, because of their eviction from their land in the past without any compensation whatsoever."⁵² All asked the commission to provide more land for the landless. Chief Nderi was particularly worried about returning squatters: "where are they going to live?," he asked. "And even on the Reserve what is to happen to those who have land which is not sufficient for them and no provision for their sons?"⁵³ Squatters and land pressure made all Nyeri men worry about the future.

The Kiambu account of peaceful Gikuyu purchases from willing Dorobo sellers drew little support from Nyeri's chiefs and politicians. Nor did Nyeri readers advocate for individual tenure, the KCA's reply to chiefs' dynastic politics in Kiambu. The KCA in Nyeri did not produce a memo for the commission, sending only an unprepared minor official to give verbal evidence. Some KCA readers helped write the PKP's memo.⁵⁴ Contentious readers could agree that it paid to be vague about land tenure. The Tumutumu readers of the PKP, many of them progressive farmers, equivocated in print: they asked that the "old law of native land tenure remain, as they are, at least for the present, those best suited to our customs and needs."⁵⁵ They wanted the 1915 Crown Lands Ordinance repealed and a grant of freehold title to Gikuyu land, protection against further land seizures by Europeans. Stanley Kiama, the PKP reader, later lamented that "the Kiambu people made a great fuss about the Land Commission, and produced a list of landless folk. The South Nyeri people made no such list."⁵⁶ Landless tenants in Nyeri remained unnamed before Judge Carter.

Why did Nyeri politicians fail to push Judge Carter with proof of landlessness? Why did chiefs and landlords regard the history of *mbari* formation--useful evidence for their southern counterparts--as a closed subject in Nyeri? The answers to these questions

⁵²Petition by South Nyeri Local Native Council, in *KLC* 90.

⁵³Evidence of Chief Nderi, in *KLC* 85-86.

⁵⁴*SA* I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu log book for 1932: entry for 23 July.

⁵⁵Petition of Progressive Kikuyu Party, in *KLC* 101.

⁵⁶*SA* I/A/41-42: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 24-25 June 1936.

help to illuminate the tensions over history and belonging that divided readers and drove public political debate in Nyeri. For as I demonstrate below, the *mbari* history that legitimated landlords' claims to land in Kiambu was simply too dangerous to discuss in Nyeri. "Deep" politics, the local politics of kinship and land tenure, was bitterly divisive: it seemed to readers to return Gikuyu to the microcosmic, face-to-face arguments of the past. And the politics of kinship--the subject of the next chapter--were extraordinarily heated in the early 1930s. Cheap goats set landlords against tenants, opening up old land cases and threatening progressive farmers with dispossession. Readers had learned during the "garden" crisis of 1926 that clan politics created division, not commonality. It made good sense for politicians to be silent about *mbari* history before Judge Carter.

The next two sections are precisely about how readers' political parties addressed, and partially met, the questions about "deep" politics raised by Judge Carter. Faced with the divisive challenge of local politics, divided among themselves by material interest, readers hoped that bureaucracy would bring them together. The burden of a divisive past compelled readers to seek out new languages of trust to prove their responsibility, their moral integrity. They developed two competing patriotisms. One, the Kikuyu Central Association, was composed of traders and others only marginally invested in land. Reconcilers of necessity, they invested in generational redemption but worried about *mbari* infighting. The other, the Progressive Kikuyu Party, were a mixed bag of *mbari* landlords and wealthy tenants. They claimed the future for family progress, but were dangerously divided about who belonged at home. Both parties proved themselves responsible through record books, pencils, and public displays of writing. Neither party was of a common mind. They had too much to argue about. Closely divided readers, brought together by new standards of responsibility, argued out the politics of land and belonging in heated debates over private malice and public responsibility. Their anguished divisions shaped the ambiguous evidence that Judge Carter heard in 1932.

Literacy, citizenship, and authority in Kagera

I begin by tracing the 1930s history of the Kikuyu Central Association in Nyeri district. Historians have written much about KCA politics the southern Gikuyu district of Kiambu, generally assuming that northerners followed Kiambu's lead. This historiographic bias falsely treats the KCA as a unitary political entity. Particularly in the 1930s, crisis in the Nairobi leadership meant that KCA politics were functionally smaller than Central Province, or even any one Gikuyu district.⁵⁷ Harry Thuku had returned from detention in 1931, and within a year was involved in litigation with Jessi Kariuki and Joseph Kangethe over the KCA's Nairobi leadership. Nyeri's KCA members were divided: Barlow reported in 1933 that they did not know whose the KCA really was.⁵⁸ Thuku tried to ensure Nyeri's support for his faction by calling readers to take an oath in Nairobi. It was to be a binding oath, a *muuma*, the violation of which brought wasting on homesteads.⁵⁹ A more material mark of loyalty was the fee of 5 shillings that Thuku asked of members. Dangerous oaths, and cash contributions, were Thuku's effort to unite fractious KCA readers. He asked for a list of members to show Sir Bustan, recently arrived in the colony to discuss African interests. The list was a desperate attempt to impose bureaucratic unity on regional diversity. For neither Thuku nor Jessi Kariuki could take credit for KCA politics in Nyeri.

Crisis in the central leadership highlights the aridity of "high" politics, the ignorance with which national politicians operated. The energy of the KCA did not derive from its national leaders, desperately making lists to determine who supported them. The KCA was not brought together in common obedience to a centralized authority, or in adherence to a shared set of principles. The vigor of KCA politics was

⁵⁷For details, see Marshall Clough, *Fighting Two Sides: Kenya Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940* (Niwott: University Press of Colorado, 1990), 169-171; John Spencer, *The Kenya African Union* (London: KPI Ltd., 1985), 83-84.

⁵⁸SA L.C. 12 and 13: "Interview: ARB with Luka Macaria and Filipu Kagwa," Tumutumu, 5 September 1933.

⁵⁹Mahiga George Ndegwa, KCA Nairobi, to members of KCA, 24 July 1932.

derived locally, as literate readers sought to work out new, tenuous standards of unity among the suspicious disputants of family politics. I will focus here on the KCA in Kagere, the “independent” school about which I have written in previous chapters. Tumutumu’s missionaries were convinced that Kagere was the center of KCA agitation in Nyeri district.⁶⁰ I suggest, reversing missionaries’ top-down analysis, that party politics in Kagere were driven by local arguments over land and leadership. Landlords’ and readers’ fears of missionary delinquency in the late 1920s had inspired heated debate over girls’ morality, the subject of Chapter Four. Hoping to guard themselves from corrupting Presbyterians, readers founded Kagere “independent” school. As I suggest in this chapter, they imagined themselves creating a new polity. Calling on cash-wealthy traders to invest their profits at home, Kagere readers argued that “independent” schooling would redeem Gikuyu from moral decay. Kagere school was nothing less than *ituika* in the making. Bureaucratic disciplines fleshed out readers’ vision, giving tangible substance to the moral claims of generational redemption. Literacy brought fractious *mbari* infighters together in common commitment to a redeemed future. Record-keeping was readers’ speculative, hotly contested solution to the divisive problem of “deep” politics.

The malice of their opponents made Kagere readers seek out ways to protect themselves. Kagere’s readers felt themselves scorned both by chiefs and by the Scots loyalists at Mahiga school. William Waweru, leader of the Scots adherents at Mahiga, accused the Kagere readers of stealing land. He owed a plot of land adjoining the Kagere school, and filed a court case in 1933 against Willy Jimmy Wambugu and other Kagere readers claiming that their new school building was on stolen property.⁶¹ Missionaries reported that Waweru was the first litigant in Nyeri district to take an oath on the Bible. The Word protected Waweru from the wasting danger of the *muuma* curse, but made Kagere readers think him irresponsible. Waweru also accused the Kagere readers of

⁶⁰c.f. Barlow, “Light and Shade at Mahiga,” in *Kikuyu News* 109 (Sept. 1929).

⁶¹SA I/A/39: Barlow to DC Nyeri, 3 July 1933.

shirking their responsibility in government labor, *gitati*.⁶² Kagere's leaders thought him jealously conspiring with chiefs: government work looked like an attempt to force them to return to the Scots school.⁶³ Other mission readers accused the Kagere leaders of conspiring to undermine justice: Francis Wanjohi at the CSM school reported that the Kagere party met at night and held court cases to try those who offended them.⁶⁴

The mission readers' accusations made Kagere readers worry about prosecution under colonial law. They hoped that bureaucratic disciplines would impress the British with their responsibility. They applied for and received a government permit from the Local Native Council in 1931, claiming that hundreds of students "cried out for help" in schooling in the area.⁶⁵ The school register recorded 465 students, many of them without English names and probably unbaptised.⁶⁶ Kagere was one of six Gikuyu-run schools applying for government recognition in 1931.⁶⁷ The school's leaders carefully wrote down the names of those who gave land and building materials. Chief Wambugu witnessed the agreement.⁶⁸ Writing promised to guard the Kagere readers from accusations of ill-intentioned thievery, and proved their responsibility to colonial officials. Writing also flattered chiefs with readers' good intentions. Kagere readers used Swahili to write to Chief Nderi in 1931, complaining that missionary intransigence meant that Gikuyu would remain forever uneducated and asking for patronage.⁶⁹ The promise of writing flattened out differences between some chiefs and readers, uniting them behind a common purpose. Nderi at a public meeting later in 1931 asked all residents of his

⁶²*Mahiga* Maundu ma Mr. William, Mahiga, 2 March 1933.

⁶³*Mahiga* "Overseers of Kagere school Dunstan, Wambugu wa Maina and Meshak Matu to the athungu, Gideon and Nelson," 20 February 1933.

⁶⁴SA I/C/12 and 13: Francis Wanjohi at Mahiga to Calderwood, January 1935.

⁶⁵*Mahiga* Dunstan Kiboi to DC Nyeri, 28 October 1931; for the permit, SA I/G/6: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 29 December 1931.

⁶⁶*Mahiga* Mariitwa ma Athomi a Mahiga, New Promise, 26 October 1931.

⁶⁷SA I/C/8: Barlow to Arthur, 9 December 1931.

⁶⁸*Mahiga* "Gift of land to build school at Kagere," 15 February 1931.

⁶⁹*Mahiga* Dunstan Kiboi and Harrison Ngari to Chief Nderi, 27 October 1931.

location to donate 1 shilling to help school those cast out by the missionaries.⁷⁰ But not all authorities shared their vision: some headmen favored the Scots, and threatened to close the school.⁷¹ Kagere readers thought headmen's threat amounted to larceny, worrying that their "cattle will go with the Masai." Headmen's malice reminded readers of tribal conflict.

Faced with accusations of irresponsibility, Kagere readers hoped record books would protect them from sanction under British law. More, they used the disciplines of bureaucratic procedure would foster unity and trust among themselves. School supporters formed the Kikuyu Traders Association in 1931 to collect funds for a new school building. They agreed to treat private discussions about the school as *kirira*, secret knowledge guarded from public consumption.⁷² Those who publicized private matters would be forced to resign. The six leaders of the school signaled their assent by contributing one shilling, held as proof against perfidy. The external malice of headmen and Scots missionaries demanded careful discretion of Kagere's leaders. They called their association a *muhiriga*, a clan.⁷³ Proofs of integrity made members look like family. They ensured common trust through writing: all public meetings were to be recorded, according to the rules of the school.⁷⁴ Those who joined the association were to sign their names on the list of rules, and contributed a shilling to prove their intentions. The association's discussions were governed through writing: those who wished to speak in public had to submit a written agenda prior to the meeting. Writing proved private integrity for party members, converted cash into trust, and guarded the public reputation of Kagere readers from the malice of ill-intentioned evildoers.

⁷⁰ *Mahiga* "Agenda, Show Ground Mucemanio," 14 December 1931.

⁷¹ *Mahiga* Overseers of school Dunstan, Meshak and Wambugu to Philipo, Jason and Joseph Mweiga, 20 February 1933.

⁷² *Mahiga* Meeting kwa Stephano Waciira, 29 May 1931.

⁷³ *Mahiga* "Agenda, Show Ground Mucemanio," 14 December 1931.

⁷⁴ *Mahiga* Rules to members, Mahiga, 1932.

Emboldened by new, literate disciplines of public reputation and private responsibility, Kagere's readers worked to turn their private profit into a proof of generational integrity. The school's sponsors were KCA members, many shopowners at the nearby center at Kamakwa. Willy Jimmy Wambugu, for example, was the first teacher at Kagere and a partner in a maize mill at Gatugi trading center.⁷⁵ He also owned shares in a public savings society headquartered in Ndunyu market.⁷⁶ Harrison Ngari Githenji, another leader, worked as a clerk on Lord Delamere's farm in the Rift Valley. He invested his cash at home, purchasing a maize mill and buying maize from women for grinding.⁷⁷ They and other cash-wealthy traders thought investment in schooling would convert their profits into a claim on Gikuyu reputation. Those who joined the KTA promised to be like a "firm soldier to develop the country."⁷⁸ All could agree with Evan Nduhiu's statement at a public meeting in 1931: "a country without a school is like one without industry."⁷⁹ Fired by a sense of obligation, readers sponsored a new school building in 1931. The building was on land owned by Hezekiah Macaria, polygamist and KCA member excommunicated from Mahiga for marrying multiple wives.⁸⁰ The new building was to be 60 feet long by 24 feet wide, with a store and office, six windows, three doors, and 18 long tables.⁸¹ Readers carefully issued written receipts for all donations, and recorded them in a cash book.⁸² Elders were deputed to collect funds from various locations around Kagere; KTA clerks carefully kept a list of all those who contributed.⁸³ Most gave cash: Wambugu wa Maina, the teacher and maize trader, contributed 10/-; Francesco Gechohi, LNC representative from Tetu and Catholic reader,

⁷⁵Oral interview: Gerard King'ori.

⁷⁶Oral interview: Grace Mukunya.

⁷⁷"Muoyo wa Harrison Gathenji Ngari," held in possession of Newton Ndiritu Muigai, Othaya division, Nyeri.

⁷⁸*Mahiga* Rules to members, Mahiga, 1932.

⁷⁹*Mahiga* "Agenda, Show Ground Mucemano," 14 December 1931.

⁸⁰Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

⁸¹*Mahiga* Kamakwa KTA, "Mahiga Independent School," 1 August 1932.

⁸²*Mahiga* Mahiga school, agenda, 29 September 1931.

⁸³*Mahiga* Members, Tetu Kikuyu Traders Association, Kamakwa, Nyeri. n.d.

contributed 100/. The school cost 2254/ in total to build, a large sum in the early 1930s when cash was short.⁸⁴ Investment in schooling demanded sacrifices of patriotic readers.

A powerful sense of moral obligation drove Kagere readers to invest in the school building. They hoped it would shelter a new polity, training up young men and women to be moral citizens just as the long house of *ituika* lore had done for earlier generations. Kagere was an investment in readers' hopes for a redeemed future. The KTA's leaders wrote as much in 1932, exhorting members to give more to support school construction. The KTA called on readers to keep their money at home: "if they went away its like a shepherd who leaves his goats which go into the garden or are eaten by animals."⁸⁵ Those who spent abroad brought disaster home: it was better to invest locally to "make the country clean." Local investment promised to renew and cleanse strained social relations. Those who refused to invest were like women who gave birth to prostitutes, "who are not reared by parents but they rear themselves." The accusation brought men's fears of moral wasting, shaped by the local history of the "female circumcision" crisis, to bear in condemning the irresponsible wealthy. The KTA reminded its readers that Johnstone Kenyatta was in London, sent with KCA money: if they failed to support him and the school, they would lose their investment. School-building and the politics of Kenyatta's literate advocacy went together: both promised to renew Gikuyu polity. The KTA concluded by warning readers of domestic disaster if they failed to contribute to the school.

When the sun shall come, or the rain fall, where shall you be sheltered from?
Who are you wanting to lead you to set up the building for you? Where shall you
be sheltered from? Or even you and your children? If you don't set up buildings
you will be killed in the open. People from other places have buildings. Light a

⁸⁴ *Mahiga* Kamakwa KTA, "Mahiga Independent School," 1 August 1932.

⁸⁵ The following paragraph is in summary of *Mahiga* Kikuyu Traders Association, "Report: Uria Agikuyu mangithii mbele," 16 March 1932.

fire and fetch firewood like Abraham and prepare a goat ready to sacrifice to our God and he shall hear our cries.⁸⁶

Old Testament sacrifice and generational ambition coincided to teach readers the virtue of investment in schooling. Kagere school promised to shelter a new Gikuyu polity, cleansed of polluted moral wasting and virtuously ready for the future. Those who stood outside the building of Gikuyu unity were likely to be killed in the open: their dalliance with private wealth was irresponsible, delinquent.. Willy Jimmy Wambugu called them “cowards” in a public meeting in 1931, accusing them of shirking public duty by trifling about receipts.⁸⁷ Building Gikuyu polity took courage, the courage to commit to citizenship.

Not all shared the KTA’s confident dreams about a literate, unified future. The building of generational unity seemed to some *mbari* leaders to threaten private property with foreign dictatorship. The “deep” politics of kinship, as ever, was resistant toward outside authority. Bureaucracy offered readers ways to convince suspicious elders of their responsibility. In December 1932 Kagere school agreed to combine with Munyange, another school that had broken away from the Scots at Mahiga.⁸⁸ Munyange was to be an outschool of Kagere: local authorities would defer to Wambugu wa Maina, the school supervisor. The agreement put it that Munyange “can do nothing on its own. Everything will be done at (Kagere).” Some at Munyange thought the agreement amounted to dictatorship. At a meeting convened to sign the accord, people from Munyange asked about the motivations for the agreement and wondered why Wambugu had not appointed a secretary to oversee the schools with him.⁸⁹ The KTA threatened localities with tyranny. Meshak Matu argued that “the people there had the same parents and had

⁸⁶Mahiga Kikuyu Traders Association, “Report: Uria Agikuyu mangithii mbele,” 16 March 1932.

⁸⁷Mahiga KTA Kamakwa, “Mahiga school: agenda,” 29 September 1931.

⁸⁸Mahiga “Independent School Mahiga,” 4 December 1932.

⁸⁹Mahiga Dunstan Kiboi, Agenda, Mahiga independent school, 18 December 1932.

schooled together and so its good to be in agreement." *Mbari* autonomy was at stake in the proposal to unite the two schools.

KTA leaders asked for calm, reminding the Munyange people that "it is not good to fight now because those who are to fight us are yet to confront us." The exterior challenge of malicious chiefs and mission readers might bring internal consensus among fractious readers. But literacy promised more. In the midst of debate, the minutes report that "Dunstan Kiboi stood up and explained everything by writing on the blackboard and people heard what had been done." The leader of the Munyange people met Kiboi's writing with acclaim: he asked that "such a meeting should be convened every month to discuss these things." Public writing dispelled *mbari* fears about irresponsible authority and brought readers together in hope for the future. Readers agreed that "what was important was unity," as one Munyange person put it. Writing promised to bring together the fractious disputants of local ethnicity and articulated new, cooperative politics.

The debate about Munyange in 1932 was precisely about the possibility of a public authority exceeding the local politics of *mbari*. The "deep" politics of kinship made it difficult for any associational party, any group not linked by common ties of reciprocity and land, to speak for others. Challenged by the parochialism of Gikuyu politics, KTA readers used writing to work out new standards of trust. Cash books, minutes, chalkboards and paper proved the association's responsibility to the British, entitling them to recognition by the state. But more immediately, more contentiously, bureaucracy was a claim of responsibility in orally-conducted debates over *mbari* authority and public power. Writing shaped standards of trust just as surely as exchanges of stock bound *mbari* patriots together. Readers hoped that their records and writing would serve the interests of Gikuyu polity, teaching children to be citizens. Writing gave shape to the inspirational promise of moral redemption, to *ituika*.

Public authority was a question vigorously imagined and debated in locales like Kagere. Writing brought *mbari* politicians together in common hope for the future. It also structured Gikuyu engagement with the British. But associational politics, especially on the territorial level, remained tenuous, arid, unimaginative. Judge Carter revealed the limits of the KCA's claims on public authority. Joseph Kang'ethe, KCA Nairobi leader and supporter of Harry Thuku, wrote to the readers in Nyeri for help in drafting a memo on land tenure for the Carter Commission in 1932.⁹⁰ Kang'ethe wanted 30/ from each chapter to help pay expenses. He also asked that they "join hands" to press land grievances before Carter. The KCA members at Kagere, grouped as the KTA, never paid their remittance. They wrote a separate memo for the Commission, detailing the Nyeri reserve boundary and asking for leave to water cattle in the Nyandarua forest.⁹¹ The memorandum was apparently never presented before the Commission. It was probably too contentious. Land belonged to the politics of *mbari*, to the oral debate by which landlords and tenants adjudicated boundaries and argued about ownership. As the garden controversy in 1926 had revealed, such divisive arguments were dangerous for political parties: they threatened to pull apart the imagined citizens of readers' redeemed polity. The KCA in Nyeri did not send an official representative before Judge Carter; only an unprepared delegate gave evidence, and did not hand over a written memorandum.⁹² About internally divisive matters such as land ownership it was better for a party seeking out consensus on literate grounds to be silent.

The KCA's conspicuous silence exposed the limits of generational politics. Judge Carter's request for histories of land acquisition seemed to threaten autonomous *mbari* with outside dictatorship. Fearful that internal dispute between landlords and tenants would rend the fabric of literate unity, the KCA kept quiet. The Tumutumu-based

⁹⁰Mahiga Joseph Kang'ethe to KCA Nyeri, 19 April 1932.

⁹¹Mahiga "Reserve boundary," 28 June 1932.

⁹²Evidence of Waiga Kibanya, in *KLC* 105.

Progressive Kikuyu Party, united in commitment to family politics but similarly worried over internal dissent, was similarly reserved--but for different reasons. The contrasts between the PKP and the KCA highlight the creative ways that readers, committed to contending political projects, used literacy to conduct ethnic debates.

Land and bureaucratic dispute in the PKP

Literacy was for the KTA an experimental, contentious language with which to claim authority in oral debates over leadership and politics. But readers were not of one mind in their literacy. Land tenure remained the surest determinate of readers' agenda, the guiding star by which they set their contending political coordinates. Literacy was a language in which they argued. This section is about how a political party, the Progressive Kikuyu Party (PKP) of Tumutumu, argued about bureaucratic procedure intimately tied to heartfelt questions of land tenure. The PKP was a *mbari* party, committed not to generational redemption but to family prosperity. Some of its members were tenants, invested in expensive stone houses built on land to which they had insecure title. Other members were landlords, hoping to maintain dynastic rights to clan property. Judge Carter, I show below, revealed their divisions. Divided by material interest, PKP readers argued about bureaucratic procedure in order to typify their opponents and to prove their own trustworthiness. The "deep" politics of landholding drove readers to argue about responsibility and its inverse, sorcery.

The PKP was founded in 1928 by Tumutumu readers seeking to claim Christian soap, medicine and clothing for *mbari* progress. They saw in the KCA's claims to generational redemption a dangerously malicious attempt to undermine family unity. PKP readers, many *mbari* rightholders by the late 1920s, were worried that the KCA's declaration for *ituika* in 1928 would bring generational dissent home. They claimed that the clean customs of Christian hygiene would protect domestic property from pollution

and bring about landed progress through family farming. Generational thought looked darkly malevolent to family farmers: the PKP accused the KCA of plotting *ituika* at night. In a more cuttingly Christian accusation, they scorned the KCA for its unbaptised leaders.⁹³ PKP members wore badges on their breasts bearing the emblem of a rising sun, and met only during daylight hours.⁹⁴ They made the KCA look like jealous sorcerers. The lineage rightholders of the PKP guarded *mbari* property against the jealousy of the ill-intentioned politicians of the KCA.

But the PKP was divided in its pursuit of *mbari* profit. Some members were tenants, sons of early converts who had settled near the mission on the land of local clans. Other members, the majority, were landlords, children of Njora, Murakaru and others who had originally given the missionaries land. Tenants, worried that the cheap goats of the early 1930s would allow landlords to reclaim land, hoped for individual freehold title to their property, much like the smallholders of the Kiambu KCA. Stanley Kiama Gathigira, younger son of a dispossessed tenant and prominent Tumutumu reader, found common ground with the KCA in 1928. He signed a KCA petition in 1929 favoring the release of Harry Thuku.⁹⁵ He later protested that Hezekiah Mundia had signed his name without permission: but some were convinced that the KCA had won him over.⁹⁶ During the 1929 circumcision controversy Kiama hid his PKP badge at a meeting with KCA leaders.⁹⁷ For carefully politic tenants like Kiama, it made sense to be equivocal about the condemning play of sorcery and cleanliness endorsed in the badges. Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho, *mbari* rightholder from Tetu, accused Kiama of consorting with the KCA to

⁹³SA I/C/9: Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho et.al. to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

⁹⁴SA I/G/1: Philp, "Evidence before committee for the protection of coloured women in the crown colonies," 10 April 1930.

⁹⁵Kikuyu Central Association, "Correspondence between the Kikuyu Central Association and the Colonial Office" (Nairobi: The Kikuyu Central Association, 1930), 6.

⁹⁶SA I/C/8: Calderwood to Arthur, 20 October 1930.

⁹⁷SA I/C/9: Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho et.al. to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

win the 1928 LNC elections. Kiama had polled better than Kagotho.⁹⁸ Literate tenants' skill at bureaucracy seemed to threaten the PKP's purposive project of clan progress.

The party polled well in LNC elections in 1928, winning both seats in Mathira and one in Tetu.⁹⁹ In 1931 the party lost ground to the KCA, losing its Tetu seat to Hezekiah Mundia and failing to gain any seats in Othaya.¹⁰⁰ The Carter Commission in 1932 offered PKP readers an opportunity to prove their usefulness. The promise that the British might return Gikuyu land brought bitter opponents together in common hope of entitlement. The PKP wrote a memorandum and proudly presented it before the government's Local Native Council for approval. The Council greeted the letter with acclaim, remembered one reader.¹⁰¹ Hezekiah Mundia and other prominent KCA readers helped to write the PKP memo.¹⁰² PKP readers met with Nyeri and Kiambu chiefs prior to the Commission's arrival in 1932 and agreed that

we wanted the government to give us title deeds for the whole country of the Gikuyu and for a "line" to be drawn around the whole Gikuyu country. After the discussion even Chief Kinyanjui found it good for all people in Gikuyu country to be given titles. These titles would have given the boundaries between the Gikuyu and the Europeans.¹⁰³

Tenants and landlords, chiefs and readers, all could agree that a "line"--a term learned from the English--would protect Gikuyu land from avaricious white settlers. Gikuyu practice with English words was paying off. Lines, carefully boundary markers around the Gikuyu reserve, allowed Gikuyu to claim protection under British law. Stanley Kiama proudly presented the memo before the commission, reminding Judge Carter that the readers of the PKP were "better educated" than the chiefs and elders of the

⁹⁸SA I/F/9: Stanley Kiama to Calderwood, 10 August 1928.

⁹⁹SA I/C/7: Philp to Arthur, 10 May 1928.

¹⁰⁰SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, entries for 19 May, 21 May, and 23 May.

¹⁰¹SA I/C/9: Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho et.al. to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

¹⁰²SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station logbook for 1932, entry for 23 July.

¹⁰³SA I/C/9: Zakayo muru wa Kagotho et.al. to Calderwood and Barlow, 2 July 1934.

LNC and thus better able to "know what the commission was doing."¹⁰⁴ Readers' knowledge seemed to offer access to the inner workings of British administration, and brought Gikuyu politicians together in proud cooperation with chiefs.

Lines and other markers of colonial law brought vigorous opponents into cooperation in hopes of entitlement from the British. But neither the PKP or the KCA could find much to say about internal Gikuyu politics, about the terms by which landlords' and tenants' competing claims to land could be adjudicated. The PKP memo was an artful attempt to reconcile contradictory Gikuyu ambitions. It began by flattening out racial divisions with the British: "we Kikuyu were cultivators and shepherds long before the Europeans came the country," it went.¹⁰⁵ Past wealth legitimated political aspiration: the readers of the PKP desired flocks and herds like European settlers. Carter should reward readers' ambition with land for grazing: with more land, readers promised milk for settler farms and more crops for export. The PKP asked leave to take cases with Europeans to the High Court in Nairobi, an attempt to extend their accomplished ease with bureaucratic procedure to judge settlers. All of these recommendations claimed that their accomplishment entitled Gikuyu to recognition from the colonial government. But about the internally divisive question of land tenure the PKP was studiously vague. The memo reminded the British of their service as carriers during the war, and asked for freehold title to all Gikuyu lands. Titles promised to guard Gikuyu land from settlers: but the PKP did not ask for individual tenure for smallholders. They weakly endorsed *mbari* tenure, but were carefully vague about the specifics. It made sense to be vague about the future for a party divided over land grievances.

The PKP's studied consensus on matters of land was blown asunder by the release of the Commission's report in May 1934. Judge Carter decided Gikuyu land tenure was communal: tribes owned land, not individuals or lineages. It was a decision that

¹⁰⁴KLC 84.

¹⁰⁵KLC 95.

protected the land of British settlers and spurned the ambitious claims of dynastic history.¹⁰⁶ Nyeri men, readers and chiefs alike, saw disaster in the report: Carter's tribal analysis of land tenure meant that Nyeri grievances were papered over. Carter rewarded insistent Kiambu litigants with some 500 acres of forest land, added to Nyeri district and settled by relocated Kiambu *ahoi*. Nyeri cattlemen got access to the low-lying grasslands in Yatta, malarious land where many complained cattle got disease.¹⁰⁷ The land was useless for cultivation.¹⁰⁸

Nyeri LNC representatives thought the report a scheme cooked up by Kiambu chiefs to steal Nyeri land. Chief Wambugu complained that if Kiambu's Chief Koinange knew of Nyeri's landless he would not ask to resettle Kiambu people in the district.¹⁰⁹ The LNC wanted to interrogate the Kiambu people resettled on Nyeri land to make sure they were really Gikuyu.¹¹⁰ Judge Carter might bring Kavirondo and Masai, dangerous foreigners, onto Gikuyu land. The Provincial Commissioner thought they should be happy: Carter had rewarded Gikuyu tribal disenfranchisement with tribal reward. But tribal theory was little comfort to Nyeri readers and chiefs pressed at home by land litigation. Barlow reported that when he gathered PKP readers to listen to a summary of the report's conclusions, they exclaimed "all is lost."¹¹¹ Their reaction pointed toward failed hopes: PKP leaders thought the report the end of lineage-based unity. They complained:

A tree grows in many directions--people need room to expand like a tree which spreads its branches in all directions. Now we had wanted to grow as one *mbari*.

¹⁰⁶For a fuller analysis, see Rita Breen, "The Politics of Land: The Kenya Land Commission and its effects on land policy in Kenya" (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1976).

¹⁰⁷SA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to Biss, 28 May 1934.

¹⁰⁸KNA DC/Nyeri/2/1/4: "Report of commission appointed to examine questions of additional land for a cemetery," 20 July 1937.

¹⁰⁹SA I/A/41-42: LNC meeting, 24-25 June 1936.

¹¹⁰SA I/A/41-42: LNC meeting, 24-26 March 1936.

¹¹¹SA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to Biss, 28 May 1934.

But we are to be allowed to expand only in one direction, and the place provided is usable for only a small sect.¹¹²

Carter's tribal theory threatened the progressive *mbari* aspirations of the PKP with the divisive threat of Kiambu's imperialism. Angry readers purchased a copy of the report and sent a swift reply to the administration. They complained that the Mount Kenya forest had been excluded from the reserves, arguing that the mountain had always been a place for worship to God.¹¹³ Monotheism offered angry Gikuyu Christians a way to criticize greedy British pagans. They also asked for compensation for the work of preparing claims before the commission, complaining that many had "gone to great expense in having their claims written down, believing they would be properly investigated." Unrequited ambition deserved British recompense. Finally, the PKP rehearsed Nderi's dynastic story about patronizing the British, telling again the moving story of Wangombe's generosity and British greed. It was an attempt to make the British see sense, warning them that Carter's report had done nothing to alleviate internal pressure on *mbari* landlords. It was also a desperate attempt to reclaim middle ground for readers now more than ever divided by competing demands of land and belonging.

For after Carter the PKP found itself divided by anguishing strife between landlords and progressive tenants. The division had probably always been the cards. Soon after the party wrote its reply to Judge Carter, one group of readers stole the printed report of the Commission and refused to return it.¹¹⁴ Barlow thought the party divided by "beastly local fitinas and factional jealousies," and wondered if the Gikuyu were regressing into the bad old days when "every ridge was against its neighbor." Principled unity was more difficult than ever to attain: but the PKP's divisions were not simply pathological. There was a material basis for angry disputes over books and politics.

¹¹²SA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow's notes on meeting re. Carter Land Commission, May 1934.

¹¹³SA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to Biss, 18 June 1934.

¹¹⁴SA I/C/9: Barlow to Arthur, 25 June 1934.

Angry landlords thought the tenants of Tumutumu had consorted with the KCA in Kiambu to steal land from Nyeri *mbari*. Tenants in return accused the wealthy rightholders of cursing them. The debate was argued out in print, and conducted over minute books and typewriters. Bureaucracy was for the angry disputants of the PKP a common vocabulary of trust, now turned inward to prove opponents' irresponsibility.

Land tenure inspired the deepest debates among PKP partisans. Landlords like the wealthy Tetu reader Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho had hoped for a communal title to Gikuyu land from Judge Carter as protection from settler avarice. Carter upset these ambitions, setting landlords against ambitious clients in divisive argument. Kagotho complained bitterly in June 1934--three weeks after the release of the Carter report--that Jonathan Ngang'a, Mathira schoolteacher and PKP president since 1929, used cash and knowledge to dispossess rightholders.¹¹⁵ Kagotho wrote with typed precision of Ngang'a's avarice, how he had grabbed Murebu wa Gathithina's land through litigation in the native tribunal. "Murebu was not as monied as Jonathan," complained Kagotho, "and as such his goats were also taken."¹¹⁶ Cash-poor landholders, with cheap goats, were threatened with the money and literate expertise of litigious readers. Kagotho and others worried that Mathira readers' litigation would make *mbari* land into freehold individual title. The missionary-organized Race Relations Council fueled to their fears. Ngang'a and Stanley Kiama, both tenants, took several trips to Nairobi for RRC meetings, signing a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies maintaining that Gikuyu land was owned by "a clan or...an individual person."¹¹⁷ Kagotho and the landlords of the PKP thought Ngang'a and Kiama were talking behind their backs with the KCA while in Nairobi.¹¹⁸ The landlords condemned them as pagans: whoever agreed

¹¹⁵For Ngang'a's biography, SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book, 1929, entry for 4 May.

¹¹⁶SA I/C/9: Zakayo muru wa Kagotho et.al. to Calderwood and Barlow, 2 July 1934.

¹¹⁷SA I/D/2: J. Kamau, Koinange wa Mbiu et. al. to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 October 1934.

¹¹⁸SA I/C/9: Zakayo muru wa Kagoth et.al to Jonathon Njuki, 2 July 1934.

with individual land tenure “does not know God,” they wrote. Christian duty called landlords to condemn the upstart tenants from Mathira.

Divided by the politics of land tenure, PKP readers argued about bureaucracy. The language of debate over land and leadership was structured by the vocabulary of bureaucratic procedure. For bureaucracy had once brought contentious readers together: “lines,” record books, cash registers, elections, and other literate disciplines had enabled the PKP, like the KTA, to prove themselves trustworthy. After Carter, anguished arguments over land turned grammars of trust into a vocabulary of condemnation, a way to talk about the perfidy of opponents.

Zakayo Muru wa Kagotho, landlord and PKP official, proved the ambitious tenant Ngang’a’s perfidy by talking about his bureaucratic irresponsibility. In several carefully typed letters, copied to missionaries, Kagotho and others accused Ngang’a of stealing the association’s minute book, and of replacing the party’s secretary with his own appointee.¹¹⁹ It looked like a coup. More, Ngang’a ignored the typed agendas submitted to him by the landlords’ group. He wrote letters to other members calling meetings at night, failing to copy the letters to Kagotho and other landlords. He also signed minutes without referring to the party’s elected secretary. The party’s bureaucracy was beginning to look like a dictatorship. Kagotho thought Ngang’a had purchased a typewriter with PKP money, and was using it for personal profit. This accusation brought rightholders’ fears home. For the Mathira tenants’ highjacking of PKP bureaucracy smacked of greedy sorcery to concerned landlords. Kagotho called Ngang’a a *murogi*, a sorcerer whose jealousy laid waste to domestic fertility.¹²⁰ Kiama, Ngang’a and others of the Mathira group held meetings at night in Karatina, speaking ill of Kagotho and other rightholders.¹²¹ PKP landlords from Tetu and Othaya threatened to form their own party

¹¹⁹These accusations are in SA I/C/9: Zakayo et.al. to Jonathon Njuki, 2 July 1934.

¹²⁰SA I/C/9: Zakaya muru wa Kagotho to Barlow and Calderwood, 2 July 1934.

¹²¹SA I/G/5: Zakayo et. al. to Barlow, 7 July 1934.

in July, promising to protect their homes from Nganga's sorcery.¹²² Mathira readers had cursed the party with their sectional jealousy, complained Kagotho: one organ of the party was wasting away and threatened to perish.¹²³ Ngang'a had bewitched the PKP's bureaucracy, laying waste to landlords' homesteads and turning structures of trust into malevolent instruments of domination.

Landlords feared that the PKP's bureaucracy would become a means to personal profit for tenants, sucking the life out of the party and destroying the future of *mbari* politics. Ngang'a, a tenant whose house was near Tumutumu, replied to Kagotho's claims by returning accusations of sorcery. He pleaded for unity among the party's members--*uiguano*, cooperative hearing--as a matter of the heart, not merely talk.¹²⁴ Unconsidered talk was dangerous: "we do not want noisy and troublesome people for they are condemned in the Bible" wrote Ngang'a, citing Matthew 4:9. Ngang'a wanted a reconciliation meeting bringing together "careful and cool" people. Accusations of sorcery were heating up beyond control, threatening accord with dangerous division. Unity demanded "peace-makers and peace-lovers," people who will bring "blessing" (*thayu*) to the party. But unity was difficult to attain for a party divided by land politics. Ngang'a thought Kagotho's group had used curses, *irumi*, to threaten people. More, Kagotho's landlords had engaged in their own literate vendettas. Ngang'a accused them of collecting money on behalf of the PKP without writing the sums into a record book. Rumors of monied impropriety coincided with fears of deceit: Ngang'a further pilloried Kagotho of failing to copy him in the letters he had sent to the missionary Barlow. Privately malevolent writing seemed a form of curse. Ngang'a wrote that if Kagotho wanted cooperation and unity he would have to "remit the money to the party at all times"; more, he would have write a report to Barlow indicating that "disagreements and

¹²²SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book: entry for 7 July.

¹²³SA I/G/5: Zakayo et. al. to Barlow, 26 July 1934.

¹²⁴Ngang'a's reply is in SA I/C/12 and 14: Jonathon Njuki Ngang'a to Meshak Muurage, 9 July 1934.

curses amongst Christians are not good." Writing was for the intimately divided disputants of the PKP a vocabulary of moral condemnation and a means of reconciliation.

Divided by land tenure and material interest, PKP readers argued about sorcery and bureaucratic procedure to typify their opponents and to prove their own trustworthiness. Stolen record books, illegal typewriters, minutes not copied and letters not delivered, were more than simple clerical errors. They were violations of trust, marking a dictatorial urge to turn literacy for personal profit. Gikuyu knew sorcerers by their greed, by the abundance of their houses and the desiccation of their neighbors' gardens. Sorcery was kleptomania, the turning of others' wealth for personal gain. Stolen typewriters, secreted record books similarly made private gain out of others' labor and wealth. Accusations of bureaucratic misconduct were for the energetic debaters of the PKP ways of thinking through terrifying violations of trust.

The PKP's argument over bureaucracy, land and sorcery recapitulates, in a negative sense, the point I have been trying to make. For Gikuyu politicians in the early 1930s, literacy was a means to think about and argue about ethnic projects. KTA traders in Kagere found in bureaucratic discipline a highly temporal means of claiming trust from elders, a way of embodying a public authority that exceeded family politics. This new form of authority, I suggested, was highly transient, difficult to transport: local politicians would scarcely agree that they shared common interests with others. Bureaucracy similarly brought the PKP together, and constituted a language with which to debate the moral economy of land and leadership. Both parties were, in different ways, arguing about the question of public responsibility, the problem of authority. Challenged by the "deep" politics of land tenure, reminded of their limits by Judge Carter, Gikuyu politicians argued through literacy in hopes of fabricating new languages of unity.

All of which returns us, finally, to the question of literacy. As I intimated in the introduction, literacy is often understood to be a skill, something to be learned and

acquired, the foundation of new, imagined nations. This chapter has argued that literacy in Nyeri was a polemic before it was a skill, a contentious means of argument. There was no common Gikuyu mind about writing, no literate consciousness inscribed by pen and paper. Literacy was a means of conducting old ethnic debates about land and belonging, readers' desperate, experimental attempt to bring the energetic disputants of Gikuyu ethnicity together. This is a point to which we shall return in future chapters.

* * *

The heated debates of KCA and PKP soon lost their force, in large part because Judge Carter had highlighted the intractable divisions internal to both parties. Divided by sorcerous jealousy and landed interest, the PKP lost the Mathira LNC election in 1934. Their candidate, Tumutumu reader Arthur Tutu, got only 81 votes out of 2543 cast.¹²⁵ Missionaries reported that many landlords resented Tutu, a tenant and party to Ngang'a's group.¹²⁶ Many voted for the candidate nominated by the chief. The PKP won in Tetu, beating the independent school leader and KCA nominee Johanna Kunyiha. The winner was Muhoya wa Kagumba, wealthy landlord and consort of Kagotho's group. *Mbari* interest made for better politics than uncertain party loyalty.

The KCA in Nyeri was entirely shut out in the elections of 1934.¹²⁷ By 1935 the party was defunct in Nyeri. Its leaders, including Hezekiah Mundia, had joined Harry Thuku's Kikuyu Provincial Association.¹²⁸ Members paid 10/, more than a month's wage for a laborer.¹²⁹ The KPA asked for improvements in the running of native tribunals, for access to markets without charge, and for an end to the government maize buying monopoly.¹³⁰ Thuku himself had invested in *mbari* progress in Kiambu, and advocated for the new land terracing rules promulgated by government in the late 1930s. The DC

¹²⁵SA I/C/12 and 13: DC South Nyeri to PC Central, 25 June 1934.

¹²⁶SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu log book, 1934: entry for 25 May.

¹²⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/1/2/1: Handing Over Report, Nyeri district, 1934.

¹²⁸KNA PC/Central 8/5/6: PC Central to Colonial Secretary, 15 June 1935.

¹²⁹KNA PC/Central 8/5/6: Special Branch, "Memo on the KPA," 30 October 1939.

¹³⁰KNA PC/Central 8/5/6: Thuku to PC, 13 August 1935.

thought him one of the best farmers in the district.¹³¹ Some KCA generationists looked like *mbari* improvers. Thuku was popular at Tumutumu: a missionary-run sports meeting was disrupted in 1934 when someone thought they saw him in the crowd.¹³² By 1936 missionaries could report that all the KCA members at Tumutumu, and many former PKP, had joined Thuku's party.¹³³ Some hoped for a new unity: James Mite-ini Weru remembered that:

We formed a party called Kikuyu Province Association after KCA. KPA was formed at my place at Gatugi where all delegates had come from as far as Meru and stayed here for nine days. Harry Thuku was there.... There had arisen differences between Jessi Kariuki and Joseph Kangethe and Harry Thuku. The KCA got divided. They said they belonged to Kikuyu Central and we called ourselves Kikuyu Provincial so that we could enlarge our operation to the entire province which went as far as Meru.¹³⁴

The KPA claimed English administrative bureaucracy--"provincial"--in hopes of bringing together the fractious disputants of Gikuyu ethnic politics. But principled unity, in 1935 as before, was demanding, difficult to achieve.

For economic recovery in the late 1930s made Gikuyu divisions more hotly fought. Spurred by growing profits from exported wattle bark and domestically-consumed maize, Nyeri's peasant farmers expanded cultivation in the second half of the 1930s. Tenants and *mbari* juniors found themselves more than ever unwelcome on clan land: landlords redefined relations of tenancy in court to protect property from intimate dependents. Lacking sufficient land, threatened smallholders turned to migrant labor to make ends meet. Wage labor and land pressure made both men and women fear domestic crisis and sexual indiscipline. Pressed by husbands' absence from home, wives stitched

¹³¹ KNA PC/Central 8/5/6: Special Branch, "Memo on the KPA," 30 October 1939.

¹³² SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1934, entry for 27 January

¹³³ SA I/C/9: Calderwood to Arthur, 18 May 1936.

¹³⁴ Oral interview: James Mite-ini Weru.

together domestic order by working as seamstresses and traders. Men worried that cash would lead them to moral dissipation, and blamed ambitious women for auctioning off household prosperity. They sought to control women in law. Women were equally concerned with moral decay, but saw it as a problem of male delinquency. They hoped to stiffen male resolve and prove moral virtue through the church's Women's Guild, which grew markedly in the late 1930s. Women's household work, advertised and dignified through the Guild, offered a means for women to manage household dysfunction and marital strife.

Chapter Eight

Gender troubled

Class formation, moral crisis, and women's rhetoric in the late 1930s

Tumutumu was in the mid-1930s gripped in a crisis of moral conduct. Church courts were flooded with accusations of marital infidelity, of pre-marital misbehavior, of sorcery and the misuse of family property. This chapter uses the crisis as a window into the conflicted nature of gendered politics in Nyeri district. As I showed in the previous chapter, land tenure set landlords and tenants against one another in intimately divisive argument over history and the future. My interest in this chapter is to demonstrate how arguments over land were gendered, how masculinity was at stake in redefinitions in land tenure, how women and men argued about moral order to come to terms with the agony of class formation. Arguments over gender were not merely ephemeral to "real," objective economic history. Nor was gendered debate simply about women, about how patriarchs could control fractious wives and daughters.¹ As feminist scholarship in African history has shown, moral accusations were for both men and women a vocabulary with which to argue about generational tensions, property rights, labor, and infertility.² Men's anxiety over women, women's accusations of male delinquency, were how Gikuyu men and women talked about violations of trust and forwarded solutions to the problem of social decay.

Pressed by rural capitalism's assault on small holders' property and wealth, Gikuyu men and women argued about sexual impropriety. What drove Gikuyu to argue about gender was the apparently widespread sense that rural capitalism made it difficult

¹This point was learned from Linzi Manicom's "Ruling Relations: Rethinking State and Gender in South African History," *Journal of African History* 33 (1992), 441-65.

²This drawn from Megan Vaughan, *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 144. The literature on moral crisis and social change in African history is growing: c.f. Nancy Rose Hunt, "Noise over Camouflaged Polygamy, Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa," *Journal of African History* 32 (1991), 471-94; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992); Jean Allman, "Rounding up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante," *Journal of African History* 37 (1996), 195-214.

for its victims to be men, or women. For gender had been a relation of property. Men proved themselves men by rendering the forest into cultivated land. Women became women as millet was harvested from the fields, as produce was rendered up to fatty value. Wealthy men's attack on small holders' land, as I show in the first section, was thus a moral problem: it undermined the propertied basis of gendered order. Wage earning men found it difficult to earn funds for marriage, the seal of adulthood. Rural women increasingly took part in the commodity trade, making elders worry about prostitution. Men and women elaborated contending theories of morality to dignify self interest and to typify opponents. Wealthy men spoke loudest: as I show in the second section, they used colonial law to control fractious junior men and women. Law, claims on "custom" and tradition, were ruling relations, means of disciplining dissolute youth.

Women argued with men by making creatively contentious investments in household order. The Women's Guild at Tumutumu was in the mid-1930s literally a debating society, offering women a vocabulary with which to argue with patriarchy and elaborate new theories of moral conduct. Through diligent displays of domestic work, by talking volubly about their labor, church women blamed men for moral disorder. Faced with evidence of social decay, where husbands whored after foreign women, women's displays of washing and soap burdened men with evidence of female virtue and masculine turpitude. Domesticity was for women a rhetoric of ethnic debate, a means of calling men to order.

Commodities and class formation in the mid-1930s

Gender trouble in Nyeri had economic roots. I suggested in the previous chapter that cheap goats in the early 1930s sparked debate between landlords and tenants over land tenure. Economic recovery in the middle of the decade made the debate more sharp and desperate. Landlords expanded cultivation to profit from commodities, especially

wattle. Pressed by landlords' greed and earning low wages for unskilled jobs, small holding men's households were in disarray. Their inability to hold families together drove rural debate over masculinity.

For landlords and big farmers in Nyeri, the mid-1930s brought renewed prosperity. Maize prices on the internal market recovered marginally. Gikuyu farmers, who grew relatively high-quality maize in bulk, benefited from higher prices.³ Missionaries reported that local prices rose from 1/50 per bag to 6/ or more in the mid-1930s. But the premier crop of the late 1930s for Gikuyu peasants was wattle. The British had introduced wattle seedlings in Nyeri in 1922-23, offering them to chiefs and *athomi* farmers.⁴ By 1924 missionaries at Tumutumu reported that neighbors of *Mbari ya Njora* had planted wattle up to the mission border.⁵ In the mid-1930s prices for wattle bark extract, used to cure leather, rose on the international market. Government responded by encouraging peasant production for export, issuing seedlings through the Local Native Council and offering demonstrations on wattle cultivation. In 1936 Nyeri peasants exported 3,114 tones of wattle bark at 35 to 40/ per ton.⁶ By 1937, the Department of Agriculture estimated that there were 24,000 acres in the district under the crop.⁷ Many peasants, both small holders and landlords, shifted land formerly cropped with maize to wattle trees.

But wattle production marked out divisions within a peasantry increasingly differentiated by class. Small holders, who mixed episodes of wage work with farm work at home, found the crop attractive for several reasons. First, wattle required less land than maize: it could be sown broadcast, thinned once and not pruned. This method of

³SA I/E/9: Dickson, "Some notes on the Tumutumu outschool system and its suggested reconstruction," 4 October 1940.

⁴c.f. Mary Wanyoike, "Karatina: Economic Changes and their impact on the economic activities of Mathira Division. Nyeri district, Kenya, 1902-1963" (M.A. Thesis. University of Nairobi, 1991), 93.

⁵SA LF 9: Philp to Barlow, 11 March 1924.

⁶KNA DC Nyeri/1/1/3: Annual report, Nyeri district, 1936.

⁷Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, 64.

production cost an average of 2/ per acre to growers.⁸ Second, the crop required relatively less labor inputs from absentee male landholders, increasingly away from home for wage work in the mid-1930s.⁹ Finally, long-standing crops like wattle established claims on land, useful when litigation threatened absentee landholders with dispossession. But wattle made it impossible to mix commodity production with food cultivation: wattle could not be intercropped with millet or potatoes, previously planted along with maize. Small holders' wattle also led to soil erosion: planted thickly on hillsides, its roots loosened dirt and killed undergrowth. This would be the rationale for state intervention in land conservation in the late 1930s, about which more below.

Big farmers, many of them graduates of Tumutumu, complained that small holders' closely-planted wattle reduced the quality of bark and drove down export prices. For small holders were frequently compelled to harvest their bark early, responding to periodic cash shortages. Land-rich farmers, who could afford to invest capital and labor in wattle, spaced out the trees in rows on ridge tops, leaving space between the trees for grass and other ground cover that limited erosion. They employed wage work to clean the trees regularly. Their method cost about 30/ per acre. Big farmers in the mid-1930s pushed for purchasing distinctions between grade one bark, harvested from mature trees on cultivated plantations, and lesser-quality bark from small producers.¹⁰ Land pressure and landlords' greed made it difficult for small holders to benefit from profitable wattle.

The promise of wattle spurred *mbari* landlords to expand cultivation, generating renewed family debate over land in the late 1930s. Land cultivation in Nyeri expanded dramatically in the late 1930s: a 1943 survey estimated that cultivated land in Nyeri had increased by 23 percent from 1931.¹¹ Peasant farmers increasingly put marginal

⁸This information from Michael Cowen, "Wattle Production in Central Province: Capital and Household Commodity Production, 1903-1964" (unpublished ms., July 1975), 17-18.

⁹Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, 65-67.

¹⁰Cowen, "Wattle Production," 21.

¹¹Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, 117-18, citing Humphrey et al., "The Kikuyu Lands" (Kenya Colony, 1945).

grassland, previously used for grazing, under wattle and planted up land gained through litigation. The average household in 1943 cultivated at least 57 percent of its available land, up from 40 percent in 1931.¹² Most of the growth was in wattle plantations: the 1943 survey found that land under perennial crops in Nyeri had increased markedly.

Landlords' efforts to profit from wattle sparked renewed family debates over land and family definition in the late 1930s. Eager to profit from wattle, landholding readers sought to consolidate far-flung *mbari* land fragments, using cash to purchase land and finance litigation.¹³ Land cases clogged Nyeri's government tribunals. Litigants called up intimate histories of family formation, deploying them in court to argue about landlords' rights to control family land. Several cases involved church elders. To take one example: late in 1938 Solomon Ndambi, Tumutumu pastor and *mbari* landlord, sent his relatives to plant banana trees on Johanna Kirongothi's land. Ndambi's mother arrived at Kirongothi's door and cursed him, "coming to war just like a young person," wrote Kirongothi's brother.¹⁴ The dispute was about Kirongothi's land. The land had been loaned by Ndambi's father to a junior brother in the late 1800s, a gift in return for his help in clearing the land of bush.¹⁵ By the 1930s, the fertile relationships agreed on in the past had become the stuff of public argument. The landholder, a descendant of Ndambi's fathers' junior brother, agreed to sell the land to Kirongothi early in 1938. Ndambi, eager to reclaim what was originally family land, insisted that Kirongothi's property was rightfully his. He backed his claim with cash: Kirongothi complained Ndambi "tried to bring about a competition over cash offered for the land so that I could not manage to raise enough cash therefore enabling them to buy it."¹⁶ Ndambi hoped that cash would allow him to reclaim what he regarded as *mbari* property. But the original landholder refused

¹²Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, 117.

¹³For an analysis of the 1930s land crisis, see Michael Cowen, "Differentiation in a Kenya Location" (Nairobi: East African Universities Social Science Council, 1972).

¹⁴TT Ministers file: Jakubu Kimamo to Barlow, 18 October 1938.

¹⁵TT Presbytery file: Solomon Ndambi to Calderwood, 14 February 1934.

¹⁶TT Ministers file: Johanna Kirongothi to Barlow, 17 October 1938.

Ndambi's overture, insisting he could not go back on the sale to Kirongothi. Ndambi, righteously angry, tried to reclaim the land through older means, cultivating Kirongothi's garden to prove his rightful ownership. To Kirongothi it looked like a curse: he complained to Barlow with a worried proverb, "slipperiness outside the door of the house is difficult to evade."¹⁷ Land litigation threatened to bring danger in the most intimate of contexts.

Both landlords like Ndambi and wealthy tenants like Kirongothi could agree about the dangers of land litigation. They were particularly worried about the cheap goats of the 1930s, which as I demonstrated in the previous chapter allowed even impoverished wage earners to finance court cases against wealthy readers. Hoping to guard their land from litigation, Tumutumu's wealthy readers pushed for redefinitions of land tenure laws. In 1936 the government's Local Native Council, made up of landlords and readers, resolved that values of land in Nyeri should be counted in cash, not stock.¹⁸ More, they ruled that property values should include the costs of improvements, the stone houses and other expensive buildings that readers built. Investment in stone houses propped up wealthy men's title to land by increasing its value, making it more difficult for *mbari* juniors and others to lay claim to it. Stanley Kiama, progressive farmer and tenant, suggested that land redemption should be stopped altogether.¹⁹ In 1938 the progressive farmers of the LNC agreed: the council decreed that land purchased for over 100/ or 10 goats could not be redeemed.²⁰ For those with cash to invest in expensive land and stone buildings, land was becoming private property. The Tumutumu Kirk Session congratulated the LNC on its foresight: it had passed a minute in 1937 informing readers that land should be carefully marked with beacons, with its cash value written in a register.²¹ Cash Books

¹⁷ TT Ministers file: Johanna Kirongothi to Barlow, 17 October 1938.

¹⁸ SA I/A/41-42: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 24-25 June 1936.

¹⁹ SA I/A/41-42: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 24-26 March 1936.

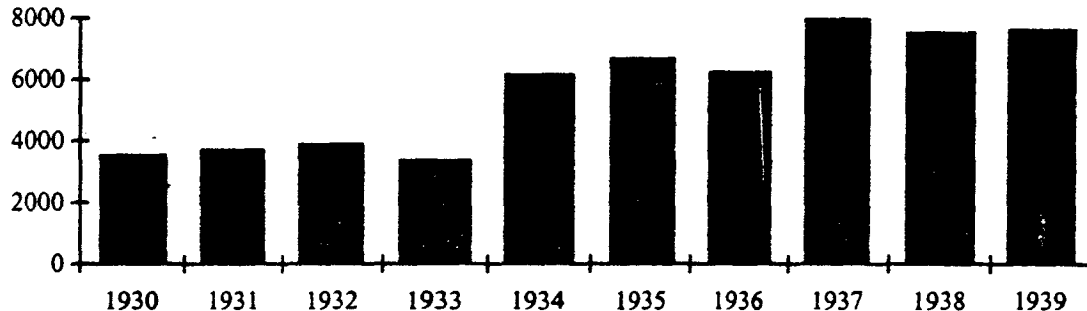
²⁰ SA I/A/41-42: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 18 August 1938.

²¹ TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 31 July 1937.

established the value of readers' land and stone houses, making it impossible for upstart juniors to lay claim to land with cheap goats. For wealthy readers, tenants and landlords, writing and cash protected land from litigation.

Congratulating themselves on renewed *mbari* prosperity, readers sent their children to school in the mid-1930s. School enrollments shot up in 1934 and 1935, rising from just over 3000 students to over 6000 in one year. Sales of New Testaments peaked in 1936; the printer had difficulty keeping up with the demand.²² Missionaries thought themselves in the midst of a "mass movement," and worried that Christian zeal would lead to excesses.²³ Schools were crowded with record enrollments: "seats full, standing room only, please take your place in the queue," exulted one missionary.²⁴

Chart 3: Attendance in Tumutumu schools, 1930-1939



Source: Annual reports, in SA I/B/7

Many of the new attendees were children. In 1937, students over 15 years of age amounted to only 10 percent of the total population in the sub-standard grades, down from 35 percent in 1927. Older pupils amount to 11 percent of Standard I, down from 59 percent in 1927, and 9 percent of Standard II, down from 65 percent in 1927. Wealthy farmers, their farms worked by wage laborers, enrolled their sons and daughters in school and paid to keep them schooling continually. Peasant prosperity fed church growth. A

²²SA I/C/9: Dickson to Arthur. 22 July 1936.

²³SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report. 1934.

²⁴SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu log book for 1934, entry for 8 December.

crowd of over 4,000 attended a conference at Tumutumu in 1935 at which three new pastors were ordained.²⁵ The church had funds to pay their salaries: envelopes were full with cash in 1935, when offerings totaled £434.²⁶ Missionaries congratulated the church on its maturity: but the balanced accounts had more to do with *mbari* ambition.

Prosperous sponsors roofed schools with iron and installed proper desks in rural schools; Barlow report that some £360 was invested by local donors in 1938.²⁷ Schooling more than ever looked to convert *mbari* prosperity into public reputation for wealthy men.

But *mbari* progress meant poverty for some small holders, trapped on eroding hillside plots by greedy landlords. Manure made some hope for relief. Manure composting to fertilize land depleted by maize and wattle was introduced in Tumutumu's schools from the 1920s.²⁸ Some schools had their own compost heaps, using manure purchased from nearby farmers. Primary school students in 1937 learned about "grainstores, a proper homestead, erosion and prevention, planting trees, manuring, and digging compost pits" in their first term.²⁹ Manuring looked to bring prosperity home. One early teacher, Cornelius Kanyiri Kanja, remembered that manuring was a popular subject for adult students:

Those small gardens were being used to teach people as a model, an example, to show them how to select seeds, how to plant food in rows. There was no fertilizer at that time, but we taught them how to put in manure. And at that time, the adult learners, especially the ones who wanted to learn those farming practices, especially the issue of planting in rows, they really liked that because it helped with the weeding. And also the issue of putting in the manure, because they would see the difference between putting in the manure, they would see how fertile it looked.³⁰

²⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1935.

²⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1935.

²⁷SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1938.

²⁸SA I/E/4: "Syllabus of course of study in agriculture," n.d. (but 1920s).

²⁹TT Government exams file: "Work done in agriculture. 1936-37 by pupils presented for primary school exam." 1937.

³⁰Oral interview: Cornelius Kanyiri Kanja.

Manure promised a fertile future for those who could afford it. But Kanyiri also remembered that many farmers lacked goats and cattle for manure. Some had a few goats for manure to “spread thinly on the ground,” but those who lacked livestock left the ground uncovered. It was a common problem for tenants in the late 1930s. Few had cattle, lacking sufficient land for grazing.³¹ Besides, landlords seeking to protect land refused to allow tenants to manure, an improvement that might endanger *mbari* title.³² Worried over land degradation, state agriculture officials pressed for changes in land tenure rules. Individual tenure seemed to some state bureaucrats to hold out the promise of development, progress premised on a capitalist peasantry.³³ The readers of the South Nyeri LNC wanted the best of all worlds: they agreed that tenants should manure land, but legislated that such an investment did not amount to a claim on ownership. The Tetu representative Kanja thought that the rules “would prevent tenants from making claims to land when manured,” safeguarding *mbari* ownership and “preserv(ing) land for future generations.”³⁴ LNC landlords virtuously guarded land for posterity: but impoverished tenants worried that their own posterity was at risk in declining yields from land. Few tenants in Nyeri could afford much manure anyway. It cost 288/ to fully manure three acres of maize intercropped with beans and potatoes in Kiambu in 1939, according to Greet Kershaw’s uniquely detailed data.³⁵ Few tenants could generate such capital to invest in manure: most partially manured their land with wages earned from men’s employment. In Nyeri it may have been even more difficult for tenants to make ends meet. Market prices for crops such as maize, beans and potatoes were markedly lower in

³¹Cowen, “Differentiation,” 4.

³²*KNA DC/Nyeri/1:1/3*: Nyeri district annual report, 1936.

³³*KNA Education 1* 1586: Chief Native Commissioner, “Individual Land Tenure,” 14 October 1938.

³⁴*SA I/A* 41-42: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 20-22 July 1937.

³⁵Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below*, 288-89.

Nyeri than in Kiambu.³⁶ They would have generated little cash to purchase manure: and laborers' wages, as I show below, would have done little to make up the difference.

Pressed at home, some small holders moved north, to Nanyuki and Naro Moru, as squatters. The depression had devastated white settlers' plantations and forced many Europeans to become landlords, doling out land to Gikuyu squatters in return for periodic labor. The historian Michael Cowen, working from interview data in Magutu location, marks the exodus from 1937.³⁷ But the Nyeri diaspora seems to have begun several years earlier. As early as 1929 Tumutumu missionaries reported on a "Kikuyu dispersion" from Nyeri toward settler farms to the north.³⁸ Hoping to recreate civilization in the wilderness, the migrants founded schools, five in Subukia by 1929, 13 by 1930.³⁹ By 1939 Calderwood reported coming across numerous "Scottish" churches on remote farms to the north, many of them never before visited by missionaries.⁴⁰ Many could not afford the essentials of literacy: Barlow noted during a visit to Tambaya in 1934 that "scarcely anyone seemed to possess a New Testament; hymnbooks were few and far between and the people's knowledge of hymns also seemed limited."⁴¹ Lacking funds for missionary books, the Nyeri migrants worked to teach their children to write out of their own resources. Barlow reported that churchgoers in northern Mathira, on the border with settler farms, were singing new hymns with "soul and verve." These original hymns had come "on pieces of paper" from settler farms in Nanyuki and Subukia.⁴² Singing a new song in exodus, the Gikuyu writers on settler land hoped that schooling would bring redemption. They went to missionary schools on the reserve, crossing the border into

³⁶Comparing *KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Annual report, Nyeri district, 1937* with Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below*, 287.

³⁷Cowen, "Notes on Agricultural Wage Labour in a Kenya Location," in *Development Trends in Kenya* (African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1972), 43.

³⁸*SA I/B 7: Tumutumu annual report, 1929.*

³⁹*SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1930.*

⁴⁰Calderwood. "The African's responses," in *Kikuyu News* 148 (June 1939).

⁴¹*SA I Z 6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1934, entry for 29 July.*

⁴²*SA I Z 6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 5 July.*

northern Mathira to attend classes. The school at Ngorano--founded by disenchanting migrants from Tumutumu--was crowded in 1935 with "raw natives," some older men who walked from farms in Nanyuki.⁴³ They hoped that schooling would rebuild a Gikuyu polity fractured by *mbari* infighting.

Other worried small holders in Nyeri turned to migrant labor in the late 1930s. But their wages were of little profit, comparing unfavorably with agriculture. Some 13,206 men worked away from Nyeri in 1936; by 1938 there were 15,193.⁴⁴ They were part of an increasingly differentiated wage labor force.⁴⁵ Most Nyeri migrants were unskilled: a 1936 survey found that 6,606 men, almost half of Nyeri's migrant population, worked in menial tasks.⁴⁶ Many were laborers in the Rift Valley, working on settler farms in Nakuru and Naivasha. Migrant labor took workers farther from home in the late 1930s--and earned them relatively little. Nyeri laborers earned 66,155/ in total in 1936. Wage worker earned markedly less than those who had land in which to invest. Wattle exports from landed farmers brought 124,000/ into Nyeri district in 1936, almost twice the total earnings of unskilled laborers.⁴⁷ Maize exports brought in 204,000/. Peasants with access to cultivable land prospered; those without sufficient land would have found it difficult to make up the difference through wages.

Wages were profitable for some. Landed farmers in Nyeri, most well-educated, multiplied their commodity profits with skilled labor on settler farms. Cowen found for Magutu division that farmers with over three acres of land worked as supervisors, tractor drivers, houseboys, or traders in the late 1930s.⁴⁸ They earned on average 71/ per month in 1936.⁴⁹ Landholders' investment in schooling paid off with comparatively high wages.

⁴³SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 29 March.

⁴⁴KNA DC/Nyeri/2/7/2: Labor Census, 1936; KNA DC/Ny/2/1/13: Registry of natives in employment, 1938.

⁴⁵c.f. Kitching, *Class and Economic Change*, 251.

⁴⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/2/7/2: Labor Census, 1936. The statistics that follow are drawn from this report.

⁴⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1936.

⁴⁸Cowen. "Differentiation in a Kenya Location." 52-53.

⁴⁹Clerking was relatively less profitable for the literate in 1936: 33 Nyeri men worked as clerks, earning about 40/ per month--15 shillings less than in 1930.

Those with less than three acres of land, Cowen found, usually worked as laborers, earning from 8/ to 30/ per month in 1936. Land pressure and low wages combined to impoverish small holding men.

Wage-earning men's absence from home for work meant that women occupied an even more central role in domestic farming in the late 1930s. It was difficult for male laborers to come home regularly: wage work took them farther afield and made transport home expensive. Danson Kamenju, for instance, failed the elementary school exam at Mahiga in the late 1920s and went to Kitale to look for work.⁵⁰ He found a job paying 15/ per month; later he planted a garden and worked on a settler's farm for 6/ per month. He remembered that he could manage to return home only when his mother was on the verge of death, due to the high costs involved in travel. The same was true for wage workers in Nairobi. Some 3,628 Nyeri men worked in Nairobi in 1936, earning 29,572/ . They earned markedly lower wages than in 1930, and were asked to pay higher rents for boarding. Many Nairobi workers slept in crowded rooms and ate inferior food to make ends meet.⁵¹ Some turned to prostitutes for food, shelter and sex, making those at home worry about young men's delinquency.

Male wage workers' absence from home, their inability to accumulate land and wealth, made both men and women argue about gender. Nyeri district was gripped in a crisis of immorality in the late 1930s, when Tumutumu's church courts were flooded with cases of sexual indiscipline. I suggest below that the moral chaos manifested rural people's horror at capitalism's assault on the propertied basis of Gikuyu masculinity and femininity. For wealthy men's attack on small holding men's land was, also, an attack on their masculinity, an assault on the material basis by which men proved their moral majority. With small holding men's masculinity in question, with the propertied basis of

⁵⁰Oral interview: Danson Kamenju.

⁵¹Luise White. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 80-83.

gendered order in flux, men and women argued about sex to define new expectations of morality. Wealthy men spoke loudest, in colonial courts. They blamed the chaos on uncontrolled women and delinquent men, and used law to protect households from dissipation. Women, for their part, elaborated a contrary theory of explanation, one that pinned the chaos on men's hypocrisy. All sides argued over moral conduct, intimately tied to questions of property rights, to come to terms with the agony of class formation.

Ruling relations

The commodity trade inspired male landlords to expand cultivation in the mid-1930s. But it is important to recognize that commodity profits also benefited some women, who invested their labor in wattle and grew maize in their gardens for sale. Women dominated the work of harvesting wattle in Nyeri, stripping the trees at 20 cents per tree in the mid-1930s. Their wages exceeded those of male workers on white settlers' farms.⁵² Women were also responsible for carrying the bark from peasant farms to railheads at Karatina or Nyeri, there to be weighed by government inspectors. By the early 1940s there were "women's days" set aside at the Karatina wattle market.⁵³ Other women traded in maize and beans, carrying farm produce to markets in Karatina and elsewhere for sale. Their maize, exported on the rail line, fed peasant families in the southern Gikuyu district of Kiambu.⁵⁴ Some women became seamstresses: Tumutumu enjoyed a sewing revival in the mid-1930s, with hundreds of women crowding "domestic science" classes. The calico dresses and shirts they produced sold widely: by 1938 missionaries reported that skins were a thing of the past, that everyone was wearing cotton.

⁵²Cowen, "Wattle Production in Central Province," 18-19.

⁵³Cowen, "Wattle Production in Central Province," 61-62.

⁵⁴See Claire Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way: Women, Men and Trade in the Nairobi Area, 1890-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) for a history of women's trade in Nyeri and elsewhere.

Women's increased participation in the economy of cash made men worry about morality. Tumutumu's seamstresses were to blame. One LNC representative, a mission reader, put the case for banning skirts this way in 1935:

The elders must stop the girls from becoming whores. We were punished in 1930 by locusts and in 1933 by dry weather. What I want is for girls, if they wear European clothes, to have them down to the ankle. I do not want the girls to wear their clothes halfway like the Akamba.⁵⁵

The LNC resolved that chiefs should bring any girls wearing short skirts before the native tribunal. Tumutumu's worrisome skirts were part of a larger crisis of morality in the late 1930s. Church courts were flooded with accusations of sexual indiscipline: 74 unmarried young men and women were accused of sexual indiscretions in 1935. 16 cases resulted in pregnancies.⁵⁶ In 1938 33 young people were accused, with 14 pregnancies.⁵⁷ Given the relative absence of sex cases in earlier years, the numbers are remarkable.

What was at the bottom of these apparently widespread accusations of sexual immorality? As with many other things, Gikuyu were not of one mind about the sexual chaos. Their differences illuminate their contending moral projects. For elders and prosperous men, whose theory of gender I take up here, the crisis reflected young men and women's indiscipline, their refusal to commit themselves to Gikuyu posterity. Young wage-earning men, elders thought, were unmanly: their lack of land attested to their indolence, their self-indulgence. Cash-dealing women were in elders' thought similarly indisciplined: their ambition threatened to dissolve men's households. Both young men and women in any case lacked land, the seal of adulthood that made for diligent moral citizenship. Condemning both young men and women from their

⁵⁵SA 1/G/6: South Nyeri Local Native Council, 29 January 1935.

⁵⁶TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama gia Tumutumu: cumulative entries for 1935.

⁵⁷TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama gia Tumutumu: cumulative entries for 1938.

indiscipline, then, elders sought to govern them in law. Colonial law became for elders the “ruling relation” by which gendered order was (supposed) to be maintained.⁵⁸

Tumutumu’s moral chaos was, in part, a crisis of masculinity. For masculinity, as I intimated in previous chapters, was an achievement, an accomplishment earned out of sweated labor on the land. Young men who cleared land, rendering the wilderness into cultivated civilization, earned the right to adulthood, the right to marry and beget children. The noun *hinya* bound manhood to work. Early dictionaries offer *hinya* as “strength” and “power”; to “strengthen” was to “increase *hinya*.”⁵⁹ *Hinya* was the sort of strength needed for labor. It was also the achievement of masculinity: dictionaries also define it as “semen,” the “male powers of procreation.” Gikuyu made intimate connections between labor and manhood, between the work needed to produce value out of the forest and the accomplishment of masculinity.

Rural capitalism in the 1930s threatened to sever the connections between labor and manhood, making it difficult for men to parlay their sweat into masculinity. Land shortages were at the bottom of their worries: as I showed above, class formation and litigation made it difficult for some small holders to get access to productive land. The land crisis was part of a larger crisis adulthood for young men. Migrant laborers in the mid and late 1930s found it increasingly difficult to get married: lacking cash, they had little hope of meeting bridewealth payments. Missionary and oral evidence agree that the minimum fee paid by most young men in 1939 was 30 to 40 goats, plus additional cattle.⁶⁰ Fathers often demanded more for educated daughters, hoping to recoup costs of

⁵⁸I here make reference to Linza Manicom’s “Ruling Relations: Rethinking State and Gender in South African History,” in *Journal of African History* 33 (1992): 441-465. Other scholars have similarly recognized the role of “customary law” in chastening women. For a recent work, see Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992).

⁵⁹Definitions offered in L. Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 49; and A.W. MacGregor, *English-Kikuyu Dictionary* (London: SPCK, 1904), 163.

⁶⁰SA 1/A/40: Barlow to DC South Nyeri, 1 February 1939; oral interview: Grace Kanini Njeru.

schooling. Some young men invested as much as 800/ in marriages in 1940.⁶¹ Wage-earning sons of small holders could scarcely afford such payments. Desperate for wives, some young men dallied with readers' daughters. Many of the cases heard in Tumutumu's courts involved young men with little hope of raising cash for brideprice. Nahashon Kihuria, for example, worked as a laborer near Kianjogu. He was accused of sleeping with a girl in 1935; more, he had failed to put sufficient cash into church offering envelopes for several years.⁶² He was banned from communion, and ordered to pay restitution. Illicit sex was an act of desperation, reflecting young men's inability to earn their way to marriage.

Missionaries and Gikuyu elders agreed that young wage earners needed careful controlling. Missionaries were worried about Christian reputation: they asked elders to treat the sin like "the smell of a stinking corpse."⁶³ Doctors convened meetings in 1936 on sex hygiene, inveighing against prolific behavior and reminding church people of the virtues of a "busy mind and body."⁶⁴ Senior readers were more worried about property than immorality. Church elders insisted that indiscreet men causing pregnancies should pay a high fine to offended fathers. Only then would either party be readmitted to communion.⁶⁵ In cases that were difficult to adjudicate elders sometimes asked offending young men to take a *muuma* oath to determine guilt.⁶⁶ Elderly men used church law to call young men to discipline, demanding sexual continence through Christian sanction.

Other rural men invested cash to hold young wage-workers accountable. In 1937 Tumutumu readers and Nairobi wage workers formed the "Tumutumu Mercy Union" with 224 members.⁶⁷ It solicited funds from some 30 outschools in Nyeri, most located

⁶¹TT Coci ya Tumutumu minute for 14 September 1940.

⁶²TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama già Tumutumu: minutes for 16 March 1935.

⁶³SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1935, entry for 18 May 1935.

⁶⁴SA II/C/41: "Committee wa Sex Hygiene," meeting 13-15 May 1936.

⁶⁵SA I/Y/5: Presbytery meeting, 12 October 1933.

⁶⁶TT Ministers file: Isaac Gakui, Tambaya school to elders of Kangaita parish, 13 December 1940.

⁶⁷SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1937.

in Mathira division. The Union asking prosperous farmers "pull together" (*ngwataniro*) to ensure migrant men's moral well-being, promising to build a hostel for Nyeri men in Nairobi.⁶⁸ Rural men's investment would keep wage earners away from prostitutes' lairs. Migrants from Tumutumu were to report to the hostel within seven days; if they failed to do so the TTMU would take no responsibility for them.⁶⁹ The Union promised to pay to bring the bodies of those men who expired in Nairobi back home to Nyeri. More, it promised to be certain that their wives and children also returned to Nyeri, guarding widows from falling into prostitution. The Union was rural men's effort to civilize the demoralizing wilderness of Nairobi. Their cash investments called wage-earning men to order, and disciplined women whose widowhood might make them prostitutes.

Young men's indiscretions made older readers doubt their discipline, their self-mastering adulthood. But wayward wives presented the more intimate threat to elders' homes. Men worried that women's working after cash would lead them to prostitution. They argued out their case against female traders in the church courts. In 1934 Njoroge wa Wariu, married for two years to Beatrice, reported that his wife had gone to Nairobi for trade. He thought she had become a prostitute.⁷⁰ Wariu was not alone: numerous readers in the late 1930s and early 40s argued before the Tumutumu court that women's cash would lead to sexual immorality. In 1945 Clement Kiamiru, married for several years to Jelious, reported on his wife's failings in this way:

She went to Nairobi having been urged otherwise. She also refused to accompany the husband from Kiambi. She went to a wedding even when Clement urged against it. Someone told Clement he had found her inside a wattle forest with someone else. She even refuses to give him food or water...When Jelious sold milk or even dresses Clement could not get any of the proceeds. Clement had

⁶⁸SA I/G/1: Wilson Ikamba to Calderwood, 20 July 1937.

⁶⁹SA I/G/1: Tumutumu Mercy Union, *Mawatho*, 1937.

⁷⁰TT Mbuku ya macira, kiama gia Tumutumu: minute for 18 August 1934.

gone to take some fermented porridge and when he came back he found she had escorted someone else...⁷¹

Trade brought seamstresses like Jelious into intimate contact with cash, making husbands worry about prostitution. More, cash made women greedy, unwilling to divide profit with husbands. Men thought that wives made jealous with cash would sap male fertility with sorcery. In 1940, Duncan Thinji worried that his wife, a trader, had caused him to become sexually impotent. He called a *mundu mugo*, a 'witchdoctor', to his household and asked him to determine if his wife had laid a wasting curse on him. The *mugo* divined that the wife was not at fault.⁷² Thinji received no reprimand from the Kirk Session for his dalliance with the *mugo*. The worried husbands and fathers of the elders' court could agree that it made sense to be careful of women who trafficked with cash. Their labor, and convinced refusal to share profits with husbands, made them morally suspect.

Anxious men hoped that legislation would control greedy women of property. Their attention focused on widows, who Gikuyu elders regarded as being particularly suspect.⁷³ In 1931 the government's new Christian Marriage Ordinance legislated that Christian widows could inherit their husbands' property on their death.⁷⁴ Tumutumu readers were indignant, reported missionaries. Male relatives were supposed to inherit the land and family of a dead landholder, ensuring that the property of the family stayed within the patriline.⁷⁵ Widows who inherited husbands' land threatened to divest *mbari* of their property, making it impossible for male relatives to ensure that the land would not be sold outside the family. More, widows who inherited land were uncontrollable.

⁷¹TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 21 April 1945.

⁷²TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama gia Tumutumu: entry for 5 August 1940.

⁷³Asante men were similarly worried about widows, for similar reasons: see Jean Allman, "Rounding up Spinners: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante," in *Journal of African History* 37 (1996): 195-214.

⁷⁴SA I G/7: Calderwood, "Native Christian Marriage and Divorce Ordinance, 1930," comments.

⁷⁵SA I C.8: Barlow to Arthur, 9 December 1931.

Angry Tumutumu elders wondered what would be done with widows who took children to Nairobi, there to become prostitutes.⁷⁶ Propertied women needed careful handling lest they auction off *mbari* posterity.

Worried men thought taxation might solve the widow problem. In 1934 chiefs and readers cooperated to ask the Secretary of State for the Colonies to abolish the hut tax.⁷⁷ They wanted a flat poll tax of 15/ assessed on all adult men. Readers thought the poll tax would keep indiscreet widows from dissipating *mbari* property. The hut tax, Tumutumu men reasoned, made women enter prostitution: widows taxed for deceased husbands' huts raised cash by selling themselves, and their land, in Nairobi.⁷⁸ The poll tax, assessed only on males, would save widows from the demoralizing demands of cash. If government would not abolish hut tax, requested the readers, it should ensure that the property of a dead landholder would be returned to his patriline, so that the widow would not be "asked for money year after year until she is forced to sell the land." Taxation threatened to induce widows to sell off *mbari* property. Ambitious widows were better left without property: readers wanted government to provide them with food and shelter once their property had been taken from them. But government failed to heed readers' warnings. In 1937 the DC decided to extend the poll tax to widows.⁷⁹ Missionaries reported that many *mbari* landlords refused to help widows pay the tax.⁸⁰ Male hopes for a prosperous posterity demanded that *mbari* guard property from dangerously uncontrollable women. In 1937 the Tumutumu Mercy Union, rural readers' effort to manage labor migrants' morality, promised in its constitution to return the wife and children of deceased migrants to Nyeri.⁸¹ Men, both migrants and propertied farmers, agreed that widowed women should be carefully managed.

⁷⁶SA I/G/7: Andu a Tumutumu, comments on Native Christian Marriage and Divorce Ordinance.

⁷⁷SA I/G/6: South Nyeri LNC meeting, 18 January 1934.

⁷⁸SA I/C/12 and 13: Tumutumu *athomi* to DC Nyeri, December 1934.

⁷⁹KNA DC/Nyeri:2/4/3: DC South Nyeri to PC Central Province, 16 July 1937.

⁸⁰KNA DC/Nyeri:2/4/13: Barlow to DC South Nyeri, 27 October 1937.

⁸¹SA I/G-1: Tumutumu Mercy Union, General Rules and Regulations, 1937.

Readers' worries over land and posterity led them to redefine lineage relations with propertied widows. Worries over out-of-control women also made male readers rethink bridewealth payments. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, male readers had from the earliest days at Tumutumu offered sacks of sugar, tea, and cash to in-laws when marrying. They argued that the new commodities made family relations as cordial as exchanges of livestock and beer had for their fathers. But in the 1930s, men worried that cash bridewealth would lead women astray. Jonathan Mwea voiced their worries in an LNC meeting:

The educated natives and mission adherents suffered most (from runaway wives) because they had greater difficulty in getting the dowry returned. This was because it was not the custom for mission adherents to give their father in law the traditional beer when asking for his daughter but cash instead and if the girl ran away the father in law would repudiate the obligation to return dowry saying you did not marry by our old Kikuyu custom but by mission custom...besides the girls who went to school were much more inclined to run away than girls in skins. They wanted better houses and better clothes and better living conditions so they ran away to towns or non-native areas to other men who had paid no dowry e.g. the house boys or the Swahili or Kavirondo or just went from one man to another like a prostitute...⁸²

Wives made giddy with dresses were likely to waste men's property. And without the visible proof of goats paid to fathers-in-law, without tangible evidence that bridewealth payments had been properly rendered, readers worried that their wives were dangerously uncontrollable. Cash in bridewealth made it difficult for men to adjudicate women's belonging.

By 1938 worried readers thought they had found an answer to the problem of cash in bridewealth. The LNC resolved that all bridewealth payments, stock and cash, should be written in a brideprice register.⁸³ They were putting an imprimatur on long-established

⁸²SA LG/6: South Nyeri LNC, 14 October 1930.

⁸³KNA DC/Nyeri/1/3/2: Political Record Book: Baraza at Nyeri, 26-27 August 1938.

practice among readers: as early as 1932 the young evangelist Charles Muhoro had tracked the number of goats, ewes, rams and other items he had paid in bridewealth in a personal ledger.⁸⁴ The ethnographer Jomo Kenyatta thought the brideprice register was a common practice, listing it among the “tradition” rites accompanying marriage.⁸⁵ Bridewealth registered, careful records of cash exchanged and stock slaughtered, made it easier to determine women’s position within families. The LNC elders in 1938 set guidelines for the cash value of goats and sheep, and ruled that a woman who had failed to bear sons could not be returned to her natal home. Law made it simple for husbands and fathers to position uncontrolled women. The brideprice law also led to more material profit for fathers: church elders from throughout Gikuyuland resolved in 1943 that no limits should be put on brideprice for educated girls.⁸⁶ They thought high brideprice would encourage young men to earn high salaries.

With women out of control, with young men undisciplined, wealthy elders sought to restore moral discipline in law. Bridewealth registers, anti-widow legislation, fines for sexual impropriety, all were rural elders’ efforts to manage moral disorder. Faced with a dangerously fluid world, in which young men no longer looked like men and where wives looked to destroy household order, elders sought to create relations of rule in law. As I shall explain at more length in Chapter Nine, these legal efforts at social control gained more force in the 1940s, when post-war disorder brought new pressures to bear on elders’ conservative theory of morality.

Women were by no means without a voice in this struggle. As elsewhere in Africa, Gikuyu women in church courts and other venues argued forcefully against senior men’s attempts to corral them into subservience with law and custom. They argued to

⁸⁴Charles Muhoro private papers, in possession of Muthoni Mwihiaki, Tumutumu: Register, entry for 1932. For Muhoro’s wedding, c.f. Brown, “Tumutumu Wedding Reception,” in *Kikuyu News* 126 (Dec. 1933).

⁸⁵Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953 (first published 1938)), 169.

⁸⁶TT Conference Reports file: Meeting of Christian elders from Fort Hall, Embu, and Nyeri at Kahuhia, 23 August 1943.

forward their own theory of moral order. The evidence is thin, more circumstantial than conclusive for this period. But it seems that ambitious women replied to senior men's accusations of impropriety with a creatively insurgent theory of male culpability. Faced with the evidence of social decay, women found in the church's Women's Guild a rhetoric with which to argue with men about morality and civic duty, a vocabulary with which also to criticize men's delinquency.

Women's virtue, women's rhetoric

Cash seemed to men to make delinquents of women. By creative acts of rhetorical judo women reversed men's theory of sexual disorder, turning the blame for moral indiscipline squarely on men's inability to control themselves. Nyeri women used their commodity profits to fund children's education, and invested in cotton clothing and maternity education to ensure that children would be properly cared for. They thought their diligent investments in Gikuyu posterity would prove their virtue to suspicious husbands. More, they made domestic work into a vocabulary of condemnation, a means of proving men culpable for the social disorder of the 1930s. In church courts and, more compellingly, through the Women's Guild, women called men to account for their sins. Christian domesticity was a vocabulary for women to talk back to men.

Pilloried by senior men as prostitutes, abandoned by junior men who left home for work, rural women used the cash they earned in the commodity trade to foster discipline among children. Tumutumu introduced fees throughout its system of rural schools in 1936.⁸⁷ Headmasters charged 50 cents per term for even the youngest children, hoping to raise funds to pay teachers. Oral evidence indicates that mothers often took responsibility for paying these new fees. Ngunu wa Huthu, for instance, began school in the early 1930s at age seven. He remembers that his mother was responsible for his fees:

⁸⁷SA I/Y/3: Kikuyu Mission Council, 17 January 1936.

My father was poor. Mother was paying fees which were 50 cents; chalk and slates were free. My father had been at Tumutumu hospital as a patient and had observed what was going on there and told me to go to school even with nothing to pay my fee with. He did not have cows, only goats.⁸⁸

Impoverished men, lacking cash, relied on wives' produce to pay for school fees. Gerard Gachau King'ori, a student at Mahiga school in the mid-1930s, remembers how his mother saved him from a crisis of cash:

In 1935 we were told we would start paying (teachers') salaries ourselves. Some students like me stopped from going to school because there was no money, what was there was only food like yams, sweet potatoes which were not for sale. Food was exchanged in major market places like Gakindu or Kamakwa. Then it was barter trade. So when fees were introduced we were supposed to pay 30 cent per term but it could not be found. Like me I spent three weeks at home without going to school. So my mother would go to Kamakwa where money could be found...from Europeans who had coffee plantations at Nyeri and Kieni. So we went with my mother to sell yams on one market day and we sold. We sold our goods for 7 cents. I would go with her to carry the baby for her. We went for two other markets to get 30 cents. Then I went back to school. After that term my father knew money was needed to pay for education and would send his wives to Kamakwa.⁸⁹

Mothers' produce fed sons' ambitions. Faced with men's inability to provide for families, rural women invested their sweat to send children to school. Tumutumu's post-depression "revival" in church and school attendance was driven by mothers' labor. Mary wa Miano, a farmer of beans near the forest in Iruri sublocation, remembered that she sold beans at market for several successive days to raise sufficient funds for her sons' school fees in the 1930s.⁹⁰ Susan Kirigu Njebwara remembered sending her son to school with profits from cabbages raised in her garden. She also purchased his trousers,

⁸⁸Oral interview: Ngunu wa Huthu.

⁸⁹Oral interview: Gerard Gachau King'ori.

⁹⁰Oral interview: Mary wa Miano.

protecting her son from the sneers of better-clothed students.⁹¹ Mothers managed family crisis by parlaying commodity profits in children's education.

Commodity profits allowed women to provide for childrens' learning. Other women invested their labor in sewing, hoping that clothes would stitch together families and provide cash to finance education. Tumutumu enjoyed a sewing revival in the mid-1930s, as women and girls flocked to domestic science classes. There were 200 to 300 women under instruction in sewing in Nyeri district in 1934.⁹² By 1935, the number had risen to 900.⁹³ Missionary teachers remarked on their diligence: women attended even when they did not understand the English of the instructor.⁹⁴ The listening women saw a prosperous future in missionary needles: they sewed bags, dresses, bookcovers and other articles and sold them for cash.⁹⁵ In 1932 the Women's Guild hired their own domestic instructor, Doris Nyambura, paying her 120/ per year to teach classes in sewing and cookery at Tumutumu's outschools.⁹⁶ By 1936 there were six such "parish sisters," all of them paid at 10/ per month.⁹⁷ Sewing profited ambitious women.

Grace Kanini Njeru was one of the first domestic instructors at Tumutumu, employed in 1940 and paid 12/ per month to teach sewing and hygiene classes in Tumutumu's outschools. She remembered that women eagerly seized on sewing to multiply cash profit and fabricate clothed respectability.

They used to like domestic science and because most used to wear skin clothes they started wearing modern clothes. By then people who liked the word of God could stop wearing the skins and started wearing clothes. I taught them how to sew them and to repair them after wearing out. Those who learned sewing brought materials to sew with hands. We taught them how to cut and sew the clothes.

⁹¹Oral interview: Susan Kirigu Njebwara.

⁹²SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1934.

⁹³SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1935.

⁹⁴SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1931.

⁹⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1936.

⁹⁶SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1933, entry for 21 January.

⁹⁷SA I/B/11 and 12: Garriock, "The training and work of African parish sisters at Tumutumu," January 1936.

Also how to repair them. They got money by working on farms and with 2 shillings you could buy a cloth. People who had learned like teachers could give people work and pay them.⁹⁸

Sewing promised to convert women's diligent labor into family profit. And cotton clothing in the late 1930s was popular, remarkably so. In 1938 missionaries commented that, seemingly within months, women and men throughout the Nyeri reserve had discarded their skins, putting on cotton instead.⁹⁹ The Scots thought it a proof of civilization: at parish conventions, wrote Barlow,

it is amazing to note the changes that have come into the outward appearance of the people. In place of the dingy skin garments of the women, and the paint and feathers and dirty, scanty coverings of the men, all are now becoming arrayed in clothes that are clean and bright. Even the village girls have all discarded their traditional goatskins and robe themselves in white calico. And above all one is struck by the eager, open happy expressions of their faces...¹⁰⁰

Missionaries saw a cultural shift in the white calico of women and girls. Based on evidence that I outline below, the seamstresses of Tumutumu had different goals in mind. They argued that their diligent labor in farming and sewing guarded Gikuyu posterity against men's moral delinquency. Women's diligent efforts to clothe the Gikuyu body became for them a rhetoric with which to make claims about discipline on men. Christian domesticity, the household disciplines of cotton clothing and soap, shamed men with evidence of female virtue. For women as for readers of a generation earlier, soap was a vocabulary of citizenship and moral virtue.

For Gikuyu women had posterity on their minds in the late 1930s. Many thought mission education, and medicine, would protect families from social disorder. Nyeri women came in increasing numbers for maternity care at Tumutumu's dispensaries

⁹⁸Oral interview: Grace Kanini Njeru.

⁹⁹Brown. "Changed Days," in *Kikuyu News* 147 (March 1939).

¹⁰⁰SA L/B:7: Tumutumu annual report, 1937.

throughout the 1930s: 264 women were confined in the hospital in 1933; 442 in 1937.¹⁰¹ Missionaries were embarrassed at their lack of facilities to accommodate the maternity revival.¹⁰² Many were "heathen" women, "often very heathen," remarked the doctor.¹⁰³ Medicine protected women during their most intimate moments of familial danger. A few women converted maternal care into personal profit. Doctors trained ex-dormitory girls in midwifery, and helped them to set up rural maternity centers near their homes. There were three of these centers in 1936; by 1938 there were 8.¹⁰⁴ Rural midwives charged 3/- per delivery, and purchased supplies from the hospital.¹⁰⁵ It was a popular undertaking: midwives delivered 82 babies in 1937, and 347 in 1940.¹⁰⁶ Some women opened maternal centers in their homes, unsupervised by mission doctors.¹⁰⁷ Their success testifies to the extent of Nyeri women's investment in maternal care.¹⁰⁸

Diligently committing themselves to posterity, then, Gikuyu women argued that men's delinquency, not women's cash, was what generated social order. We can learn something of the way they argued in church court minutes. Women argued before church elders that social disorder was a problem of husbands who lusted after foreign women. Salome Kagume said as much in 1935. Her husband, Isaaka, had gone to Nairobi for wage work. Salome accused him of going around with prostitutes.¹⁰⁹ Salome was not alone in her worries about delinquent husbands. In 1938 Mariko Macaria accused Jakubu Kibuku of adultery and sorcery before the Kirk Session.¹¹⁰ Macaria was a brother to

¹⁰¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual reports, 1933 and 1937.

¹⁰²SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1935.

¹⁰³SA I/C/9: Brown at Tumutumu to Arthur, 5 July 1935.

¹⁰⁴SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual reports, 1936 and 1938.

¹⁰⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1938.

¹⁰⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1940.

¹⁰⁷SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1938.

¹⁰⁸For histories of midwifery in Africa, c.f. Heather Bell, "Midwifery Training and Female Circumcision in the Inter-war Anglo-Egyptian Sudan," in *Journal of African History* 39 (1998): 293-312; for India, c.f. Geraldine Forbes, "Managing midwifery in India," in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 152-72.

¹⁰⁹TT Kiama gia coci, minute for 16 March 1935.

¹¹⁰TT Mihuti church committee, minute for 6 April 1938.

Kibuku's wife. Marital infidelity divided families, and made some worry about sorcery. Jakubu refused to talk about the matter before the church court: such things were too private to be discussed openly. The ex-dormitory resident Jeanie Maruguru accused her husband of secret malice in 1930: she complained that he had invited singers of *muthirigu* to attend their wedding.¹¹¹ Public humiliation fractured marital trust: she asked for a quick divorce. Women hoped that the church court would reveal men's infidelity--and protect feminine virtue. Kanuthu, an unbaptised girl accused of sexual indiscretion with Kahiu wa Ndegwa in 1934, maintained that she had been menstruating throughout the period when she was supposed to have been cohabiting with her lover.¹¹² Besides, she argued, Kahiu's appetite was at fault: he had repeatedly told her that he was hungry, asking for sex. Kanuthu offered to be examined by a doctor to prove that she had resisted his hungry advances. Public dispute over sex and menstrual blood might guard feminine virtue from male avarice. Literacy could play a similar role. Sara Wanjiku appeared before the church court in 1934 with a letter from the Presbyterian pastor in Nairobi, attesting that she had left all of the affairs of prostitution.¹¹³ She was readmitted to communion, once elders had verified the signature. Writing, and carefully reasoned debate, allowed women to protect their reputations and prove men's delinquency.

Boldly diagnosing moral degeneracy as a problem of male resolve, women worked to rebuild families in the late 1930s. They did so in church. Nyeri women joined the church in increasing numbers in the 1930s.¹¹⁴ By 1939 they were the majority in most Sunday services.¹¹⁵ Girls' attendance also rose in school: in 1939 they made up almost 40 percent of the role.¹¹⁶ They were in the majority in the lowest two classes of Tumutumu' schools.

¹¹¹ TT Kirk Session minute for 15 March 1930.

¹¹² TT Kiamwangi church committee minute for 6 July 1934.

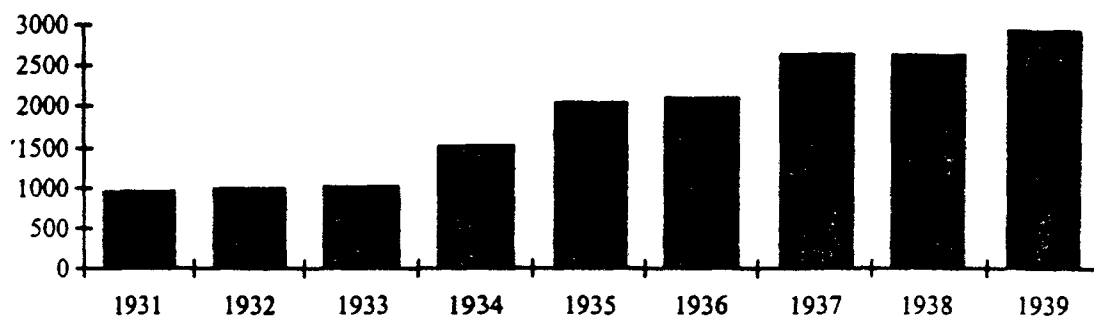
¹¹³ TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama gia Tumutumu, minute for 2 July 1934.

¹¹⁴ SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1936.

¹¹⁵ SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1939.

¹¹⁶ SA II/E:29: Dickson, "Girls' Education: statistics," July 1942.

Chart 4: Girls' attendance in Tumutumu schools, 1931-39



Source: SA II/E/29: Dickson, "Girls' education", 1942

Missionaries thought it a problem of men's apathy: women were supposed to be more faithful in church. But it was more than faith that brought women to church. Some of the new members were junior wives of polygamists. Church elders, all monogamists, argued about what to do with them. In 1934 Tumutumu elders asked the Kenya Presbytery to admit junior wives to communion.¹¹⁷ Christian wives, they reasoned, caused trouble with polygamist husbands: they refused to make beer, would not be beaten, and would never fail to go to church. Wives who had become Christians had married Christ. The church grew out of marital discord in polygamous men's households.

For some women and girls, church membership was a means to argue with husbands about marital obligations. Some women joined the church to avoid marriage to unwanted partners. Wairimu wa Gatu, for instance, joined the church at Magutu in 1938 after her mother sought to marry her off to an old man.¹¹⁸ Missionaries reported that several girls and women joined the church in this manner.¹¹⁹ They often interceded on the behalf of the runaways. Church membership guarded girls from parents' greed.

¹¹⁷ TT Stanley Gathigira, Arthur Tutu and Charles Kareri to Moderator Presbytery of Kenya, 7 February 1934.

¹¹⁸ SA I/A 40: Barlow to DC, 7 Sept. 1938.

¹¹⁹ SA I/B.7: Tumutumu annual report, 1932.

Bernice Kiritu wa Kimaru remembered she ran away from home several times in the late 1930s to avoid her fathers' plans:

I didn't want to get married, I would have wanted to go on with education because my brothers and sisters were readers. I resisted in vain to get married. I resisted by hiding in some secret place...I used to run to my relatives and then a time came when I had to go to run to the school. So after running away from that man I went back to school, where I had a good time being guarded by the teachers.¹²⁰

Tumutumu's schools and churches prospered from the marital discord in the late 1930s. Women hoped to guard themselves from men's malice by turning Christianity into a grammar of gendered virtue. The Women's Guild was the cockpit of female ambition. The Guild was formed in 1920 by seventeen women, many of them young wives of early readers.¹²¹ They promised to devote a portion of their garden to support the Guild's activities: progress took hard work. Guild membership shot up in the 1930s: weekly meetings at Tumutumu's outschools drew hundreds of women in 1930.¹²² In 1933 the Guild drew 1,000 women to a Christmas meeting.¹²³ By 1935 there were standing committees of women in each of Tumutumu's parishes.¹²⁴ Each of them grew vegetables for guild use on a portion of their garden, and used the proceeds to support woman evangelists who toured the reserves teaching cooking, hygiene and sewing. Doris Nyambura, itinerant sewing instructor, was paid 120/ by the Tumutumu Guild in 1933.¹²⁵ Women's farming underwrote Christian evangelism.

Guild women hoped their Christian virtues would protect them from husbands' malice; more, they thought that their productive cooperation would reknit Gikuyu

¹²⁰Oral interview: Bernice Kiritu wa Kimaru.

¹²¹SA I/C/12 and 13: Margaret Malcomson to Garriock, n.d. (but 1937); Tumutumu annual report for 1921, in *Kikuyu News* 80 (June 1922).

¹²²SA I/Z/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1930, entry for 6 December.

¹²³SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1933.

¹²⁴TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 28 December 1935.

¹²⁵SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1933, entry for 21 January.

morality. For sewing was not simply an instrumental means of making profit. In their needles and thread Tumutumu's seamstresses seem to have thought themselves stitching together a new Gikuyu polity. Their argument for private virtue began at home. Women who joined the guild swore to uphold domestic order. The 1934 guild constitution asked new members to promise to "do their work with intelligence," to "read the Bible every day, and pray every day," to bring others to church, and to remember poor people, the sick, sad people, and people who do not know the matter of God.¹²⁶ Private virtue led to public deeds of mercy. In 1935 Doris Nyambura, president of the women's guild and itinerant evangelist, outlined the domestic responsibilities of guild members in public speeches, carefully written out in advance:

Get up early in the morning. Pray and read part of the book of God and put on the clothes of the day and open the windows. Heat up water for tea or porridge or food like bananas, sugar cane or bread, and milk for children and water to wash faces and even the children themselves. Sweep and remove the leaves the leaves and look around the household to see if it is clean. Wash the face and arms and hands and wash the children then read them he Bible. Also pray with the children before washing. Drink cai and bananas, sugar cane or bread. This work is to be done before 8 a.m.¹²⁷

Nyambura went on to detail women's activities throughout the day, laying particular emphasis on sewing and mending of children's clothing. The women's guild expected civil labor of women. It sounded like hard work. And indeed, Nyambura's recitation of women's labor was meant to be heard, read aloud at Guild meetings and in conferences with male church elders. This gets to the heart of the matter. By loudly talking about their work, by reminding husbands of the labor they committed to households, church women put men to shame, burdening them with evidence of female integrity.

¹²⁶SA II/C/47: Tumutumu women's guild constitution, n.d. (but 1934).

¹²⁷SA II/C/47: Nyambura, "Maundu ma guteithia atumia wira wao wa nyumba-ini ciao kwage mateta." n.d. (but 1934-35).

Guild members drove the point home at a 1937 convention, held on the Tumutumu church grounds. They endured long lectures from male church leaders about the model of a God-fearing woman, with good cooking and how to welcome important visitors figuring prominently in men's speeches.¹²⁸ Men hoped female domesticity would serve male ambition. But at the end of the conference, the assembled women pointedly reminded church elders that the problem of domestic indiscipline was a male issue. They passed three resolutions:

1. There are some wrong things done by men and should be corrected.
2. The elders who are family heads should meet and should be notified of their mistakes as they destroy their families.
3. Women asked that: a) their workload should be lessened. b) they should be allowed to travel to see the hospitality of other women. c) cooking utensils and other cutlery should be looked into. Items such as this should be sufficient. The members of the church should look into these resolutions so that Christians can set examples for others. See Exodus 5:14.¹²⁹

The guild members closed their resolutions with the pointed Biblical reminder that "you are the light of the world." It was meant to shame men. Women reminded male church leaders of their failure to uphold domestic order, of their delinquent whoring after wealth. Women's public rehearsals of private labor shamed men with feminine accomplishment, and offered a vocabulary of critique with which to criticize absent husbands. They hoped their laundry list would call young men to moral conduct. Idis Kahiga, woman evangelist during the 1930s, remembered preaching against youthful sexual indiscipline in this way:

I used to tell them to believe in the Lord as the source of all that is good, and they should leave the evil. We used to tell the youth to marry people they did not know. This is a blind man and a blind woman. Those two were virgins. They

¹²⁸TT Conference reports file: "The meeting of remembering women," 4-8 October 1937.

¹²⁹TT Conference reports file: "The meeting of remembering women," 4-8 October 1937.

would cultivate a land that was unused. It is in that unused land that you could harvest a good crop of potatoes and maize.¹³⁰

It made good sense to farm unused land in the late 1930s, especially when commodities were profitable and soil increasingly depleted. Women's Guild members' good sense reminded young men that the future took discipline, that the reward of sexual continence was a productive posterity. Sexual discipline, and hard work, promised common profit. Women's Guild members thought that the twinned disciplines of labor and marital accord would lead to common redemption from the dangerous incivility of sexual indiscipline.

Arguing powerfully that the future demanded commitment to sexual and household order, women used the vocabulary of Christianity to negotiate marital expectations with husbands. Grace Kanini wa Njeru, women's guild member and early domestic science instructor, protected herself from an unwanted suitor by reminding him of Christian morality:

He had looked for me. He came several times, and I turned down his proposals and I told him I do not know how to cultivate and also told him I cannot marry a non Christian. I also gave him another condition, I will never sleep at his place before getting married.¹³¹

The sexual discipline of the Women's Guild was for its members a language of moral integrity, and a means to negotiate with husbands. Other women sought out alternate means to negotiate marital expectations with husbands. They agreed to marry outside the church, using "traditional" marriage as a means of testing prospective husbands. Eleven Christian couples were disciplined for their "traditional" marriages in

¹³⁰Oral interview: Idis Kahiga.

¹³¹Oral interview: Grace Kanini Njeru.

1931; 16 in 1935.¹³² Men under church discipline for their non-Christian marriages complained to missionaries that wives were often the ones who did not want marriages solemnized in the church.¹³³ It made good sense to women to delay Christian marriage: "traditional" marriage vows allowed women to test prospective suitors' moral integrity. Christian marriage was difficult to dissolve: women who wanted a divorce could do so only on the grounds of husband's adultery.¹³⁴ And church courts, composed of male elders, rarely granted divorce to offended women. Christian marriage bound women closely to men, too close for the comfort of many. Many couples negotiated the demands of Christian marriage by going through two distinct ceremonies in the late 1930s, one a "traditional" wedding and the second, conducted some time later, a Christian one. Grace Gathoni, for instance, married the schoolteacher Jotham Muturi in a church wedding in December 1941. Well before their official marriage Muturi paid bridewealth in beer and goats to Gathoni's family. He built a cornered house and lived with her for two years before raising the funds to pay for the church wedding. Gathoni described the process in this way.

He was a teacher at Muthithi, and used to pass through our home at Ruthagati. He was a good young man who did not like many things with girls. When he expressed interest in me I stayed for a long time before answering him, trying to find if he really loved me. He never asked me to escort him because he wanted a woman and not a girl to escort him. After a long time I knew he was really interested in me...¹³⁵

Lengthy courtships, and illicit marriages, offered some women an opportunity to test men's moral resolve. "Traditional" weddings promised ambitious women proof against male irresponsibility, and guarded them from legal subservience to malicious

¹³²TT Mbuku ya maciira, kiama gia Tumutumu, summary of cases for 1931 and 1935.

¹³³SA I Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1932, entry for 18 November.

¹³⁴SA I G/7: Calderwood, "Native Christian Marriage and Divorce Ordinance of 1930," comments.

¹³⁵Oral interview: Grace Gathoni.

men. For young men, "traditional" marriages were a means of conserving cash, offering time to save prior to expensive Christian weddings. Muturi remembered working hard to raise funds for beer and livestock to pay to Gathoni's father. The church marriage, he remembered, was almost incidental after the work of bridewealth:

I did not inform my in-laws (about the church wedding). I just informed the elders of the Tumutumu church. My in-laws were not very much interested because already I had finalized with them and my wife was already living with me. They just came to the wedding as *athoni* (in laws). When we joined the church I became a church elder.¹³⁶

The double marriage of Muturi and Gathoni was a means by which both could prove their moral responsibility. For women like Gathoni, two-staged marriages were protection against men's domination, a means of negotiating with Christian patriarchy. African pastors seem to have understood and sympathized with young people's ambitions. Missionaries complained in 1933 that African pastors frequently married couples under discipline for their non-Christian weddings.¹³⁷ Christian discipline demanded that they be married quietly, without churchly ceremony: but pastors seem have agreed with hopeful couples that completed bridewealth payments were sufficient proof of moral integrity. In 1936 church elders wanted the rules changed to allow for the church marriage of those disciplined for their "traditional" marriages.¹³⁸ For church elders, young people's moral integrity, proved through investments of bridewealth, deserved the crown of Christian blessing.

Dual marriage was for women in the late 1930s a way to manage men's moral delinquency. Faced with proofs of men's malevolence, worried that marriage would make them slaves, women negotiated with patriarchy with the moral proofs of soap and

¹³⁶Oral interview: Jotham Muturi.

¹³⁷SA I.C/8: Barlow to Calderwood, 24 April 1933.

¹³⁸TT Kirk Session minute for 20 June 1936.

clothing. Christian domesticity was for Women's Guild members a vocabulary of domestic order, a means of talking about virtue and holding men to account.

The parable of the woman at the well, who was told about her most intimate sins by Jesus, drove the point home. Guild member Naomi wa Paulo used the parable to preach to men and women at a conference in 1939:

We too get into sins and look like this woman. For example, elders and preachers should be good people. But when (an elder) dies people can get into trouble. Such a person could be seen in church saying "people thought I was fine but that is not the case. I was a sinner, I would like all women with whom I have sinned to stand and if they refuse I will mention their names." They refused and he mentioned their names. He said all their sins. After finishing a fire from beneath burned him completely. People see us as being good but we do hide our sins like theft, hatred, hypocrisy, curses, being mean, laziness, jealousy etc. The reward for sins is death. Let's come to Jesus, to be made aware of our sins, and be given his water of life.¹³⁹

Naomi's parable reversed the gendered dynamic of the Biblical story, making her fictitious elder into the subject of Jesus' revelation. By such acts of gendered judo women like Naomi turned around the accusations and threats of elderly men. Male hypocrisy, secret sins men committed, was to blame for the social disorder of the 1930s. Men's refusal to come clean, their righteous refusal to confess, made them devilish. Male sins burned up social order. Christian domesticity offered worried women a way to manage marital infidelity. Naomi argued that the water of life could douse private discord with healing, bringing peace to marriages strained by moral dispute. Her argument made the sacrament of baptism a solution to marital discord. It is important to see in this women's reply to male accusations of sorcerous jealousy. The labored discipline of the women's guild, the private proof of dual marriage, the promise of Christian baptism all offered worried women a way to protect themselves against male malice. Christian civility managed gendered dispute for women.

¹³⁹ TT Conference reports file: Meeting of churches of Murang'a and Nyeri, 1939.

* * *

Naomi's argument about the water of life and men's culpability claimed that Christian baptism would guard households threatened by moral crisis. In 1935 David William Alexander, bishop of the African Orthodox Church, arrived in central Kenya to school prospective clergy of new "independent" church associations. He spent most of his years in central Kenya conducting baptisms. Historians have seen in Alexander's ministry the seeds of cultural nationalism. They may be right. But as I argue below, independent schooling was for Nyeri men and women first a moral project, a desperate effort among men and women divided at home to restore peace and healing. Independent churches promised the intimate combatants of Gikuyu household strife names, reputations with which to cool intimate marital disputes. The following chapter, then, is a moral history of independency.

Chapter Nine

The virtues of English Independent schooling in Nyeri district

In 1934 Muumbi wa Isaaka was baptized Monica Muumbi. She recalls that she took care about her name.

I chose the name Monica for myself because I used to study the Bible. I learned about the man called Augustine whose mother Monica used to pray for him very much. He later became a bishop and got saved. I found that his mother had done something good, that is praying...Me I cherished the idea of prayers and so the name would be a constant reminder.¹

English names resonated for Gikuyu worried at gender trouble. In 1934, the Tumutumu Kirk Session asked missionaries for a proper list of baptismal names, and recommended that catechumens should spell their names “the way the Englishmen spell them.”² Jobs were at stake in the growing wage economy: some readers worried that settler employers would laugh at improperly spelled English names.³ Rumors attested that malicious settlers put secret marks in the labor registers (*vipande*) of migrant workers, cursing them against future employment.⁴ Gikuyu workers signed off from work contracts by Europeans in the late 1930s called the process *rogoka*, to release from bewitchment.⁵ Labor contracts looked like a malicious spell. Properly-written English names guarded Gikuyu against sorcerous settlers and offered a means to work in a colonial economy that increasingly operated through record books, employment chits, and tax records. Baptismal names engaged Gikuyu with British bureaucracy. But as Monica’s account suggests, English names were also a means of managing household

¹Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

²TT Kirk Session minute book for 1934, entry for 14 July.

³TT Ministers file: Mariitwa ma kubatithio, n.d. (but 1932).

⁴SA I/D/5: Kikuyu Missionary Council, “Report to Kikuyu Provincial Subcommittee on native registration.” August 1933.

⁵L. Beecher, “A Kikuyu-English Dictionary” (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), held in SA I/Z/26.

conflict. The Christian history of St. Augustine's wanderings and repentance, evoked in his mother's name, reminded Monica that virtuous women called delinquent men to order. Like the Monica of the *Confessions*, 'Monica' cajoled men with public proof of female virtue, demonstrating Christian integrity and shaming wayward sons and husbands.

This chapter explains why English names were so salient in Gikuyu moral and political debate in the late 1930s. It does so by reconstructing the internal history of "independent," Gikuyu-run schools. Kenya's historians have taken independent schools to be the birthplaces of nationalism, culturally self-conscious nurseries in which the future leaders of Mau Mau were trained up. That was precisely what the British were worried about: independency looked like insurgency in the making. I suggest, in distinction to British and nationalist accounts, that independency in Nyeri district was a moral project before it was a nationalist project. As I discussed in Chapter Seven, the late 1930s were a time of intense moral debate among men and women, a time when old markers of self-hood and gendered identity were in flux. Independent churches and schools promised to engender civility among a people terrified at moral chaos. In classrooms and through the sacrament of baptism, Gikuyu school-goers named themselves, positioning themselves as subjects in a fluid, uncontrollable world. Their fathers and mothers had earned self-hood through their sweat on the land. Independents hoped to master themselves with English names. Mastery over English was a means of asserting moral agency. It was also a means of engaging with the British. In mastering English, independent readers hoped also to master the English. By playing bureaucratic games with the state, by toying with and subverting the state's rules of recognition, independents worked out a language of colonial criticism, a literate vocabulary with which to contest the morally disabling state of British power.

The chapter attempts to reconstruct what I take to be independents' two-staged theory of education. In the first stage, the subject of the first section below, independents hoped that English would be for Gikuyu a test of moral agency, a means of positioning the self in a morally chaotic world. Drawing inspiration from the lessons of the past, they knew that self-mastery required discipline, intense investments of labor. School-goers hoped their diligent investments in English books would earn them self-mastery suited to new times. Congratulating themselves on their accomplishments, independents in the second stage of their theory of education turned their ease with English into a vocabulary with which to best the British. As I show through a discussion of the local history of Kabiruini independent school in Mathira division, independent readers played games with ribbon-cutting ceremonies, letters to the King, record-books, and constitutions, using the signs of bureaucratic procedure to upset the rigidity of British law. Independents at Kabiruini beat the British at their own writing game. But bureaucracy remained divisive, less a definitive language of politics and more a rhetoric with which to argue. In the third section I reconstruct how independents argued among themselves over church structure and, more deeply, over old questions of political authority.

The energy of independent schooling was not generated by its bureaucracy, by its male, literate leaders. Gikuyu men and women worked up the energy to engage with national, bureaucratic politics in local debates, intimately challenging arguments over gendered disorder, landed dispossession, and self-mastering reputation. Independency promised worried Gikuyu English names, literate reputations to fend off domestic sorcery and prove ethnic integrity. Bureaucracy raised the pressingly local nature of moral argument to the terrain of colonial engagement, offering new means--and languages--to make critiques of morally disabling British power.

**Naming themselves
English and moral agency in independent schooling**

In a social world where both men and women found it difficult to prove themselves adults, where men looked like women and women looked like whores, independent readers hoped that English names would become discriminating, enabling, tests of self-hood. Land had made moral agents of Gikuyu in the past: men and women proved their adulthood, their gendered self-mastery, with their sweat. Independent school readers thought that changed times needed new tests of self-mastery, new markers of social accomplishment for a world in flux. As I show in this section, independent readers cut off from mission churches worked hard to maintain Christian discipline in churches. They sponsored a bishop from South Africa, and pilloried him for years with requests for marriages and baptisms. They hoped that the bishop's baptisms would salve the intimate wounds of gender troubles. Sacraments engendered civility among husbands and wives. More, independent readers hoped that command over English would discipline demoralized Gikuyu, preparing them for engagement with the British. English names, and words, were for independent readers moral commitments, training up Gikuyu for the future.

In September 1934 leaders of various Gikuyu-run schools met at Kagere and inaugurated the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA).⁶ Seven schools in South Nyeri joined.⁷ They elected Johanna Kuniya, Tetu reader and Local Native Council member, as president. Willy Jimmy Wambugu, leader of the schismatics from Mahiga, was elected district head for Nyeri.⁸ Leaders hoped that their ease with bureaucracy, displayed through public elections, constitutions, and school log-books, would impress the British. The association's constitution was a lengthy excursus on

⁶c.f. John Anderson, *The Struggle for the School: The interaction of missionary, colonial government and nationalist enterprise in the development of formal education in Kenya* (London: Longman, 1970), 119.

⁷TT Conference reports file: Meeting at Kahuhia of mission and independent leaders, 13 October 1934.

⁸SA I/D/1: Justus Kang'ethe, "Kikuyu Independent Schools," in *East African Standard* 8 September 1934.

bureaucratic structure: the role of officials, terms of office, election procedures, all printed in English in the front of the booklet and in Gikuyu toward the back. KISA's leaders were careful to send copies of the constitution to government officials, missionaries and other whites. Literate bureaucracy was meant to demonstrate Gikuyu responsibility before critical British eyes.

But more than a good impression, the teachers gathered at Kagere in 1934 thought their association would help resolve the intimate household disputes that divided men and women at home. They called for moral discipline, for creative work among their followers in their constitution:

The meaning of "independent" is *wiathi*--doing one's work without someone lording over him. When someone is self-reliant and doing according to his wishes, that is independent. There is a difference in someone responsible for his work and when there is someone looking after his work. One cannot give his child to someone else to raise him for him. A good person is one who takes care of his child instead of entrusting his child to someone else. One who refuses can be carried with a *ngoi* (carrier cloth). The one carrying the other cannot support himself fully so he makes the one carrying tired. This association found it hard to deal with people asking Europeans who lead education to grant permission to open schools which had been closed. This association is ready to help Gikuyu in all areas, spiritual, economic, and forging unity of the tribe and education for the growth of the tribe.⁹

This passage was left untranslated in the English version. Self-mastery, the moral agency of working for oneself, would make little sense to the British. Besides, KISA's leaders knew that adulthood took vernacular resolve. KISA's bureaucracy promised to relieve Gikuyu of morally disabling dependence on the British. Their prophets had taught them what to do. Mugo wa Kibiru, some 50 years earlier, had seen visions of red-skinned invaders carrying fire sticks. Their snake, vomiting fire, would stretch from coast to coast. Mugo had warned Gikuyu to learn from the strangers: they would bring social

⁹K.VA Sec/1/7/9: Rules of the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association, November 1935.

decay, but when Gikuyu had learned the secrets of their power they would depart. Self-mastery, Mugo taught, demanded moral fortitude.¹⁰ The bureaucrats of KISA knew their history. Independent schools were an effort to earn moral self-mastery through careful investment in British learning. Archbishop Wanjigiri, early school teacher, said as much when describing KISA's goals:

KISA aimed at getting knowledge from the white man. Later the Kikuyu would teach their people without relying on the whites...KISA wanted to prepare pupils for the time when the whites would leave. It was not their aim to produce politically active people. Knowledge was first; political action would come to a knowledgeable people.¹¹

There is more than subterfuge in Wanjigiri's plan, more than surreptitious plotting. A sense of duty guided independents to invest in education. As Mugo had taught, as their constitution argued, KISA's leaders knew that engagement with the British demanded, as a necessary first step, moral discipline. Gikuyu had to master themselves, becoming moral agents, before they could argue with the British. Independency, then, was a means of vernacular self-mastery, a way for men and women worried by social decay to remake institutions of order.

Independents hoped that Christian disciplines would structure new tests of self-hood in an age of delinquency. The previous chapter demonstrated that class formation made it difficult to men to prove their masculinity, for women to prove their virtue. Gender trouble raised pressing questions about moral agency. Independents hoped that Christian baptism would foster new disciplines of the self. As I show below, baptism offered worried men and women names, means of proving their reputation, ways of positioning themselves within a world where identities were increasingly in flux. Just as

¹⁰Mugo's history has been told, to great effect, in John Lonsdale, "The Prayers of Waiyaki: Political Uses of the Kikuyu Past," in D. Anderson and D. Johnson eds., *Revealing Prophets* (London: James Currey, 1995).

¹¹Oral interview: Archbishop Wanjigiri.

surely as labor had earned adulthood for their fathers and mothers, English become for readers a discriminating test of citizenship, a mark of achievement in a world where such markers were under assault.

Independent church leaders' first concerns were therefore about clergy. For without clergy, independents could not marry, baptize, or conduct the other rituals that made for Christian discipline. The clergy shortage was a problem of self-mastery for independents. KISA's leaders had initially hoped that the Anglicans might offer ecclesiastical sanction to an independent church: Daudi Maina Kiragu wrote to the CMS in 1933 asking for a "good African...to baptize our people who are ready for baptism."¹² The Anglicans, hoping for a rapprochement that would heal the schism of the late 1920s, agreed in 1934 to accept two independent candidates for the divinity school in Limuru.¹³ Criticized by the Scots for ordaining schismatics, the Anglicans insisted that the ordinands would be under the authority of the Anglican bishop.¹⁴ KISA's leaders reconsidered, and withdrew. The Scots were exultant at Anglican resolve.¹⁵ To independent leaders it was a disaster.

For independent schoolgoers hoped that church sacraments would redeem them from moral chaos and social decay. As I showed in the previous chapter, Naomi wa Paulo had argued as much at the Women's Guild convention, enjoining men and women divided by jealousy to be cleansed by the waters of life. Baptism resolved intimate strife. The clergy shortage threatened independent readers with moral dysfunction. Readers at Kagere complained that "people here are getting to be 50 without a wife or children."¹⁶ The clergy problem made it difficult for men to be men. Some independents in Nyeri sought out an accommodating Anglican clergyman in northern Fort Hall, who baptized

¹²KNA OP/EST/1/483: F.B. Welbourne, "Independency in Kikuyu," unpublished ms. dated 26 April 1958.

¹³SA 1/D/5: Bishop Mombasa to Allied Missionaries, 4 January 1935.

¹⁴KNA CMS/1/102: Meeting of Highlands Deanery African Anglican Church elders and KISA, 5 December 1934.

¹⁵SA 1/C/9: Barlow to Arthur, 9 May 1934.

¹⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/3: Harrison Githinji and Ndegwa Waciuri to DC Nyeri, 23 December 1937.

and married without submitted names to the bishop.¹⁷ Missionaries thought the cleric corrupted by politics: but the morally endangered Kagere Christians demanded flexibility of mission pastors. Newton Thabari Ngama remembered walking miles each way to the Anglican church at Irindi from Kagere for baptismal classes. He went hoping for a solution to domestic strife: "when one gets baptized he stops the evil like adultery and prostitution," he explained.¹⁸ Church sacraments promised to resolve the moral strife that divided Gikuyu. The Anglicans' refusal to ordain independent churchmen therefore amounted to moral betrayal. Daudi Maina, an independent church historian, wrote of the Anglicans in this way:

The need for clergy of our own was obvious in those troubled days, since none of the other clergy cam to our help...we read from the scriptures that you were asked to feed his lambs, but instead of doing this, when the sun grew hot you ran away to get shelter and left our Lord's sheep in the sun.¹⁹

Missionary perfidy desiccated independents' households. Desperate, KISA's leaders turned to Daniel William Alexander, Archbishop of the African Orthodox Church of South Africa.²⁰ Alexander tied the worried independents in Gikuyuland to an ecclesiastical order more weighty, more accomplished, than Protestantism, trumping British sneers with the proof of church history. His sacraments promised to redeem Gikuyu from moral disaster in the waters of baptism. Peter Gatabaki, then teacher at the KISA school in Kiamwangi, first heard about Alexander from James Beuttah. Beuttah told him that Alexander "had a license to baptize anywhere in the world."²¹ Beuttah was

¹⁷KNA CMS/1/270: Crawford to Pitts Pitts, 24 March 1934.

¹⁸Oral interview: Newton Thabari Ngama.

¹⁹Daudi Maina Kiragu, *Kiria Giatumire Independent Irie*, 1964, 6.

²⁰For historical discussions of Alexander, see Richard Newman, "Archbishop Daniel William Alexander and the African Orthodox Church," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (4) (1983), 615-30; Theodore Natsoulas, "The Rise and Fall of the Kikuyu Karing'a Education Association of Kenya, 1929-1952," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 23 (3-4) (1988), 219-33.

²¹Oral interview: Peter Gatabaki.

himself impressed with Alexander's credentials: he remembered that the bishop had stressed his relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church during their first meeting in 1933.²² Impressed KISA readers raised 1,000/ for his passage from South Africa, and promised 500/ in wages.²³ They collected from independent schools, asking 1/ from parents of pupils.²⁴ Missionaries thought Alexander a charlatan, lining his pockets at the expense of gullible Gikuyu.²⁵ KISA's leaders hoped his churchly credentials would silence the British. Alexander claimed ecclesiastical authority from the Orthodox bishopric at Antioch: as an Orthodox church pamphlet put it, he possessed "the most direct, unquestionable and provable line in Apostolic Succession to be found in any branch of the Western Church..."²⁶ Church history proved Gikuyu worthy of British respect. Proud KISA leaders sent prospective ordinands to train under Alexander at his home in Gituamba, near Thika: Philip Kiande of Tetu in Nyeri; Harrison Gachokia of Kiambu and Daudi Maina of Fort Hall. Stephano Waciira, Kagere reader and former Tumutumu deacon, later joined the group. The Kiambu-based Kikuyu Karing'a Educational Association, a much smaller independent association, also sent their nominee Arthur Gatung'u to train with the KISA ordinands.²⁷

Alexander's ecclesiastical credentials impressed the British with independents' respectability. But more than British recognition, Gikuyu worried by domestic strife and sexual incontinence hoped that Alexander's baptism would redeem them. As one reader put it in 1936, KISA hoped that Alexander would "baptize them and absolve their people."²⁸ The moral agony of gendered struggle drove men and women to invest in church sacraments. In April 1936 the bishop held a service at Kagere, drawing at least

²²John Spencer, *James Beauttah: Freedom Fighter* (Nairobi: Stellascopes, 1983), 22-23.

²³c.f. David Sandgren, *Christianity and the Kikuyu: Religious Divisions and Social Conflict* (New York: Peter Lang, 100-103).

²⁴KNA Sec/1/7/9: PC Central to Colonial Secretary, 24 December 1935.

²⁵KNA Sec/1/7/9: Kendall, AIM Githumu, to PC Central, 17 December 1936.

²⁶KNA DC Nyeri 2 3 3: "Divine Liturgy of the African Orthodox Church."

²⁷c.f. Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 121.

²⁸KNA DC Nyeri 2 3 3: DC Nyeri to PC Central, 24 November 1936.

700 people. Many had prepared for baptism by walking to classes at the Anglican church at Irindi, several miles distant in Fort Hall district.²⁹ Some carried their children with them. Others, lacking clerics to turn to, had hired witchdoctors to resolve household conflicts.³⁰ Alexander's baptism salved domestic discord with Christian names. He asked for 7/ for every baptism—more than a month's wage for some laborers—and issued communion cards printed with baptismal names.³¹ Even those who had not attended classes were baptized.³² By August 1936 Alexander had baptized some 5,000 people throughout Gikuyuland.³³ The ministers he trained followed his leading: in 1938 Barlow reported that Stephano Waciira, the Kagere reader ordained independent church deacon, was marrying and baptizing squatters on settler farms in Ngobit.³⁴ Some of the couples he married were under Presbyterian discipline for their "traditional" marriages. They paid 2/ for the Christian marriage and 2/ for baptism, carefully choosing their baptismal names but dispensing with wedding rings. One, Kimamo, chose the name Ibrahim; his wife was Ester, and his son Isaaka. They were the names of the founding family of Israel. Baptism offered squatters and other Gikuyu worried at moral decay means of naming themselves into the promise of Biblical redemption.

What was at stake in this widespread Gikuyu speculation on baptismal names? Why did English names inspire such creative, costly thought among people desperately worried over rural disorder? The answer gets at the center of Gikuyu hopes for schooling in the 1930s. Independents and other Gikuyu Christians hoped that schooling would knit together new modes of personal discipline and public reputation for a people threatened by social decay. Baptismal names were a means for men and women to master themselves, positioning themselves as adults in a world where adulthood was difficult to

²⁹Oral interviews: Ester Mbau Mwhaki; Grace Gathoni; Onesimus Njuguna King'ori.

³⁰Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

³¹Oral interviews: Onesimus King'ori, Joseph Mwangi Mwaura.

³²Oral interview: Daudi Ndiangui.

³³*KNA Sec/1/7/9*: PC Central Province to Colonial Secretary, 7 August 1936.

³⁴*SA I/A/40*: Barlow to PC Central, 2 August 1938.

attain. Baptismal names were also, at the same time, a claim on colonial citizenship, a means of engaging with British power.

The squatters were not alone in their imaginative investments in naming. In 1938 Presbyterian readers at Kiamwangi asked Tumutumu missionaries to print a book listing Christian names in English and Swahili, together their meanings.³⁵ Many feared European laughter: missionaries reported that some catechumens had mistakenly chosen names like Napoleon, Socrates, Lucifer, or Beethoven.³⁶ Such names written on marriage certificates, school registers, and bank accounts drew mirth from employers and magistrates. In an increasingly bureaucratized colonial economy it paid to be careful of English names. Tumutumu Kirk Session advised readers in 1934 to check their spelling carefully when choosing a name. Elders recommended that:

- 1) A list of acceptable names be drafted, names to be included are only those in the Bible, and English ones for those of renowned people. These names should be given to all ministers and schools.
- 2) On the issue of spelling names a) names in the Bible should be spelt in either Swahili or English b) English names to be spelt the way Englishmen spell them c) ask readers in schools help people in schools to spell names correctly.
- 3) Those choosing names for themselves or for their children to be told a) she has no business changing the name after she is baptized b) that if possible she should know the meaning of that name or the person from whom the name was taken from c) she should know how to spell the name, except for those who don't know how to write d) we cannot be able to go back to Gikuyu names, but those wishing to remain with their old names cannot be questioned. Their old names should be used together with baptismal names, even a new born baby on baptism should be give both names.³⁷

The elders' court recommended careful inquiry, diligent mining of the Bible, when choosing a name. Spelling English well protected Gikuyu from British laughter. Many catechumens followed elders' advice: Jerida Kirigu, baptized in 1934, received

³⁵SA I Z 6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1938. entry for 5 November.

³⁶TT Ministers file: "Baptismal names," no author (but probably Calderwood), 1938.

³⁷TT Kirk Session minute book: minute for 14 July 1934.

counsel on her name from an elderly reader.³⁸ Monica Muumbi, baptized in 1938, read Saint Augustine on the advice of a school teacher and chose her name in admiration of Augustine's mother.³⁹ Books could guard the baptized from embarrassment before the British. But more than protection, Christian names culled from Biblical stories could usefully link readers with virtuous people of the past. Naming was a way to talk about personal virtue. Leuel Njuki, baptized at an independent church in 1939, read a Salvation Army book and chose his name "because the owner of the name loved people and was respectful."⁴⁰ Others read the Book for their names: Jotham Muturi named his child Samuel in 1940 in hopes that "he would come out like Samuel in the Bible."⁴¹ Sales of New Testaments skyrocketed in the mid-1930s: Tumutumu missionaries ran through 3,500 copies within days during a convention in 1936.⁴² Many appear to have read it for models of Christian virtue, publicly-known paradigms to which to harness their own reputations.

English names helped Gikuyu make their selves in a social world where selfhood was increasingly difficult to master. English was a means for men and women troubled over gender to prove themselves virtuous. It was also an entry into the colonial economy, where proper names spelled out dividends. It is for this reason, I suggest, that independent schoolgoers were so eager to learn to read and speak English into the 1930s. English was a moral discipline, just as surely as female circumcision, landholding and other marks of Gikuyu selfhood.

Independent school leaders' first arguments with the British were over English. In 1929 the government's Director of Education, eager to facilitate easy communication among the three British protectorates of eastern Africa, mandated that Swahili, not

³⁸Oral interview: Jerida Kirigu.

³⁹Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

⁴⁰Oral interview: Leuel Njuki.

⁴¹Oral interview: Jotham Muturi.

⁴²SA I/C/9: Dickson to Arthur, 22 July 1936.

English, would be the language of instruction in government-supervised elementary schools.⁴³ Students would not begin to learn English until Standard Five. Independent schooling in Nyeri began as readers' effort to guard their hopes for English from British intransigence. Even before the advent of the KISA bureaucracy, Gikuyu-run schools in Kagere and elsewhere taught English, illegally, in the lowest levels of school.⁴⁴ Mission-school teachers, equally disgusted, taught English to eager pupils after school hours.⁴⁵ KISA's leaders hoped to impress government with the gravity of the situation. Swahili study was a waste of time, many argued: the Swahili had never conquered the Gikuyu.⁴⁶ There was no moral reward in learning an inferior language. English, readers thought, was a better investment. It helped Gikuyu talk to the British. Hezekiah Mbutia, vice-president of the association, argued in print in 1936 that English should be the medium of instruction from Standard II because

it is essential and helpful to anybody say while in a far country where is language is not used. English is also the official language of the British empire.⁴⁷

English promised to make Gikuyu citizens of empire, able to communicate with foreigners and officials outside Kenya. English was a language of colonial engagement. It was also a language of accomplishment at home. In a meeting with government officials and missionaries in 1936, KISA leaders complained that

Indians and Goans always look down upon Kikuyu as being ignorant people. The Indians stood between them and the government and prevented the Africans from

⁴³c.f. SA I/Y/1: Meeting of the Kenya Missionary Council. 3 December 1929. For a history of colonial language policy, see T.P. Gorman, "The Development of Language Policy in Kenya with Particular Reference to the Educational System." in W. Whiteley ed., *Language Use in Kenya* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 397-453.

⁴⁴Oral interviews: Joseph Mwangi Mwaura; Joseph Wahome Muturi.

⁴⁵KNA Educ/1/2097: Donovan, report on inspection of Kahuhia normal school, 12 March 1935.

⁴⁶c.f. Leonard Beecher, "Language Teaching in Kikuyu Schools: studies in the teaching of English and other languages in the Kikuyu schools of Kenya colony" (M.A. thesis, University of London, 1937), 10.

⁴⁷KNA Sec/1/7/9: Mbutia to East African Standard, 6 July 1936.

obtaining higher work. Africans with as good qualifications were placed under Indians. When would the Africans be helped forward?⁴⁸

Command of English made Gikuyu employable, colonial subjects entitled to recognition, and employment, from the British. In a colonial economy where command over language was a critical criterion for high-paying jobs, English instruction fostered Gikuyu ambition.

But more than British citizenship, independent school leaders appear to have hoped that English would become a language to unite fractious Gikuyu. The Nyeri readers named their church, begun by Bishop Alexander, the African Independent Pentecostal Church. Pentecost was the occasion described in *Acts* when the Holy Spirit came down and enabled the apostles to speak in unknown tongues. It inspired independents with hopes for unity, as the pastor Daudi Maina wrote:

The reason for Pentecostal is to say that the church was given unity by the Holy Spirit when it descended on the apostles while they were sitting together waiting...that time the Spirit came down on all clans (*mihiriga*) that were there...the name of Pentecostal is used for people from three sides: 1.Kiambu 2.Fort Hall 3.Nyeri Embu.⁴⁹

Pentecost glossed over Gikuyu regional divisions, uniting people divided by clan and regional histories. Command over English was for independents a vocabulary of internal discipline, a promise that foreign tongues would bring Gikuyu from disparate places together. The government's limits on English education threatened to turn Gikuyu into polyglot infighters, unemployable and incapable of articulating a unified vision for the future. The British, more impressed by the threat of scholastic disorder than by Gikuyu ambition, agreed to compromise in 1936. The new government syllabus

⁴⁸KNA VQ:1:26: Minutes of meeting with independents, missionaries and government, 11 August 1936.

⁴⁹Daudi Maina Kiragu, *Kiria Giatumire Independent Irie*. n.d.

allowed one period for English instruction from Standard III, with more lessons as pupils advanced.⁵⁰ In return, Kunyiha promised that KISA would follow the Department of Education's syllabus. Chastened by memories of Mugo, Gikuyu could agree that it paid to cooperate with government. They hoped that their agreeability would entitle them to government grants-in-aid, and to places in the government's new primary school at Kagumo. Kagumo was built in 1930 at a cost of £8625, largely from funds raised by the South Nyeri Local Native Council.⁵¹ The District Commissioner thought it "a first step toward the rewelding of the Kikuyu into a composite whole."⁵² But when it opened in 1933, 70 of the 90 students were from Tumutumu's outschools. Only two were from Gikuyu-run schools.⁵³ Independent school leaders worried they would be denied access to higher education. KISA organized entrance tests at independent schools, and offered scholarships to pupils.⁵⁴ By 1936 Kagumo admitted 19 independent school pupils.⁵⁵ KISA's agreeable cooperation with government, their disciplined effort to learn British secrets, paid off with colonial entitlement. By 1940 KISA schools in South Nyeri received £107.5 annually in government aid.⁵⁶

KISA's principled cooperation with the British imposed conformity on students and teachers. Independency in Nyeri was a processual revolution, a disciplined effort by readers to prepare their people for the future.⁵⁷ Former independent school teachers and students in Nyeri remember that they were careful to follow the school syllabus while

⁵⁰SA I/C/4: Meeting with mission and government representatives, 11 August 1936.

⁵¹SA I/G/6: S. Nyeri LNC meeting, 7 August 1930.

⁵²KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1934.

⁵³KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1933.

⁵⁴KNA Educ/1/2033: Duncan Mutari at KIS Gakarara to Inspector of Schools Central Province, 26 November 1936.

⁵⁵KNA Educ/1/2033: Ottoway, principal Kagumo school, annual report for 1936.

⁵⁶KNA Educ/1/3284: Director of Education, memoranda, 2 January 1940.

⁵⁷Independent schools in Kiambu would seem to have embraced a different philosophy of education, for which see Kamuyu wa Kang'ethe. *The Role of the Agikuku Religion in the Development of the Karing'a religio-political Movement, 1900-1950* (PhD dissertation, Nairobi University 1981).

preparing pupils for government exams.⁵⁸ Exams demanded circumspection of teachers.

Onesimus King'ori, a former teacher at Kagere, put it this way:

We went to the government to get the syllabus. We didn't have our own. We could not teach anyhowly because our children had to do the same exams that others did. They did the same questions.⁵⁹

Independents' purposive investment in British learning demanded careful adherence to government rules. Some teachers chafed. Justus Kang'ethe, former Tumutumu teacher and secretary of KISA, taught English illegally at the independent school at Gakarara:

(Kang'ethe) was required to follow the government syllabus. However, because the government did not want the Kikuyu to be taught English other than the New Testament, Kang'ethe began to teach the pupils English. A young boy was stationed out by the road at a strategic position between the road and the school to alert the teacher of the coming of the Education Officer, Mr. Walter, for inspection. In this way, the Kikuyu at Gakarara were taught English through elementary.⁶⁰

English demanded resolve, and cunning, of independents: but conspiracies like Kang'ethe's were rare. Government inspectors in the 1930s mandated that head teachers keep careful log books, tracking progress through the syllabus, work in the school garden, and the attendance.⁶¹ Independent school teachers generally kept records diligently, earning school inspectors' praise.⁶² Writing made readers respectable. One former teacher remembered that "to be a teacher for the Gikuyu independent schools it called for

⁵⁸Oral interviews: William Mwangi; Joseph Muriithi; Peter Munene.

⁵⁹Oral interview: Onesimus Njuguna King'ori.

⁶⁰Oral interview: Archbishop Wanjingiri.

⁶¹KNA Educ/1/1065: Chief Inspector of Schools to DE, 18 April 1935.

⁶²CPK Advisory Council on African Education file: Report by Inspector of Schools, Central Province, "Kikuyu Independent and Karing'a Schools," 1937.

ability to write your names.”⁶³ KISA celebrated the promise of literacy in public sports events, designed to raise funds and demonstrate their scholarly achievements. One former student remembered the public events in this way:

Games were started to compete with various schools in the area. This was for the purpose of fostering unity in the schools and to make people know one another...the blackboard would be put somewhere, and the teachers would be blindfolded and they would be given a chalk and one would be told to write the message “Gitingititikikika” (it is hard to carry away). So teachers would go toward the chalkboard, groping to find if they will get the right place. So what was checked was how one would write such words which are difficult to pronounce and spell well and in a straight line manner, as if written between drawn lines.⁶⁴

Public games put writing on display, showing off independents’ knowledgeable mastery over colonial disciplines. The games were popular, remembered more than one participant. At Kagere, church supporters charged 10 cents admission. Even Presbyterians came.⁶⁵ The bitterest of opponents would pay to enjoy writing competitions. Grace Mukunya, former student at Kagere, remembered doing 32 physical exercises in ten minutes at public sports events, timed by a teacher’s whistle.⁶⁶ Kagere school also held public competitions over *cai*, with women running about to collect firewood, boil milk, and make tea in the shortest time possible.⁶⁷ Wining teams were given prizes, ranging from a bull to smaller livestock.

Kagere’s eager displays of Christian disciplines reminded Gikuyu of their purpose in schooling, and for my purposes underline what I take to be the theory behind independents’ investments in English. Tea-making games, public writing on the blackboard, made missionary education a technique to be mastered, a skill to be carefully

⁶³Oral interview: James Miteini Weru.

⁶⁴Oral interview: Lawii Waciira Ndiritu.

⁶⁵Oral interviews: Joyce Wanjiru; Henry Mbage Muciri.

⁶⁶Oral interview: Grace Mukunya.

⁶⁷Oral interview: Lawii Waciira Ndiritu.

learned and publicly performed. Offered up before the watching eyes of a paying audience, Kagere's students practiced their mastery over English disciplines. They were inspired, I have argued, by a obligating sense that moral agency required command over things British. Independent schools were readers' effort to learn British disciplines, to master foreign tongues. Proper baptismal names, handwriting carefully between two straight lines, became for them a mark of identity, an achievement of self-hood in a world where such markers were in flux. English engendered Gikuyu selves as surely as property and labor had for earlier generations.

Their play with the disciplines of writing and domesticity prepared Gikuyu readers for creative engagements with British power. This, I suggest, was the second stage of independent readers' theory of education. Proud of their accomplishments, independents used English to ague with the British. By mastering English, Gikuyu hoped to master the English, engaging them with proofs of Gikuyu respectability. The British expected bureaucratic efficiency of Gikuyu scholars: record-books, minutes, rules and regulations, other marks of publicly-minded hierarchy. I have argued in previous chapters that, for Gikuyu, bureaucratic politics of itself had little depth. Principled associations among men and women were difficult to maintain: they demanded a detachment, a cool objectivity, inimical to the deep politics of kinship and land. National party politics were ignorant, unknowing, unable to talk about land tenure and other divisive issues. When Gikuyu did invest in bureaucratic politics, I suggest in the following section, they were driven by locally contentious histories of land crisis and gendered disorder. Bureaucracy was for independent school leaders a vocabulary with which to call the British to order, an instrumental means of engaging with the state. Independent school readers played with British bureaucracy, just as students at Kagere played with blackboards and chalk. They used their renditions of record books, files neatly kept, and ribbon-cutting to demand recognition from colonial power.

**Playing with the state
Kabiruini independent school**

The history of “independent” schooling in Kabiruini, near the Mt. Kenya forest in Mathira division, underlines the creative ways that local readers used bureaucracy to best the British. I here want to reconstruct the history of the school, both for what it reveals about local arguments over morality and land in Mathira and for what it demonstrates about the terms on which Gikuyu readers engaged with British power. As I show, intimate arguments over land and sex drove local readers, formerly Presbyterians, to form a self-run school in 1936. The District Commissioner, worried about sedition, refused to register the school. Faced with the legal power of the state, Kabiruini readers creatively adopted bureaucratic procedure to prove their responsibility to the British. They played extraordinarily creative games with ribbons, record books and letters to the King, using displays of literacy to burden the DC with evidence of their integrity. Kabiruini readers beat the English with English, turning their accomplishment with writing into an insurgent means to contest colonial authority. The history of Kabiruini is about how the energetic debaters of Gikuyu ethnicity worked local worries over virtue into a language with which to criticize the morally disabling state of British rule.

Kabiruini’s history is inextricably bound up in the history of Gikuyu debate over land consolidation and family definition. As I showed in the previous chapter, commodity production in the 1930s allowed landlords to expand cultivation, turning tenants and *mbari* juniors off the property they had previously occupied. Family redefinition sparked moral dispute among Nyeri people, heated debate about class formation and sexual identity. In Kabiruini, worried men and women argued through contending theories of moral conduct in public dispute over education. Land litigation between a tenant, Francis Ruga, and his wealthy patron, Chief Murigo, drove school politics. Ruga’s father was a junior member of the *mbari* of Chief Murigo, the

government's chief over much of northern Mathira. Lacking his own land, he had requested space to plant from Murigo. Murigo had acquiesced, giving him a plot in return for his help with clearing bush. But in the late 1920s, land pressure spurred Murigo to rethink his relationship with tenants. One elderly reader remembered the argument this way.

When they were in Magutu, they had been given a place to build by their uncle Murigo. But Ruga's father expanded his family and needed a place to build. Murigo told him, Ruga, I cannot give you any more place to build. Ruga said, you gave this land to my father, it belongs to us. You cannot take it away from us, we own it now. Murigo said, I gave it to your father, not to you; you have to go.⁶⁸

Landlords' attempts to limit juniors' rights to *mbari* land sparked dangerous argument over old ties of patronage. Ruga, nervous that Murigo's greed would deny a future for his children, filed a court case. Perhaps more pertinently, in 1927 he paid *ituika* goats to elders.⁶⁹ Generational succession might trump *mbari* dispute. Murigo feared sorcery, remembered some: Ruga may have threatened to curse him. Hoping to salve intimate wounds, Murigo agreed to give Ruga land in the wilds of Njatheini. Njatheini was at the time on the frontiers of Gikuyu expansion, near the Mount Kenya forest edge. With comparatively infertile soil, the region was sparsely populated until the 1920s. Farmers from densely populated Magutu walked back and forth through the forest to cultivate *njahi* beans and maize; others fed cattle on the grasslands at Kagati.⁷⁰ In the mid-1920s pioneers from Magutu began settling in the region to farm for the commodity market. Many, like Ruga, were losers in land litigation, fleeing pressure at home. Magutu's *mbari* lords, many readers from Tumutumumu, had expanded land cultivation at

⁶⁸Oral interview: Musa Kanja.

⁶⁹TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 18 July 1931.

⁷⁰Oral interview: Peter Munene.

the expense of juniors and tenants.⁷¹ Migration to Iruri was an act of desperation: as one migrant put it,

All the people here--Njatheini and Iruri--came from Magutu because of problems over land. We were almost evicted. The conflict was brought because of rising populations and demand for more land.⁷²

Driven away from home by Murigo's eager attempts to consolidate land, Ruga worked to bring civilization to Njatheini's wilderness.

Murigo resolved that because he had some land at Njatheini and because he did not want the curse of going to court with his nephew, he decided to tell the DC that Ruga's farm was at Njatheini... When Ruga knew of Murigo's plan he went and recruited people from Embu to clear an expansive plot of land, more than 20 acres. Every day he added more and more acres--in total his land at Njatheini was 48 acres.⁷³

Diligent labor could prove a claim on land for threatened *mbari* juniors like Ruga. But some say that Ruga cleared at Njatheini without regard to previous tenants' rights. The tenants protested that Ruga's avarice amounted to theft. The elders, called in to arbitrate, agreed, reasoning that "if we move these men from here, where will they stay? Do they have a field out in the wilderness?"⁷⁴ Common civility meant that tenants' rights should be recognized: Ruga agreed to split the farm in half with the tenants.

Hoping to prove his claim on the remaining land against Murigo's suspicion and tenants' jealousy, Ruga gave land to Tumutumumu missionaries for a new school in 1931. The plot was on the edge of a government road, right on his border with the argumentative tenants.⁷⁵ The school--called Njatheini--guarded his property. It was a

⁷¹See Cowen, "Differentiation in a Kenya Location," for a description of this process in Magutu.

⁷²Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

⁷³Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

⁷⁴Oral interview: Cornelius Kanyiri Kanja.

⁷⁵Oral interviews: Musa Kanja; Cornelius Kanyiri Kanja.

calculated move. Schools on *mbari* land earned commendation from missionaries, who could help prove landlords' title in court. Cash could also protect property. Profiting from cheap goats, Ruga bought a butchery in Karatina in 1934.⁷⁶ Cash investment in goats promised to raise funds for land litigation, guarding property with money.

Investment in schooling guarded Ruga's land against potential litigation from tenants or from Murigo. But by 1934, the growing school looked to overwhelm Ruga's property. The school had 120 pupils in June 1934; by July there were 170.⁷⁷ Schools all along the Mt. Kenya forest line were packed. Entirely unbidden by missionaries, prayer houses sprang up throughout Magutu division.⁷⁸ Many of the attendees were "raw" natives.⁷⁹ To Ruga the expansion of the school at Njatheini was a threat: it looked like a ploy by disgruntled tenants to reclaim his land. One ex-student remembered the dispute this way:

Ruga said, now the school is growing too big, and the piece of land is too small, and the school is threatening to use all the land, so let another place be found where this school can be taken...it was a small house, and it was right on the road, and now they wanted to make the road into tarmac too, which would take more land, which would have taken more of Ruga's land...⁸⁰

Tarmacked roads and expanding attendance made the schooling into a threat to Ruga's ownership. Ruga wanted the scholars, especially the children of the former tenants, to leave the school. The DC reported that he drove tenants' children out of classrooms.⁸¹ In 1935, the families of Ruga's former tenants set up a new Presbyterian school at Iruri.⁸² They were led by Cornelius Kanyiri, a nephew of one of the tenants

⁷⁶SA I/C/12 and 13: Barlow to DC South Nyeri, 2 April 1934.

⁷⁷SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1934, entries for 28 April and 16 July.

⁷⁸SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 18 July.

⁷⁹SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 5 July.

⁸⁰Oral interview: Musa Kanja.

⁸¹KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/3: DC South Nyeri to Dickson, 18 March 1936.

⁸²TT DC and Forest Officer file: Dickson to DC Nyeri, 30 September 1935.

dispossessed in the 1920s by Ruga. A second group stayed at Njatheini, with Ruga's blessing.⁸³ Elderly informants remember that the division among the readers worked out along lines of age and private accomplishment. Musa Kanja, Kanyiri's cousin, described the sociology in this way:

The people who were there at Njatheini were elders, while Kanja's son's were just young men. Now the elders said, no, we cannot let the children lead us. But the children followed them all the way to Iruri. So the case had become a case...⁸⁴

The "children" driven to Iruri, remembered Kanja, were unmarried young men, most related to Kanyiri's *mbari*. Those who remained at Njatheini were older, some with second wives.⁸⁵ Age divided readers into jealously disputing camps. Perhaps more pertinently, the division was over *mbari* definition. Arguments between Ruga, the landlord, and disgruntled tenants drove church politics at Njatheini. It was a bitter parting: Kanyiri's group thought Ruga had cursed them. Kanja and others returned the insult, calling Ruga's group *acengi*, barbarians.⁸⁶ Mutual accusations of moral corruption drove public scholastic debate.

Landlords' and tenants' arguments over land, at Njatheini as elsewhere in Nyeri, drove the politics of schooling. Hoping for access to trained teachers and government grants, Kanyiri and Ruga competed for Tumutumu missionaries' endorsement. Kanyiri's group at Iruri was successful: they held school in the afternoons with teachers from Magutu, paid from Tumutumu funds.⁸⁷ Ruga's group wanted similar help, asking missionaries to begin mid-week prayer meetings at Njatheini in 1935.⁸⁸ But missionaries refused: they did not want to spread their resources to thickly in one small region.

⁸³Oral interviews: Lista Warutere, Musa Kanja.

⁸⁴Oral interview: Musa Kanja.

⁸⁵Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

⁸⁶Oral interview: Muriuki Kiuria.

⁸⁷TT DC and Forest Officer file: Dickson to DC Nyeri, 30 September 1935.

⁸⁸TT Tumutumu Kirk Session minutes: minute for 20 July 1935.

Tumutumu supervisors thought Njatheini would “probably die a natural death from malnutrition.”⁸⁹ To Ruga and others left at Njatheini, missionary neglect was a positive danger. Early in 1936 they began meeting under a tree outside the old building at Njatheini.⁹⁰ When queried by missionaries, they asked for a full-sized school, and for a Sunday service of their own.⁹¹ Lista Warutere, a Standard IV graduate who worked as the teacher, and Ruga himself were the only baptized Christians in the group. Their public schooling was a desperate attempt to catch missionaries’ attention, to restore productive relations with the British.

Sexual indiscipline finally divided Ruga’s group from the Scots mission. In the middle of 1936 Ngatia wa Mweri, longtime deacon from Njatheini, was excommunicated for marrying a second wife.⁹² His chief accuser before the Tumutumu Kirk Session was Cornelius Kanyiri, the teacher at Iruri. Kanyiri thought Ngatia morally corrupt. Ngatia had impregnated the woman pledged to be married to Kanyiri’s junior brother, the schoolteacher Suleiman Mbuthia, while Mbuthia was paying off the brideprice.⁹³ Ngatia paid the requisite fee for spoiling the marriage: but his transgression cuckolded Kanyiri. Mbuthia married the woman when she was about to give birth; Kanyiri, furious, disinherited him. Intimately divisive arguments over sex drove the public politics of schooling. Ngatia, humiliated by Kanyiri, offered land to Ruga’s group for a new school at Kabiruini, near Njatheini.⁹⁴ Ruga’s group quickly constructed a building, asking for donations even from Kanyiri’s supporters. Those who refused to give cash were compelled to part with axes, pots, or goats.⁹⁵

⁸⁹TT Ministers file: Dickson to Barlow, 10 October 1935.

⁹⁰SA 1/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 8 February.

⁹¹SA 1/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 12 March.

⁹²TT Kirk Session minute book: entry for 14 April 1936; oral interview: James Wamugunda.

⁹³Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

⁹⁴Oral interviews: Lista Warutere, Musa Kanja.

⁹⁵Oral interview: Ngunu wa Huthu.

What divided Ruga's group at Kabiruini from the Presbyterians was not "nationalism," not an elusive sense of cultural integrity. Closely felt social tensions, intimately divisive arguments over land and sex, sparked struggle over schooling. "Independent" schooling at Kabiruini began with familial argument. Kabiruini's early history was intertwined with local debates over land consolidation, with landlords' and tenants' arguments over family definition, with the moral crisis of sexual indiscipline. The politics of schooling was intimately bound up in the social history of struggle over land and morality in the 1930s.

Driven by arguments with Kanyiri, Ruga and Ngatia promised to allow beer at marriage festivals, and to encourage the circumcision of girls.⁹⁶ Was this Ngatia's answer to Kanyiri's public accusations of moral corruption? Kabiruini's leaders promised to restore sexual morality among girls. More, the scholars at Kabiruini promised to teach English from Standard II. Former students remember that only two families remained with Kanyiri's group at Iruri.⁹⁷ English education made "independent" schooling popular. Divided by family arguments over land and sex, partisans of the two schools argued about the moral authority of public power. Ruga's group was united in commitment to the discipline of English. They accused the Presbyterians at Iruri of being a cabal: most of the church's members were relatives of Kanyiri. Musa Kanja, brother of Kanyiri, remembers one encounter in this way:

The refusers (Ruga's group) were saying that we had denied them a lot of followers and so they were coming up to here preaching and so they came and blew the trumpet. We fought there. I told them we had selected the place to preach and so they could not come and disrupt the fellowship. They had come from Kabiruini via Iruri to arrive before us. I had been tipped to their plan and so I took four men to do battle for me and we went. I told them they were not to blow their trumpet here to seek followers and they were to go back to where they had come from. They said that the ground is not mine to which I replied it is not mine but it belongs to God. He had allowed me to preach to people. They also

⁹⁶SA I/E/10: Duncan to DC South Nyeri, n.d. (but 1936).

⁹⁷Oral interviews: Cornelius Kanyiri; Peter Munene.

said he too had allowed them to bring their people. On having this disagreement Gituku (the landholder) came and said the place was his and so they were forced to go back. They went back to Iruri and we were able to continue with our preaching.⁹⁸

It was an argument over the moral authority of words: how could either side speak on land not their own, to people not of their own family? Arguments between family integrity and public power had long divided Gikuyu. British bureaucracy telescoped local moral debates into a vocabulary of colonial politics. To missionaries, Ruga's school looked like an upstart attempt at subversion. In July Jack Duncan, one of the Tumutumu missionaries, camped for several weeks at Iruri to bolster Kanyiri's faction. He held services at Njatheini for some 400 people at a time, showing slides of the "Life of Christ" and drawing first professions from a few young men.⁹⁹ Missionaries worried that Ruga would divide Christians throughout Mathira. Government was similarly nervous about Ruga. The DC complained of the "rowdyism" the Kabiruini group and thought that "people should show they could behave before they were granted privileges." He had in mind the incident at Iruri, which Kanja had reported to missionaries.¹⁰⁰ Public disputes over moral authority made the DC fear for civil order.

Hoping to undercut Ruga's promises about English education, missionaries sponsored a new school at Ruare, close in to Ruga and Ngatia's school at Kabiruini. Ruare teachers taught Standards I through III, with one year of English.¹⁰¹ They hoped to stifle Kabiruini with colonial law. Government rules prohibited two schools opening within a three mile radius.¹⁰² Ruare, a missionary school, earned government recognition. The first teacher at Ruare was Isaiah Wahome, a Magutu reader cured some years before

⁹⁸Oral interview: Musa Kanja.

⁹⁹SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 19 July.

¹⁰⁰SA I/C/9: Duncan to Arthur, 2 October 1936.

¹⁰¹TT DC and Forest Officer file: Dickson to DC South Nyer, 18 April 1936.

¹⁰²SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 21 October.

of yaws at Tumutumu hospital.¹⁰³ Chief Murigo, intimately interested in the case, backed the Presbyterians against his upstart relative: he sent ox carts to carry building materials from Magutu.¹⁰⁴ Murigo spoke at length at the opening of the new school.¹⁰⁵ Family argument shaded into the politics of schooling.

For the Kabiruini separatists, missionary neglect, governmental bureaucracy, and the chief's animosity combined to stifle their hopes for education. The government's District Education Board, which oversaw school openings throughout the district, ruled in October 1936 that Kabiruini's application for a school should be denied. They reasoned that "the desire to erect a church at that place sprang largely from the hope of causing embarrassment to the Church of Scotland which had obtained a site nearby."¹⁰⁶ Presbyterian missionaries' practiced ease with government rules stifled Kabiruini in law.

British law, colonial rules over the distances between schools, were the means by which missionaries and officials sought to squash "independent" schooling in Nyeri. Government bureaucracy disabled Kabiruini's hopes for education. Faced with the rigid power of the law, independent school leaders sought out means to argue. Barred from teaching in their new building, they held classes outside. One former teacher remembered hanging a blackboard from a tree to teach students.¹⁰⁷ They emphasized instruction in English, attracting pupils with the promise of language.¹⁰⁸ The DC, worried that their ambition would lead to disorder, recommended to Ruga in 1936 that "if he wished to have an independent school he must get in touch with Johanna Kunyiha (the president of KISA) and submit an application through him in the proper way."¹⁰⁹

Government demanded that the ambitious readers at Kabiruini play by its rules of

¹⁰³Oral interview: Peter Munene; "History of Ruare Primary School," private papers held at Ruare school, Iruri location, Mathira division, Nyeri district.

¹⁰⁴Oral interview: Peter Munene.

¹⁰⁵SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 20 November.

¹⁰⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1936.

¹⁰⁷Oral interview: Mwangi wa Ndemeyu.

¹⁰⁸Oral interview: Jotham Muturi.

¹⁰⁹SA I/E/10: DC South Nyeri to Dickson, 18 March 1936.

recognition. To Ruga's group the independent school bureaucracy looked like an opportunity to turn law in their favor. Lista Warutere, the first teacher at Kabiruini, described their strategy in this way:

Ngatia and Ruga sought out ways of getting recognition by the DC. So we came back and went to the independent church...we went to the district chair Wambugu wa Maina and even to Johanna Kunyiha, because we didn't have a leader, we couldn't send students to school, we couldn't get married. They said, go ahead, we will help you with the government.¹¹⁰

Kabiruini's readers engaged with the KISA hierarchy instrumentally. They saw in KISA's accomplished ease with the language of elections, regulations, book-keeping and other literate disciplines means of engaging with the colonial state. Bureaucratic discipline promised to relieve the oppressive burden of the law. Musa Kanja described the dynamic in this way.

The DC said "I have decreed that Ruare is to be the new school."...so Ruare was of the Scotland mission. But the church would never become united, and the independent people they wanted an independent one. Who is your leader, you independent people? Ruga is your leader. Ruga went to Nairobi and got some leaders from the independent church, and said are we not independents, can you give us a church?¹¹¹

Faced with the disabling power of the government's law, Ruga's group seized on the vocabulary of independency to forward their argument with the DC. As Lista suggests, British rules made them into "independents." Willy Jimmy Wambugu and Johanna Kunyiha introduced Ruga and Ngatia to Nairobi lawyers, the firm of Nazareth, who the independents paid to "help understand the laws." The lawyers helped them draft

¹¹⁰Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹¹¹Oral interview: Musa Kanja.

petitions to the local administration; on one occasion, Lista proudly remembers, they wrote to King George. They wrote that

'we are fed up with the government of Kenya, we are part of the British Empire, could we not be allowed outside education?' Therefore the DC was made to take our problem seriously.¹¹²

Colonial citizenship, and English discipline, weighted independents' words with bureaucratic sense and called the DC to attention. Independent church leaders also wrote on behalf of the Kabiruini people. Bishop Alexander applied for a church late in 1936, hoping to shame government with the 600 people meeting under the tree outside Kabiruini.

They are helpless, on many occasions when they are praying it begins to rain and as there are many children, some of them have died of exposure.¹¹³

Writing burdened the British with evidence of Kabiruini readers' commitment, their integrity. The active progress of Christian schooling shamed the British with Gikuyu hope. Bishop Alexander visited Kabiruini in the middle of 1936, baptizing hundreds at a fee of 1/50 each.¹¹⁴ Lista, the school teacher, wrote out a list of those waiting to be baptized, asking each to sign their name. Their signatures demonstrated their citizenship, and challenged the British. In October 1937 the DC found 220 pupils under instruction at Kabiruini, taught by Lista.¹¹⁵ He again ordered the school closed, this time posting three tribal policemen to guard the doors. The policemen were officered by Murigo's son.¹¹⁶ Government law and familial argument coincided. The DC prosecuted

¹¹²Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹¹³KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/3: Alexander to DC South Nyeri, August 1936.

¹¹⁴SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1936, entry for 26 July; oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹¹⁵KNA VQ/16/13: Intelligence report for South Nyeri, 1937.

¹¹⁶Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

Lista and Ruga under the Education Ordinance of 1931, which allowed the provincial administration to close schools not following the government syllabus.¹¹⁷ The independents' indiscriminate teaching of English was the chief piece of evidence for the state.¹¹⁸

Faced with the disabling legal power of the state, the independents at Kabiruini played creative bureaucratic games to deflect law's dangerous rigidity. Missionaries reported in 1937 that the Kabiruini people, operating their school illegally, claimed that the Governor himself had given them permission to carry on. More, they said they had the government's leave to teach English in the school.¹¹⁹ Bureaucratic games protected independents. Lista Warutere describes the strategy in this way.

We were taken to court by the DO for starting a school that was not recognized. They would come and find me teaching. The DO would try to disrupt the school and he would order the students to leave, but I would control them so the DO did not scare them. The DO ordered the school closed, but I pretended not to know him, and made him introduce himself. I said, "even I am an employee--my employer is Francis Ruga." They would go up and see Ruga, and he would say "yes, we are trying to get education. You have copies of our letters." The DO took us to court in Nyeri...I would show them copies of my teaching qualifications. When I was in the courtroom I would pretend I didn't know anything--I didn't know it was illegal and would never teach at an illegal school.¹²⁰

Kabiruini's readers played with the hierarchies of bureaucracy, turning the colonial demand that they speak the language of administration into a means of contesting the DO's authority. By calling himself an employee, by transferring responsibility for the illegal school to imagined structures of administration, Lista ingeniously thwarted the DO's efforts to locate a culpable party at Kabiruini. Lista's play with bureaucracy

¹¹⁷For the application of the 1931 ordinance to control the independents, see *KNA Educ/1/3284*: Director of Education to Colonial Secretary, 2 January 1940.

¹¹⁸*SA I/E/6*: Inspector of Schools, Central Province, "Kikuyu Independent and Karing'a schools," 1938.

¹¹⁹*TT Ministers file*: Calderwood to DC South Nyeri, 11 June 1937.

¹²⁰Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

protected the school from British rules by making it difficult for the eyes of the law to recognize guilt. Lista was fined 20/ for his part in the "illegal school"; Ruga, brought in to argue his case, argued that "he was elected by the community. If you want to fine someone you must fine the whole community."¹²¹ His fine of 120/ was paid by parents of schoolchildren. The government's law, founded on the culpability of individuals, foundered when faced by the solidarity of ambitious independents. Bureaucratic games protected independent schooling from disabling law.

The independents' creative play with bureaucracy upset governments' efforts to rule through law. Unable to control the school with legal means, the DC resorted to force, posting more policemen to guard the school.¹²² In December 1937 he went to Kabiruini himself, to explain the school's closing to the recalcitrant independents.¹²³ To Lista it was an invaluable opportunity to convert the inhuman disability of law into personally moral suasion. He described the meeting in this way.

After a year of writing to various people in London, the DC wrote to me and others and he was going to address the school on 22 December. I organized an elaborate reception with the children lined up with ribbons of paper. The DC was made to cut the ribbon and the children clapped and rejoiced and sang. The ribbon was 200 meters long. When the DC got in, he found the seating all arranged neatly, and found Johanna Kuniya and Willy Jimmy waiting for him. So the DC said the school was open, on the condition that Ruga not be the chairman...he said, "Ruga has done very badly, he has written to the Colonial Office and even to King George."¹²⁴

Lista remembered that 800 people attended the event. The DC wonderingly wrote that the meeting was "packed" with children.¹²⁵ Children's watching eyes, the ceremonial ribbon, the neatly arranged chairs challenged British responsibility with

¹²¹ Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹²² *KNA VQ/16/13*: Intelligence report, South Nyeri, 1937.

¹²³ *KNA VQ/16/10*: Intelligence report, South Nyeri, December 1937.

¹²⁴ Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹²⁵ *KNA VQ/16/10*: Intelligence report, South Nyeri, December 1937.

Gikuyu expectations. Lista's carefully-staged ceremony--a replica of hundreds of similar ceremonies, played out by British officials eager to impress Gikuyu with English dignity--shamed the DC with a literate *fait accompli*. Personal suasion, displayed in English ceremony, was for independents a means of challenging their disability in law. Legal culpability became magnetic charm. With their school opened, the independents at Kabiruini agreed to follow the government's syllabus in 1938, promising to "compare their syllabus with other schools."¹²⁶ The syllabus proved independents' responsibility, working Gikuyu ambition into the structures of state bureaucracy.

By playing with the state's rules of recognition, independent readers beat the British at their own writing game. Herein lies the heart of the argument. English was for independent readers a vocabulary of personal identity, engendering self-mastery among people worried by social disorder. Their practice with English was for independents like the Kabiruini readers a pre-text for engagement with the British. Independents' two-stage theory of education first obligated Gikuyu to learn British secrets, to master colonial vocabularies, in order to master themselves. And by mastering themselves, Gikuyu hoped also to master the English, the second stage of independents' educational theory. The English disciplines of letter writing, administrative hierarchy, and ribbon cutting were for Gikuyu readers a means to engage with the morally disabling rigidity of the state. Bureaucracy was a language for Gikuyu to make political claims within the colonial vocabulary of entitlement and citizenship. But readers worked up the energy for this bureaucratic project in fiercely local arguments over sexual misconduct and landed responsibility. Ruga and Ngatia's creative engagement with colonial bureaucracy was driven by moral anguish over class formation, spurred by landlords' attempts to redefine relations of tenure and by dispossessed tenants' efforts to earn productive self-mastery, mobilized by the flux in gender roles and sexual mores.

¹²⁶Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

Local politics and schism

I suggested above that local arguments over land and authority drove Kabiruini readers to make creative investments in English bureaucracy. But local politics could as easily be destructive, setting bureaucrats against one another. The old question of public power made KISA's leaders in Nyeri suspicious of Bishop Alexander. As early as October 1936, less than a year after his arrival in the colony, Alexander disagreed with leaders of KISA over control of the new church he was in the process of creating.¹²⁷ At issue was the question of church structure. Alexander, as bishop, wanted ten percent of baptismal and offertory revenues forwarded to him in South Africa once he completed training new clerics for his African Orthodox Church.¹²⁸ Alexander made his demands public at a meeting in 1937, at Johanna Kunyiha's residence in Ngangarithi. Hudson Kimunyi remembered Kunyiha's reply in this way:

After training, Alexander told them to be sending some amount of money to South Africa because of the training work he had done. So the elders, Kunyiha and others told Alexander "now when one goes from a *mundu mugo* (wise man, 'witchdoctor') over some ailment, he comes and is given his goats and when the work is over, they part. So we had called you to train our people and we have given you what concerns you. So go and leave us alone. We shall not send anything to you."¹²⁹

Alexander's baptisms and ordinations salved intimate wounds and fended off marital sorcery. But the bishop's insistence on an ecclesiastical tithe looked like dictatorship to Kunyiha and other Nyeri independents. The prospect of subservience to the Orthodox bishop made Nyeri readers fear that their vigorous investment in self-mastery would go to waste in a foreign land. Alexander reminded some of the impolitic

¹²⁷KNA PC/CP/8/7/3: Assistant Inspector of Police at Thika to Supervisor of Police, 2 October 1936.

¹²⁸Oral interview: James Mite-ini Weru.

¹²⁹Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

missionaries: Kunyiha's supporters argued that he had come from a foreigners' church much like the Scots at Tumutumu. Should not independents be self-reliant?¹³⁰ How could Gikuyu move from the mouth of the leopard to the den of hyenas?¹³¹ Alexander's tithe threatened to make independent schooling into wastefully dependent disaster, not self-mastering progress. Some remember that Kunyiha, livid at Alexander's perfidy, beat the bishop with a stick at the meeting at Ngangarithi.¹³² The following day, he and other KISA leaders went to Nairobi and withdrew the 600/ guarantee left with government as immigration duty.¹³³ Law promised to free independents from the impertinent bishop. Kunyiha wrote to Alexander in May 1937 giving him the date for his departure. He copied the letter to the DC.¹³⁴ It may have been too dangerous to meet Alexander face-to-face. Stiffly formal bureaucracy freed KISA leaders from the physical dangers of divisive argument. On 27 June Alexander ordained four independent church seminarians he had trained, and within weeks he was gone from the colony.¹³⁵

Not everyone assented to Kunyiha's angry dismissal of the bishop. Arthur Gatung'u, a reader from the Kikuyu Karing'a Education Association (KKEA) in Kiambu, had trained under Alexander and wanted to remain within the Orthodox church. Philip Kiande, KISA reader and clerical trainee from Nyeri, similarly supported Alexander. Supporters and critics of Alexander argued throughout 1937, both sides asking the DC to intervene on their behalf.¹³⁶ By 1938 the warring factions had grouped themselves into three churches. Kiande formed five rural church/schools in Nyeri into an African Orthodox Church. Gatung'u similarly allied KKEA churches with the AOC.¹³⁷ Both paid tithes to Alexander in South Africa, but the two AOCs did not cooperate. Even

¹³⁰Oral interview: Gerard King'ori Gachau.

¹³¹Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹³²Oral interviews: Paul Thuku Njembwe; Hudson Kimunyi.

¹³³Oral interview: James Mite-ini Weru.

¹³⁴KNA VQ/1/26: Johanna Kunyiha to Alexander, 5 May 1937.

¹³⁵Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, p. 121.

¹³⁶KNA DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1937.

¹³⁷KNA PC/CP/4/4/1: Nyeri district annual report, 1941; c.f. Anderson, Rosberg and Nottingham.

within the same communion, it was difficult to achieve regional unity. Stephano Waciira from Kagere and the remaining ordained clerics from KISA, hoping to forget the intimate disputes of the past, formed the African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPC). Some fifteen independent church/schools in Nyeri joined the AIPC, including Francis Ruga's school in Kabiruini.¹³⁸

Historians have usually explained the 1937 division between the AIPC and the AOC as a conflict in leadership, dwelling on the biographies of Alexander's trainees. The argument goes that Kiande and Gatung'u, both proficient English speakers, were friendly with Alexander and convinced their supporters to follow the bishop.¹³⁹ Kunyiha, Waciira, and Daudi Maina, in contrast, were suspicious of the bishop and set up their own church. That was certainly how the colonial administration saw the conflict: as a jealous argument among leaders over power and privilege.¹⁴⁰ But as I showed in the previous section, independent school politics were more righteously vigorous than personal feuds among bureaucrats. The division between the AOC and the AIPC in Nyeri was driven by older, local debates within school communities about *mbari* autonomy and generational unity. Local schools divided into warring church camps not in common obedience to dynamic leaders but because intimate tensions over leadership and politics made it difficult for any church to speak for all Gikuyu. The division of 1938 was structured on the deepest level by old debates over *ituika* and family politics, not by the personal jealousy of a few clerics.

I shall briefly illustrate what I mean by returning, once again, to Kagere school. As I showed in Chapter Six, Kagere's readers in the early 1930s invested their cash profits in the stone school building, tracking their expenses with cash books and other records. They thought their diligent investment in the common good, memorialized in

¹³⁸SA I/E/6: Inspector of Schools, Central Province, "Kikuyu Independent and Karinga Schools," 1938.

¹³⁹John Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 121; Rosberg and Nottingham, *The Myth of Mau Mau: Nationalism in Colonial Kenya* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1985), 129-30.

¹⁴⁰KNA VQ/1/26: PC to Chief Secretary, 19 Februaury 1941.

record books, with redeem Gikuyu children from the violence of the past. Kagere was *ituika* in action, readers' principled effort to work unity among the bitterly divided patriots of local family politics.

In 1937, Alexander's tithe divided local readers into violently opposed camps. At issue was the old question of *mbari* integrity and generational unity. Harrison Ngari Githenji, recently returned home to Kagere from waged employment as a clerk in the Rift Valley, began collecting funds for Bishop Alexander's tithe in mid-1937.¹⁴¹ He had met Alexander while away at work.¹⁴² Alexander's baptism inspired him with hopes for the future: he convened a meeting within days of returning home to "think about how we can develop our community."¹⁴³ The attendees were all of Githenji's *mbari*. Ngari complained that the leaders of his *mbari* "had not come to think about the children of this community can stop going for long distance before they get to school."¹⁴⁴ Githenji's biography records that immediately after the meeting the clan purchased a grinding mill for maize, and contacted Alexander about starting an Orthodox church. Orthodoxy in Kagere began with hopes of family progress.

To Kagere readers, hoping for generational redemption rather than *mbari* division, Alexander's supporters seemed like a jealous cabal. Hudson Kimunyi explained their view in this way.

They did not want to be attacked by any other yoke because they had run away from the yoke of those other people. They wanted to be independent (self-mastering) because now they had trained ministers.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁴²"Muoyo wa Harrison Gathenji Ngari," held in possession of Newton Ndiritu Muigai, Othaya town, Nyeri.

¹⁴³"Muoyo wa Harrison Gathenji Ngari."

¹⁴⁴"Muoyo wa Harrison Gathenji Ngari."

¹⁴⁵Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

Moral renewal, the Kagere readers knew, demanded self-mastery, moral and political agency. Alexander's tithe, eagerly embraced by Githenji's *mbari* partisans, seemed to the readers at Kagere to amount to dictatorship. Alexander's autocracy would sap Gikuyu self-mastery and moral discipline, turning Christianity into a vehicle of oppression instead of a discipline of renewal. Kagere's debate over church authority was about *mbari* authority and generational unity, now played out in the new theological language of independency and Orthodoxy.

By December 1937, local debate verged on violence. Githenji and his AOC followers held services in the Kagere church building early on Sunday mornings, followed by the independent readers in the afternoon.¹⁴⁶ Their cooperation was uneasy: Githenji wrote to the DC complaining that the independent readers sometimes tried to lock them out of the church building.¹⁴⁷ The argument was over property. Githenji's group maintained that they owned the church building, since they had contributed toward its construction. Independent church leaders disputed their claim on ownership. Readers' virtuous cash investments in the school building of the early 1930s now divided school-goers among themselves. Early in January 1938 the independent church leaders, led by the ordinand Stephano Waciira, blocked Githenji's group from entering the church. Interviewees from Kagere remember arising early in the morning to cut trees and blockade the road.¹⁴⁸ Joyce Wanjiru, a member of Githenji's group, recounted the incident in this way:

It was agreed that (Githenji's) people would go in the morning because they were the ones who had to come from far and that Kiande (the Orthodox church cleric) would be there to preside. When we went we found that the church was closed. The path leading to Kagere had trees fallen to prevent Kiande's car from passing. On getting to know this Githenji held the padlock and broke it away. On that day

¹⁴⁶Oral interview: Joyce Wanjiru.

¹⁴⁷KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/3: Harrison Gathenji and Ndegwa Waciuri to DC Nyeri, 23 December 1937.

¹⁴⁸Oral interviews: James Mite-ini Weru; Hudson Kimunyi.

there was a fierce war. No service went on. Those who supported Githenji were beaten. From that day (Githenji's people) never went there.¹⁴⁹

To Githenji and his supporters, it looked like a violation of rights to *mbari* property. He wrote to the DC complaining that he had been beaten, and asked for legal redress.¹⁵⁰ To the Kagere readers the violence was a necessary guard against foreign dictatorship. They were particularly worried about the AOC cleric Philipo Kiande, who reminded many of Bishop Alexander. Kiande had inherited his car from Alexander, the same car that KISA leaders had purchased with public subscriptions in 1935.¹⁵¹ Kiande was a thief, or a dictator whose churchly claims would sap Kagere of its wealth. Competing claims on public responsibility and property led to violence. Githenji, Henry Thirikwa, Benjamin Kahihia and other Orthodox supporters were beaten badly by a large crowd of independents.

Moral debate over *mbari* authority and property led to violent divisions in church. Githenji's group, fearful of independent readers' violence, flirted in early 1938 with rejoining the Presbyterians at Mahiga.¹⁵² Missionaries might protect them from Kagere readers' principled anger. But *mbari* patronage promised better protection. By late in 1938, the Orthodox partisans had begun holding services on land owned by Githenji's *mbari*, the Aithegeni.¹⁵³ The AOC became, more than even, an *mbari* project. Church people initially met under a *mukuruwe* tree, the sweet-smelling tree that elders used to propitiate angry ancestors. *Mbari* ancestors might guard the Orthodox from the violence of the past. So did government oversight. The Orthodox called their church Birithia. The name evoked the word by which Gikuyu called government policemen, *birithi*.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹Oral interview: Joyce Wanjiru.

¹⁵⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/2: Harrison Ngari to DC, 31 January 1938.

¹⁵¹Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁵²SA I/Z/6 (A): Tumutumu station log book for 1938, entry for 1 March.

¹⁵³For the permit, KNA DC/Nyeri/2/3/3: Ngari to DC, 16 September 1938.

¹⁵⁴This is my own speculation: for *birithi*, see Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 30.

The protective ties to *mbari* land and government law promised the Orthodox ways of rebuilding after the disasters of Kagere. By 1941 BIRTHIA was one of five AOC churches registered by government, under the clerical control of Philipo Kiande.¹⁵⁵

Local, long-running debates over *mbari* authority, generational unity and moral conduct drove church divisions at Kagere. Today, local people speculate on this divisive past by retelling stories of the church bell. Kagere readers, united in the early 1930s at the prospect on generational unity, had worked together to purchase the bell. Men and women contributed 20 cents each to purchase it.¹⁵⁶ Harrison Githenji, at that time a literate clerk and prominent member of the KCA, wrote the letter to order the bell from Rome.¹⁵⁷ Readers today proudly remember the bell's volume.¹⁵⁸ The church bell, positioned atop a trellis outside the church, crowned the moral redemption Kagere readers thought they were bringing about with a public voice.

During the trouble of 1938-39, Ndegwa Waciuri, relative of Harrison Githenji, stole the bell from Kagere. Hudson Kimunyi, then a young boy, remembered coming to ring the bell one Sunday morning and finding the rope dangling in the trellis, with the bell gone.¹⁵⁹ He professed not to know what had happened to it. Other interviewees remembered better. They claim that Ndegwa took the bell from Kagere because "we had contributed to it when it was bought."¹⁶⁰ Past investments of cash earned ownership of property. BIRTHIA loyalists remember that they gave the bell to Henry Thirikwa, another member of Githenji's *mbari*, who took it to Tetu to start an Orthodox church.¹⁶¹ Their memories make the theft look like a righteous reclamation of *mbari* property. Ownership, as ever, started at home.

¹⁵⁵SA I/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council, 16 December 1941.

¹⁵⁶Oral interview: Grance Mukunya.

¹⁵⁷Oral interview: Paul Inoi.

¹⁵⁸Oral interview: Joyce Wanjiru.

¹⁵⁹Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

¹⁶⁰Oral interview: Beatrice Nyawira.

¹⁶¹Oral interview: Paul Inoi.

Other readers, supporters of the Kagere independents, remember Ndegwa not as a *mbari* patriot but as a senseless spoiler of public unity. One remembered that Ndegwa was a former circumciser whose allegiance to Christianity was suspect.¹⁶² Some called him *Comba*, an insult that compared Ndegwa to a European, or a barbarian.¹⁶³ Ndegwa's theft of the bell played mischief with Kagere's hopes for public redemption. Kagere church loyalists remember that Ndegwa threw the stolen bell into a pool in the Mumwe river, at the point that divided Kagere location from Birithia.¹⁶⁴ The pool may have been one of the resting places for *ndamathia*, the dragon that had hallowed *ituika*. Was this Ndegwa's reply to Kagere readers' hopes for generational unity? Did Kagere's hopes for *ituika* sink with the bell, drowned at the hands of a jealous *mbari* clansman?

I have suggested that Gikuyu moral debate about land, political authority, and gendered order drove the local politics of independent schooling in 1930s Nyeri. Historians have been too quick to speculate on the links between independent schooling and nationalism, and not attentive enough to the moral quandaries that animated schism and local violence within schools. The literate discipline of the independent schools was simultaneously a language of moral debate and a grammar of colonial engagement. Christian civility offered a means of working private accomplishment into public criticism of British colonialists. My argument is, importantly, not simply a matter of perspective: local debates over morality were never an "offstage" transcript working parallel to public discourse. The moral, gendered arguments of peasants in Nyeri were rather the venue in which the meanings and function of literate bureaucracy were worked out, and into. Worried by class formation and gendered disorder, Gikuyu remade old and new disciplines to speak in intimately domestic debates over responsibility, power and the

¹⁶²Oral interview: Elijah Kiruthi.

¹⁶³Oral interview: Joyce Wanjiru.

¹⁶⁴Oral interviews: Paul Thuku Njembwe; Onesimus King'ori.

future. Their debate, as I show in the next chapter, continued in the 1940s and 50s, as readers and non, men and women, landlords and tenants argued over old moral questions of self-mastery in new Christian languages of conflict.

Chapter Ten

Mapping chaos Sorcery rumors after World War Two

This chapter is a social history of sorcery rumors in Nyeri district in the 1940s. My argument is that terrifying tales about latrines that killed kin, about needles that made women infertile, about government reports that turned diligent students into zombies, were ways that men and women terrified at rural capitalism's assault on their livelihoods mapped out the *terra incognita* of social change. For after the war, wealthy men, both British and Gikuyu, intruded into the most intimate aspects of peasants' livelihoods with an array of coercive reforms. The fences of land consolidation made it impossible for poor men and women to get access to productive land, leading many to become wandering wage workers. British needles and concrete latrine tops, meant to engineer Gikuyu into a modern sanitary regime, alienated smallholders' property and sucked the life out of children. Sorcery tales speculated on these technologies. They were a means of evaluation, rural people's creative attempt to come to terms with the moral chaos of colonialism. The British termed these tales agitation. We must read them for what they meant to people for whom such fears were very real.¹ I shall read rumors about needles and latrines as signposts, acutely sensitive attempts to concretize oppressive social relations. By mapping out rural capitalism's technologies, by speculating on the debris of British social engineering, Gikuyu men and women made oppressive relations of power visible. And by signposting the demoralizing wilderness of colonial power, by flagging the marks of class formation, sorcery tales gave directions to the insurgents of the future.

Class formation after the war attacked smallholders' property and made all Gikuyu argue about masculinity. As I show in the second section below, men and women argued about the unmaning of men in three overlapping spheres of argument: first, about

¹A point learned from Luise White, "Cars out of place: vampires, technology, and labor in East and Central Africa," in F. Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 436-60.

age and the means by which young men might achieve moral majority; second, about sexual potency and the problem of young men's infertility; and third, about property, the moral basis of gendered order. All of these were private matters, best walled off from public ears. Marital and sexual strife unglued households, and endangered Gikuyu social order. So did British social engineering. Post-war British social engineering intruded into the most intimate aspects of domestic life. Men and women knew themselves to be in a battle for posterity. Latrines smelled like corpses; needles killed children. British hygienic imperialism sucked the vitality out of people terrified at gender chaos. Gikuyu worries about the blood-sucking British were confirmed in 1950, when the government's Beecher Report undermined schooling, the institution through which readers hoped to manage social change. As I show in the third section, the Report turned the moral discipline of education into vagabondage, barring the majority of children from access to English learning. Readers' disappointment at Beecher, rural people's terror at the technologies of class formation, was the moral context for Gikuyu violence in "Mau Mau."

Class formation and property after the war

The Second World War fired up old Gikuyu arguments about land, generation, gender, and morality. Young Nyeri men went to work in great numbers during the war. A few went for service in the colonial army, the King's African Rifles. But British administrators worried about sedition were reluctant to admit Gikuyu men into front-line battalions. The vast majority of Gikuyu recruits from Nyeri were enlisted into service units as medical dressers, drivers, clerks, or laborers.² Some found it onerous work. A young Dedan Kimathi enlisted as an army sweeper in Nanyuki from 1944 after being expelled from Tumutumu primary school. Clad in a collarless shirt and shorts, he worked

²Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999), 88-89.

like a "scavenger," digging latrines and sweeping compounds. Kimathi, disgusted at his lot, deserted.³ Other young men, especially those with literate skills, thought the relatively high army wages a good bargain. Those with medical training earned an enlistment bonus of 20/, and an additional bonus of 20/ on being posted to the front.⁴ John Muriuki, for example, was a teacher in a Tumutumu primary school in 1940, earning a wage of 25/ per month.⁵ He enlisted in the army as a medical dresser, earning as much as 90/ per month while serving in Burma, Ceylon and Sri Lanka. The promise of high wages attracted literate readers to army service. Missionaries reported that whole schools disappeared in 1939 as older pupils and teachers enlisted in army service corps.⁶

Converts like those from Tumutumu turned the army into an extended course in Christian literacy, running catechism classes in army camps in the Middle East. Some 60,000 Kenya men were baptized while serving in the army.⁷ Missionaries at home worried about what would happen when the new catechumens returned.⁸ Charles Muhoro, Tumutumu reader and KAR Presbyterian chaplain, thought it an opportunity to win "backsliders, lukewarm Christians and also unbelievers to God."⁹ He baptized 17 men on one day in May 1942. Army service was the drill sergeant of Christian conversion. Sergeant Amos Ndegwa, Tumutumu reader serving in the Middle East, thought teachers left at home should learn discipline from their colleagues in the army. He wrote to Tumutumu teachers in 1945:

Hitler who is also foolishness is the one who is ruling in Gikuyu country. So you should be like soldiers who always yearn for victory like we yearn for victory in

³As described in H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975), 26.

⁴SA II/A/3: DC Nyeri to Tumutumu supervisor, 5 December 1945.

⁵Oral interview: John Muriuki.

⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1940.

⁷SA I/Z/7: Calderwood, "Kenya Colony," 1947.

⁸KNA CMS/1/97: African Christian Council (Anglican), meeting for 20-21 November 1940.

⁹SA II/C/36: Muhoro to Calderwood, 18 May 1942.

1944...Not one soldier can retreat a step to escape because there is no law for that. Now, you teachers are the soldiers on the front-line of the war you have.¹⁰

Ndegwa hoped the example of the armed services would enlist teachers in renewed battle against ignorance. Those left at home failed to heed the summons. School enrollments fell steadily throughout 1940.¹¹ Much of the drop came in the upper standards of rural outschools. Missionaries thought it due to the "lowering of the spiritual level" of the pupils. But there were demanding material reasons for young men's exodus from school. The shortage of school-goers, I show below, manifested the chaos of Nyeri smallholders' houses.

Crisis in commodity agriculture drove smallholders' impoverishment. The British constructed the Dried Vegetable Factory (DVF) in Karatina at the onset of the war, compelling farmers within a six-mile radius in Mathira division to grow vegetables and sell them at a fixed price to the factory. The factory was built on Gikuyu land, with the owners paid 20/ per year for its use.¹² Peasant producers for the factory were fined if weeds were found in their fields.¹³ Nyeri grain and vegetables fed British soldiers in the Middle East and India. The DVF profited some young men. Liliani Gachigua left school in Kiambu in 1939 to help his father plant cabbages, beets and other vegetables for the DVF on their farm in Iruri.¹⁴ He used the profits to make brideprice payments for his wife, and to fund school fees. But many Nyeri growers complained that the government's purchase price was insufficient to meet their costs: labor shortages meant that women

¹⁰SA II/C/36 Sgt. Amos Kanuhu Ndegwa, Middle East Forces to teachers at Tumutumu, 12 November 1945.

¹¹SA I/E/9: Dickson, "Some notes on the Tumutumu outschool system and its suggested reconstruction," 4 October 1940.

¹²KNA DC/Nyeri/1/2/1: Handing Over Report, 8 Jan. 1944.

¹³For a fuller history of the DVF, see Mary Wanyoike, "Karatina: Economic Chnges and their impact on the economic activites of Mathira Division, Nyeri District, Kenya, 1902-1963" (MA Thesis, University of Nairobi, Dec 1991), 120-30.

¹⁴Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

working in men's fields could demand as much as 40 to 50 cents per day.¹⁵ The rains failed in Nyeri, like other districts in central Kenya, in 1939 and 1943.¹⁶ Government had imposed a maize purchasing monopoly at the beginning of the war.¹⁷ In 1943, maize fixed by government at 10/90 per bag sold for as much as 100/ on the black market in Kirimukuyu. Excess maize was in high demand. There were localized food shortages throughout Nyeri early in 1943.¹⁸ Prices for essential foodstuffs skyrocketed; government rationed necessities.¹⁹ Tumutumu missionaries, worried about shortages, closed the boarding school in 1940. Responding to heated protests from parents, they reopened it in 1942 but could at best afford sparse rations for students.²⁰ Peasant farmers faced cash shortages, and cut back on their giving to the church. Church finance showed a deficit throughout the early 1940s.²¹ Missionaries threatened to read the names of those church elders who had not paid their tithes in public. The elders' court voted down the motion.²² Economic disability was embarrassing for big farmers.

But more than the farmers of the elders' court, smallholders were imperiled by the commodity crisis of the early 1940s. Lacking land to make profits from commodities, facing continued pressure from landlords, some smallholders became proletarians in the 1940s. Junior *mbari* members and tenants had been under pressure from landlords since the late 1930s: as early as 1938 clans around Tumutumu mission were clamoring for land to accommodate the landless.²³ Landlords in Nyeri seem to have furthered land consolidation at the expense of tenants and junior family members away at war. Some used plows to trump tenants' hoes, expanding their holdings by plowing up neighbors'

¹⁵SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council meeting, 25 August 1942.

¹⁶SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1940; KNA PC/CP 4/4/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1943.

¹⁷Bruce Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), 258.

¹⁸SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council meeting, 7-8 June 1943.

¹⁹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1943.

²⁰SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1943.

²¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1940.

²²TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 15 June 1940.

²³KNA DC/Nyeri/2/6/6: Jonathon Nganga to DC South Nyeri, 5 May 1938.

land.²⁴ Other landlords used colonial courts to wrest clan land from tenants. Land litigation increased markedly in 1941; missionaries reported that many of the disputes involved church leaders.²⁵ Many litigators, hoping to save on court fees, agreed to arbitration from chiefs or LNC elders.²⁶ Even so, by 1946 native tribunals in Mathira and North Tetu divisions had instituted double panels to deal with the backlog of land cases.²⁷ The DC and other officials favored “progressive” farmers with ploughs and well-terraced land in court.

British law propped up rich men’s ambitions, allowing them to consolidate landholdings. Some rich men became cattle barons during the 1940s. In 1943 the farmers of the LNC recommended that eldest sons should inherit fathers’ property as an unbroken block.²⁸ Primogeniture protected *mbari* property from division, but left junior sons and tenants imperiled, dependent on elder brothers for access to land. In 1950 the DC reported that primogeniture had become usual practice in Magutu and Ruguru locations as *mbari* elders consolidated their landholdings.²⁹ Land consolidation endangered junior sons and tenants. By 1944 the “average” family controlled 6.7 acres of land, down from 8 acres in 1936 and well below the 12 acres necessary to sustain a family.³⁰ But the averaged story of general land shortage concealed marked disparities of class. In 1950, nearly 40 percent of Nyeri’s land was held by smallholders owning from 2.5 to 5 acres. Some 8.4 percent of land in the district was controlled by families owning 15 or more acres.³¹ Land marked out differences of wealth between families: but cattle were the surest index of class formation. In 1960, the first year for which data are

²⁴KNA Educ/1/1586: LaFontaine, Chief Native Commissioner, “Native land tenure,” 1939.

²⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report for 1941.

²⁶KNA PC/CP/4/4/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1942.

²⁷KNA PC/CP/4/4/2: Nyeri district annual report, 1946.

²⁸SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council meeting, 13-14 December 1943.

²⁹KNA VP/2/2: District team meeting, 8 November 1950.

³⁰N. Humphrey, *The Kikuyu Lands* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945), 4.

³¹Kenya African Agricultural Sample Census, 1960-61 (Nairobi, 1961), 20-21.

available, farmers holding over 15 acres of land owned an average of 8 cattle.³²

Smallholders owning from 2.5 to 5 acres, in contrast, owned 1.5 cattle. Most of the big cattleholders lived in Mathira, home to the bulk of Tumutumu's schools. Mathira farmers also had the largest families in the district.³³ Land, cattle and fertile families made some Tumutumu readers a rural aristocracy.

Pressured by land shortages and by rising prices for foodstuffs, young men from land-poor families entered the labor market in droves during and after the war. In December 1941, 10,447 Nyeri men were out at work, up from 6,202 in October 1936.³⁴ In 1943 and again in 1947 Nyeri district produced the most migrant workers per capita of all districts in the colony.³⁵ Fifty-one percent of able-bodied men registered as wage laborers in 1947. Some men went to work for settler farmers in Laikipia and North Nyeri, who increased wages to attract workers. Others worked in Nairobi, staying away from home for long periods of time.³⁶ They were part of a highly stratified labor force. The 1947 labor census revealed that 2.2 percent of the total African labor force in Kenya worked in clerical employment; another 14.4 percent worked as artisans and skilled workers.³⁷ They earned relatively high wages. But it was increasingly difficult for marginally educated men to hope to attain such rewarding positions. Missionaries reported that a student who could have gotten a clerical job after graduating from St. III before the war now had to graduate from St. VI for the same job.³⁸ Clerical employment was thus beyond the reach of most smallholding men, undereducated from mixing school with labor in the 1930s. Fully 31 percent of wage workers in Kenya worked in unskilled, non-agricultural employment. Their wages increased marginally in response to wartime

³²*Kenya African Agricultural Sample Census, 1960-61* (Nairobi, 1961), 28.

³³*Kenya African Agricultural Sample Census, 1960-61* (Nairobi, 1961), 30.

³⁴*KNA PC/CP/4/4/1*: Nyeri district annual report, 1941.

³⁵*KNA PC/CP/4/4/2*: Nyeri district annual report, 1943; *KNA PC/CP/4/4/3*: Nyeri district annual report, 1947.

³⁶c.f. Special Labour Census, 1941, in *KNA DC/Nyeri/2/7/2*.

³⁷cited in Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 306.

³⁸*SA L/B/7*: Tumutumu annual report, 1939.

demand: but skyrocketing prices for basic commodities meant that real wages for migrants dropped precipitously in the 1940s. Farmers, traders and the educated climbed the ladder to wealth during the war; migrant workers and smallholding peasants trod the road downward to poverty.

Wages divided Gikuyu. So did government's soil conservation policy. Smallholding men and women left with small, eroded hillside plots after litigation found themselves increasingly subject to state conservation requirements during and immediately after the war. State officials in the 1940s were convinced that peasant farming practices, not land shortages, were to blame for soil erosion and land degradation in the reserves. Peasant farming, they reasoned, wore "the hillsides down to the subsoil" and would, in a few generations, make the reserve uninhabitable.³⁹ In the early 1940s, the DC and agricultural officials began to encourage chiefs to force peasants to plant up roadsides with grass and to terrace hillside plots.⁴⁰ Government intervention in peasant land use increased markedly after the war: in 1948, Nyeri chiefs compelled peasants to terrace 7,006 acres of land; in 1949, 10,408 acres were terraced.⁴¹ With men away at work, women were compelled to do most of the work. The traders and smallholders of the KCA protested in 1941 at chiefs' impositions on other men's wives: but the prosperous farmers of Harry Thuku's Kikuyu Provincial Association held meetings to assure government of its support and to harangue shirkers.⁴² With hilltop plots cultivated with plows, the wealthy farmers of the KPA had little to worry about. Small peasants on hillside plots bore the brunt of state agricultural policy.

Gikuyu anguish over growing divisions of land and wages sparked renewed debate over sexual discipline. Sexual debate during the boom of the late 1930s, as I showed in Chapter Seven, had manifested rural divisions over the gendered morality of

³⁹KNA Educ/1/1586: CNC, "Individual land tenure," 14 October 1938.

⁴⁰KNA PC/CP/4/4/1: Nyeri district annual report, 1941.

⁴¹KNA VQ/16/84: Nyeri district annual report, 1949.

⁴²KNA PC/CP/4/4/1: Nyeri district annual report, 1941.

wage work. Land shortage and class formation in the late 1940s made Gikuyu arguments over moral conduct more pressing. Wealthy farmers used wartime profits to finance bridewealth payments for second wives. On 11 July 1942, to take only one example, the Kirk Session disciplined no less than 11 deacons and elders for polygamy.⁴³ Gikuyu domestic accomplishment, more than ever, was a privilege of age and wealth. Wealthy older men monopolized wives, stifling young men's hopes for adulthood. The frequency of Christian marriages at Tumutumu dropped precipitously in the early 1940s.⁴⁴ Fathers demanded high brideprices for their educated daughters: one man paid as much as 800/ in 1940.⁴⁵ Young wage workers, sons of smallholders, had little hope of meeting such a price. They dallied with readers' daughters, leading to a marked increase in sex cases in church courts. Missionaries thought the immorality arose from the modern disintegration of old social restraints.⁴⁶ But Gikuyu elders and youth alike agreed that the crisis had more to do with property than with moral impropriety.

I suggest below that Tumutumu's moral crisis of the late 1940s was a crisis of manhood, of masculinity, driven by terrifying changes in property relations. Class formation, rural landlessness, sucked the virility out of young men. Young men looked like zombies: unable to marry, lacking cash or land, they were shadows of men, waifs without the substance of moral agency. As I show below, the crisis of masculinity was also a crisis of generational relations, a crisis of gender, and a crisis of property. The man problem compelled Gikuyu to argue among themselves in four overlapping spheres of debate. First, young and old debated the terms by which men could achieve moral majority. Second, men and women argued about marital discipline and masculine responsibility. Third, landed and landless disputed the morality of *mbari* closure, which

⁴³TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 11 July 1942.

⁴⁴TT Correspondence with Chogoria file: Philp to Irvine, 24 July 1942.

⁴⁵TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 14 September 1940.

⁴⁶SA L/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1940.

unmanned the poor. Fourth, all Gikuyu were concerned about how to get rid of the British, whose rule amounted to a morally disabling tyranny.

Arguing among themselves over the deep questions raised by the unmanning of men, Gikuyu told each other stories about needles that killed kin, about fences that laid waste to homesteads. Speculative tales about the debris of class formation were efforts at explanation, creative thinking about the origins of men's unmanning. For by telling stories about missionary needles and wealthy men's fences, Gikuyu posited that the moral disorder of class formation had malevolent, intended, origins. Stories about blood-sucking needles attributed blame for young men's delinquency on wealthy men, both white and black, making them look like sorcerers. Gikuyu knew sorcerers by their wealth. Their flocks prospered while others perished; their land was productive while others' went to waste. Sorcerers were moral and material kleptomaniacs, draining the life out of victims for personal gain. By telling each other stories about foreign technology, then, Nyeri men and women crystallized class formation as wealthy men's malevolence. Such tales proposed radical courses of action, calling for war against the unforgiving wealthy. Mau Mau's first murders in Nyeri were witch killings. By eavesdropping on tales of sorcery, I hope to understand the moral terms in which Gikuyu argued about class formation--and worked into an agenda of resistance to British power.

Spheres of argument

I. Generation

Debate between young and old, the first sphere of Gikuyu dispute, was about the terms by which young men could be agents within a morally disabling colonial economy. Landless and rootless, young men lacked the fertile evidence of integrity, land. Old men called on young men to work harder. Their conservative theory of morality, learned from the lessons of forest clearing, held that agency required sweat. Young men lacking land were delinquents. Scorned by their elders, young men in the 1940s began to think

through an alternate, radical theory of moral chaos. Inverting elders' logic, they claimed that wealthy men's greed, not youthful delinquency, was to blame for social disorder. Radical theory pinned social disorder on elders' jealousy, their irresponsible failure to show mercy. Elders' conservative theory of sweat and young men's radical theory of irresponsibility structured Gikuyu debate over land, masculinity, and class in the 1940s.

Soldiers back from war brought debate over the responsibilities of age home with them. They returned in the mid-1940s with cash in their pockets, the fruit of labors abroad. Many invested in schooling, turning ephemeral money into respectable profit for posterity. School rolls in Tumutumu leapt from 9,180 in December 1944 to 12,531 in October 1945, leading to shortages in supplies and teachers.⁴⁷ Missionaries reported that most of the new attendees were children. Soldiers in the ranks had learned their Christian lessons well. By 1947 the roll had swelled to 14,433, a record.⁴⁸ Missionaries noted that rolls fluctuated, however, with the seasonal labor demands of peasant households. Even returning soldiers did not keep children in class full time. Schooling in the 1940s, as before, demanded careful stewardship of family resources.

Returning soldiers converted war bonuses into capital investments in schooling, trade and public reputation. Some, formerly drivers in the army, bought old military vehicles and ran illegal transport businesses from Nyeri to Nairobi.⁴⁹ Others pooled their resources and formed associations in which to invest their cash. The Nyeri District Ex-Soldiers Friendly Association (NDESFA) hoped to sell members 20,000 shares at 50/ each to invest in cinemas, dispensaries, a bus service, and an import/export business.⁵⁰ Associations like NDESFA converted soldiers' private profits into a generational claim on Gikuyu power. At a meeting attended by 1,000 ex-servicemen in 1946, they resolved to establish welfare centers throughout Nyeri district, to organize sporting events, and to

⁴⁷SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1945.

⁴⁸SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1948.

⁴⁹KNA DC/Nyeri/1/2/1: Nyeri district Handing Over Report, 5 February 1948.

⁵⁰KNA PC/CP/8/5/4: DC Nyeri to PC Central, 3 April 1946

provide film shows for the general public.⁵¹ They were careful to note that undesirables like thieves and prostitutes were to be barred from the new welfare centers. Their integrity demanded that the soldiers distinguish themselves from the morally dissolute. NDESFAFA wanted to build a war memorial to Nyeri men who had perished in the war.⁵² Muranga soldiers wanted the same.⁵³ Private sacrifice, memorialized in stone, demanded recognition from the British--and from elders doubtful of young men's virtue. After the war, the soldiers worked together to buy the Dried Vegetable Factory in Karatina from government. The DVF would earn profit for soldiers. But more darkly, I mention here and will discuss below, there were rumors that its machines were killing children, wasting Gikuyu posterity with British sorcery. NDESFAFA promised to protect Gikuyu children from British malice by purchasing the machine and burying it in the Aberdares.⁵⁴ Cash investment protected Gikuyu polity from disaster and proved soldiers' integrity. The association's name, NDESFAFA, sounded like the English "Deserver": it reminded the British that soldiers' sacrifice deserved reward.⁵⁵ Did "Deserver" also articulate virtuous soldiers' answer to elders' reluctance to recognize their worth?

For to some elders, soldiers' claims that cash made for adulthood were irresponsible, grasping, the impudence of childhood. Waruhiu Itote, newly returned to Nyeri from Burma in 1946, proudly wagered his 1,000/ demobilization bonus that he possessed more cash than his herdsman father.⁵⁶ He was profoundly embarrassed when his father produced more than 3,000/ to win the bet. Elders shamed upstart soldiers with evidence that land made for wealth. Some elders asked for inflated brideprice from cash-rich soldiers: by 1949, young men paid as much as 100 goats and 6 rams, or a cash price

⁵¹KNA DC/Nyeri/2/10/9: African Welfare Association, meeting on 7 May 1946.

⁵²KNA DC/Nyeri/2/10/9: NDESFAFA, meeting on 10 March 1946.

⁵³KNA DC/Murang'a/3/1/11: Ernest Kabutha, President of Murang'a District Ex-Soldiers Association to DC Fort Hall, 12 February 1946.

⁵⁴Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

⁵⁵John Lonsdale notes the word play in NDESFAFA in "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 434.

⁵⁶Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 31.

of 2,240/ for the educated daughters of readers.⁵⁷ Missionaries tried to convince Christian elders to lower their price at a public meeting of church leaders at Kahuhia in 1943. The elders refused, reasoning that high bridewealth would encourage young soldiers to earn "huge salaries."⁵⁸ Adulthood, elders argued, could not simply be purchased with demobilization bonuses. It required hard work, long-term investments of sweat.

Some young men objected to the moral tyranny of self-mastering work. They improvidently dallied with readers' daughters: one parish court disciplined 7 young men for pre-marital sex in 1943; 15 in 1948.⁵⁹ The incidence of gonorrhoea and other sexually transmitted diseases increased markedly among young women in Nyeri on soldiers' return. Tumutumu hospital treated 20 cases of gonorrhoea and administered 15 abortions during six months in 1944; in 1945 they dealt with at least 77 cases of male sterility, 45 cases of gonorrhoea, and 19 abortions.⁶⁰ Missionaries reported that whole female wards were given over to gonorrhoea. Five times more women than men came in for treatment for the disease.⁶¹ Sexual indiscipline may have been some young men's response to elders' demand for hard work. Other young men married elders' daughters without paying brideprice. Mwati wa Kiruba's sister, for example, ran off in Nairobi with a male teacher from Tumutumu in 1940. Kiruba's father found her in Dagoretti, but perished while drinking poisoned beer with his daughter's suitor.⁶² Arguments over marriage and adulthood were deadly serious.

The sexual crisis of the mid-1940s manifested larger tensions between young and old over masculinity, over the moral achievement of adulthood. In an economy where

⁵⁷TT Nyeri District Law Panel, minutes for 1949 (n.d.).

⁵⁸TT Conference reports file: Meeting of CSM church people with CMS people from Fort Hall and Embu, Kahuhia, 23 August 1943.

⁵⁹TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minutes for 1943 and 1948.

⁶⁰Tumutumu hospital, Book of Admissions, held in possession of Mr. Mwaria, PCEA Tumutumu Hospital administrator.

⁶¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1940.

⁶²Oral interview: Mwati wa Kiruba.

land was scarce and low wages put brideprice out of reach of some wage earners, young men and old disagreed about the possibility that work would earn self-mastering adulthood for young men. Elders' conservative theory of moral agency shamed young men into diligent labor by reminding them of the need for hard work. Property, and sweaty labor, were in conservative thought the best proof of integrity. Elders used the sanction of property to control undisciplined young men, calling them to order with land and goats. In 1943 the Nyeri LNC ruled that men causing pregnancy-out of wedlock should pay a bullock and a sheep to locational elders and 10 goats and 10/ to the woman's family.⁶³ Sex, elders maintained, was a relation of property, an accomplishment of self-mastering work. By 1949, the price of indiscipline had increased: the elders of the Nyeri District Law Panel ruled that the fine for pregnancy out of marriage was 10 goats, 2 rams and 2 bullocks. More, the panel ruled that the child thus born belonged to the woman's father's family.⁶⁴ Elders expected that expensive fines would cure the wasted lusts of young men. They condemned young men who drank and smoked, reminding ex-soldiers that drink had always been the prerogative of the old.⁶⁵ Some soldiers had applied for permits to run beer canteens in the reserves, arguing that drinking had been their "hobby" during the war.⁶⁶ The government refused the application, and in 1949 the elders of the Nyeri LNC banned smoking and drinking among young men, reasoning that "this leads them to steal."⁶⁷ Youthful indiscipline was a problem of property for elders.

Elders' conservative theory of adulthood blamed the propertyless dissipation of youth for the sexual indiscipline of the late 1940s. Hard work and the proof of property, elders preached in an unrelenting sermon, earned self-mastering men rights to marriage and adulthood. But by the 1940s, some young men argued that elders' greed, not their

⁶³SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council, meeting 13-14 December 1943.

⁶⁴TT Nyeri District Law Panel file: Law Panel, draft conclusions, 30 November 1949.

⁶⁵TT Nyeri District Law Panel file: Law Panel, draft conclusions, 30 November 1949.

⁶⁶KNA DEF/10/63/22: Wanjohi Kamau, Fort Hall district, to Director of Manpower, 2 April 1947.

⁶⁷SA II/A/4: Nyeri LNC meeting, 16-19 May 1949.

own moral laxitude, was to blame for sexual indiscipline. Gakaara wa Wanjau gave voice to their radical theory. Son of the Tumutumu minister Johanna Wanjau, Gakaara enlisted in December 1940 as an army clerk and served in north Africa. He returned in 1945, and with a group of independent school teachers founded the African Book Writers Ltd. in Karatina.⁶⁸ Among his first pamphlets was *Uhoru wa Ugurani*, "The Matter of Brideprice Negotiation," published in 1946.⁶⁹ Gakaara's tale was about a young soldier, recently returned from war, who made marriage payments totaling 3,000/ to his prospective father in law. When he asked for his wife in return for his outlay of cash, the father, greedy for more, refused. His daughter, protesting, suggested to the young man that they elope to Nairobi together; the young man, a paragon of virtue, refused. The despondent girl committed suicide, leaving a note blaming the father for ruining her reputation. The father was jailed for his greed, condemned by a magistrate who pilloried unmerciful people. Gakaara concluded the tale with the moral "Blessed are the meek." It was a stinging rebuke to elders' conservative theory of moral conduct. Elders' greed, argued Gakaara, was to blame for family strife, not youthful immorality. High brideprice payments made it impossible for even the most hard working young men to achieve moral self-mastery. Greedy elders' failure to show mercy, *tha*, made them culpable for the sexual indiscipline and deadly familial sorcery of the 1940s. The message resonated in Nyeri. Gakaara's pamphlet sold 10,000 copies in its first run in 1946. In 1951, reprinted as "I want you to kill me," it sold an additional 5,000 copies.⁷⁰

Gakaara's radical theory harnessed young men's virtue, their Deserving willingness to uphold social order, to criticize wealthy elders. Elders' failure to show mercy, their greedy monopoly on wives and land, generating deadening familial tension. Wealth was supposed to be generous, enabling the poor to achieve moral agency by

⁶⁸Cristiana Pugliese, *Author, Publisher and Gikuyu Nationalist: The Life and Writings of Gakaara wa Wanjau* (Nairobi: IFRA, 1994), 39.

⁶⁹Reprinted as "I want you to kill me" in Pugliese, *Author*, 150-62.

⁷⁰Pugliese, *Author*, 45.

loaning out land and property. Gakaara argued that elders' failure to enable young men made them morally culpable, disastrously destructive. Radical theory was a theory of disappointed obligation, demanding that elders make good on the responsibilities of age.

At stake both in radical and conservative theories of adulthood was the critical question of masculinity. For as young men struggled to be adults in the 1940s, they struggled also to be men.

II. Masculinity

Gender, I suggested in previous chapters, was both for men and women an achievement of labor. Men and women became gendered beings through work on the land. Children were without gender: their clothing was undistinguished; their bodies unmarked by the scars of circumcision; they slept in mothers' homes. Work engendered Gikuyu. Class formation made it difficult for men to work their way into manhood. Without property, without land in which to invest sweat, wage-working men were immaterial, delinquent, suspect. Both elders and wives doubted their integrity. Male delinquency inspired women to argue about marriage. Wives used the flux in gender roles to renegotiate marriage obligations in the 1940s. They argued in church courts, as I show briefly below. They also argued out marriage in the East African Revival, the subject of the next chapter.

Class formation made it difficult for men to be men. Frederick Ruheni and Pilisila Wangari's 1947 marriage dispute before the Tumutumu Kirk Session sheds light on how intimately the crisis of land in the 1940s was tied to the vocabulary of marital strife. The couple had been married in church in May 1946.⁷¹ Ruheni, a laborer in Nairobi, paid brideprice in cash to Wangari's father. But by mid-1947, Ruheni had yet to build a proper homestead. Wangari, disgusted, went home in April 1947 to stay with her

⁷¹TT Tumutumu Parish file: Lamont to Solomon Ngari, 13 October 1947.

father's family. They came before the Kirk Session in July, she to seek divorce, he for reconciliation. The argument was over sexual infidelity. But more deeply, Ruheni and Wangari argued about masculinity, and about the obligations of marriage in a context where men could not be good husbands. Ruheni maintained that his diligent labor should earn Wangari's respect: he had not enough resources to build a house, he reasoned, but when cash was sufficient, "he (would) set up a big house to accommodate all his people."⁷² Ruheni hoped that the evidence of hard work would convince Wangari of his integrity and heal intimate marital wounds. Wangari countered Ruheni's labor theory of virtue with corrosive accusations of gendered dissipation. She would not go home with Ruheni, she said, for four reasons:

- 1.) She found Frederick was not a Christian because there was beer at his wedding.
- 2.) He himself drinks beer and brings other beer drinkers to the house.
- 3.) He brings prostitutes to his home to take beer and they disturb her a lot.
- 4.) He got an infection and cannot have sex, unless he is treated for the infection for six years.⁷³

The Kirk Session, shocked at Wangari's disclosures, sent Ruheni to the hospital for an examination and resolved that the couple should remain separated while a report was prepared. Moral indiscipline, sexual dysfunction and propertyless poverty combined to make the men of the Kirk Session doubt Ruheni's integrity as a husband. Without a house, Ruheni scarcely looked a self-mastering man. With a sexual disease, he scarcely looked a man at all. His lack of property, his sexual indiscipline, made church elders question his masculinity.

Chagrined, Ruheni appeared again before the Kirk Session in October to explain himself. He and Jeremia Waita, a Tumutumu pastor, had met with Wangari's father privately. Waita learned that Ruheni had paid the dowry for Wangari in full. She, when

⁷²TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 19 July 1947.

⁷³TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 19 July 1947.

requested to go home with Ruheni, had vowed that she would not.⁷⁴ Ruheni's virtuous payments of dowry convinced the Kirk Session of his integrity: they resolved that Wangari should be reminded of her marital obligations by the church pastors. Dowry proved Ruheni's fitness as a man and as a husband to the men of the Kirk Session. Male missionaries agreed, reasoning that if Ruheni had paid dowry, his wife was obligated to live with him.⁷⁵ Property, diligently rendered as bridewealth, was for European and Gikuyu men the best proof of manhood. Timely displays of property helped Ruheni hold Wangari to account.

Wangari and Ruheni's marriage dispute highlights both laboring men's difficulty in preserving marital order and women's creative ability to turn gender worries to their own ends. It took property, tangible evidence of moral majority, to convince the Kirk Session that Ruheni was a man. Laboring men like Ruheni found it hard to provide sufficient proof in the 1940s. Women like Wangari used the crisis of masculinity to renegotiate marital ties. Creatively playing with Christian categories of moral infraction, Wangari turned Ruheni's delinquency into a language of marital debate. In her accusations of sin, in her claims about Ruheni's delinquency, we may eavesdrop on the moral languages in which men and women argued in the 1940s. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Low wages and eroded land made it difficult for husbands to call wives to marital discipline. World War II had sparked renewed male fears of female prostitution. Some Nyeri women went to Nanyuki to work in the military camp as prostitutes during the war. They were accommodated in army-run brothels, administrators' effort to keep down the risk of venereal disease for soldiers.⁷⁶ Others worked in private houses. They plaited their hair and put on nice shoes, remembered one old woman.⁷⁷ Virtuous girls were

⁷⁴TT Tumutumu parish file: Kirk Session minute for 11 October 1947.

⁷⁵TT Tumutumu parish file: Lamont to Solomon Ngari, 13 October 1947.

⁷⁶For military brothels, see Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 160-66.

⁷⁷Oral interview: Monica Muumbi.

careful only to comb their hair: if they had plaits they were likely to be mistaken for prostitutes. Prostitution demanded circumspection of virtuous women. It outraged Gikuyu men. The prosperous elders of the LNC heard in 1947 that "Indians had been seen at Ruringu Market on Saturday and Sunday attempting to seduce African girls and women." They ruled that Nyeri town should be closed to women on Sundays; on weekdays the markets should be closed at 4 p.m. to keep market women from dallying.⁷⁸ The LNC blamed sexual indiscipline on women traders with cash in their hands.

Other men blamed women's disorder on young men's failure to master themselves. One government employee in Nyeri put it this way in 1952:

A number of young men in Kikuyuland depend on the labor and sweat of their mothers and sisters and wives to feed and maintain them. If they get a job it is only for a few months in order to pay taxes and buy clothes. They are to be found hanging around trading centers playing draughts or in drinking parties. Such a class of idle men is always a dangerous one.⁷⁹

Guarded by the achievement of property, senior men blamed gendered disorder on the moral dissipation of the young. Young men refused to master themselves: hanging about playing draughts, they were indolent, delinquent. More, they were unmanly, depending on women's work for their sustenance. Young men's delinquency threatened to invert the gendered order of Gikuyu households, leading to moral chaos.

Blaming delinquent young men and cash-wealthy women for moral decay, elders used long-established means to ensure moral conduct of wayward girls. Church courts were inundated with cases of female circumcision in the late 1940s. Tumutumu's church court dealt with only 3 circumcision cases in 1943, but heard 14 in 1948, 9 in 1951 and 14 in 1952.⁸⁰ Missionaries worried that the "hard won position taken by the Church

⁷⁸TT LNC Minutes file: LNC meeting, 10-13 November 1947.

⁷⁹KNA VP/2/14: "Memorandum by Mr. Kanyua," in 16 December 1952.

⁸⁰TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minutes for 1943, 1948, 1951 and 1952.

against the mutilation of women appears to be in danger of being lost," and blamed the resurgence of circumcision for the moral crisis of the late 1940s.⁸¹ But circumcision was for many men and women a cure for sexual indiscipline, not its cause. Mothers took the lead to guard daughters from immorality, often against fathers' objections. Shadrack, a deacon of the Presbyterian church in Nyeri, complained to the Kirk Session in 1945 that his wife, not he, was to blame for his daughter's circumcision.⁸² He asked that his wife be excommunicated. Mothers' efforts to maintain sexual order generated Christian condemnation from some husbands. Other men used careful strategies to balance family order with Christian discipline. Tito Muriuki, elder from Kianjogu and son of one of the landholders who had given land to the mission in 1908, was excommunicated in 1940 for having his daughter circumcised.⁸³ In 1950, when all of his daughters were grown, he repented before the Kirk Session. More, he returned his wife to her father's home, and married another woman.⁸⁴ The discipline of daughters required circumspection of Christian fathers, who strategically severed ties with the church to shore up daughters' discipline through female circumcision. Muriuki was not alone: in 1948 Tumutumu readmitted some 60 former communicants who had been banned in the late 1930s and early 40s, many for circumcising daughters.⁸⁵ It was the 40th Jubilee of the founding of the mission. It appears that many fathers and mothers celebrated the occasion by reknitting the Christian ties thoughtfully severed by their virtuous investment in daughters' morality.

Christian men and women met the challenge of gendered crisis pragmatically: circumcision engendered young women, turning them from potential prostitutes into virtuous moral agents. Tumutumu's courts were in the 1940s reluctant to pass judgment

⁸¹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1947.

⁸²TT Parish file: Shadrack at Nyeri to Tumutumu Kirk Session, 18.9.45

⁸³TT Ordinations book for elders.

⁸⁴TT Coci ya Tumutumu, minute for 18 November 1950.

⁸⁵TT Tumutumu Kirk Session, minutes for 1948.

on such intimate family decisions. They, too, were pragmatic about family strife. Elders feared that husbands and wives, intimately divided by arguments over gender roles, would turn sorcery against the court. In 1947 the Nyeri LNC ruled that all those suspected of witchcraft, Christian or not, should take a *muuma* to prove innocence or guilt.⁸⁶ Those who refused to take the oath were assumed to be guilty, and were obligated to pay 2 goats to the clan of the affected person. Fears of sorcery made elders dispense with Christian principles, conjuring up old means of protection against the threat of disaster. Fearing sorcery, worried church elders increasingly refused to hear marriage disputes, or used older methods to adjudicate complicated private affairs. In 1949, for instance, Marjory Waringa appeared before the Kirk Session claiming that her child had been circumcised without her knowledge. Her husband, Meshak, was a government headman. The Session carefully ruled that it could not deal with the case: it belonged to father, grandmother and grandfather to determine guilt.⁸⁷ Marital strife, and political prudence, made it dangerous for the church to interfere on private family matters. Some elders used older, better established means to guard themselves from sorcery. Jeremiah Waita, Tumutumu minister, asked both parties in a 1940 case of premarital pregnancy to take a *muuma*, a dangerous oath, to identify the guilty party.⁸⁸ One of the accused protested that it was Waita's job to determine guilt, arguing that "you as the doctor should diagnose the disease presented to you." But ministers and elders alike thought that oaths were good protection against the witchcraft of jealous husbands and wives.

Christian elders' worries about sorcery illustrates how dangerous, how pressing, was marital strife in the 1940s. Husbands and wives argued openly about private matters, publicizing marital infidelity, male infertility, beer-drinking, prostitution, and other secret sins. Their arguments threatened to destroy Gikuyu polity. For elders knew that family

⁸⁶ *TT* LNC Minutes file: LNC meeting, 11 August 1947.

⁸⁷ *TT* Kirk Session, minute for 25 August 1949.

⁸⁸ *TT* Ministers file: Isaac Gakui, Tambaya school to elders of Kangaita parish, 13 December 1940.

strife was best kept secret from public hearing. Husbands and wives were supposed to resolve their differences at home: proverbially, "the door of one's hut is not taken to close another's hut."⁸⁹ Carefully-fenced homesteads were an accomplishment of self-mastery: by walling out the wild, men civilized the forest and marked out a terrain of domestic reproduction. The self-mastery of husbands, the virtue of wives, demanded that family matters be screened off from public consumption. The marital strife of the 1940s terrified elders by threatening to dissolve households. Elders' worries would vitally shape their reactions to East African Revivalists' public confessions of sin, the subject of the next chapter.

But more than generalized worries about family dissolution, Christian elders were terrified that sorcery accusations would be turned against them. Fenced in by land enclosure, castrated by their inability to pay brideprice, poor men in the late 1940s speculated in song and in rumors that the wealthy were indeed sorcerers, *ereri*. Their land, cattle and fat children came at others' expense. Sorcery stories were radical theory in the active voice, condemning the wealthy for their greed. More, they implicitly proposed radical, violent solutions to the problem of class formation.

III. Property

We can hear something of land-poor men's terror at the moral disability of landlessness in Vincent Mwaniki's 1947 plea to the Nyeri District Commissioner for land:

I am in severe trouble due to lack of residence and food for the family, as I am landless even a small piece of ground on which to farm would enable me to fight for them. The family is ever miserable. I have endeavored to obtain a plot from people but regret to say without success...Throughout my life I have always been a beggar on the land, according to what my father used to be...I am a student and very conscious of my object in work, and an able-bodied man; I can stand

⁸⁹Barra, *1,000 Kikuyu Proverbs* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1994), 95.

strenuous work as I am fully understanding the rules, especially soil erosion, to enrich the soil...my father was a poor man, has suddenly died and left my mother with my younger brother being 14 years old, now however that I have got a wife with one boy being 12 years old really I am awfully worried about them, surely they cry, and their condition proved to be unhealthy. I try hard to work, but without land I cannot do more than just keep the wolf from the door.⁹⁰

Before the British Gikuyu had worked hard to keep wild animals from homesteads, investing sweat to clear the land of trees and to build social order. In the 1920s, land-poor young men had built up fertile homesteads in school, using the cash wages of clerking to wall out uncivilized danger and protect homesteads. But by the 1940s, men like Mwaniki found little hope that sweat would earn domestic integrity. A tenant on the Catholic estate in Mathari, Mwaniki hoped that his diligent labor against soil erosion would earn a grant of land from government. He was disappointed. In his desperation Mwaniki was not alone: a 1945 survey found that 24 percent of landholdings in Gikuyuland were smaller than the 2.4 acres necessary for bare subsistence. Wealthy men consolidated their holdings in court. Mathira and North Tetu native tribunals had to institute double sessions to deal with the backlog of cases.⁹¹ By 1952, government agricultural inspectors in Nyeri could note that

where before there was open scrub and scattered patches of cultivation, there is now a countryside of hedged and fenced holdings with a large proportion of grass and many progressive African farmers.⁹²

Government approved of fences: they demarcated landholdings into manageable portions and held owners accountable for land conservation within their bounds. Wealthy elders and progressive farmers similarly approved of fences: they kept out jealous tenants

⁹⁰KNA VP/1/27: Vincent Mwaniki, Ihururu sublocation, to DC South Nyeri, 21 July 1947.

⁹¹KNA PC/CP/4/4/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1946.

⁹²KNA Educ/1/601: Member for Agricultural and Natural Resources, "African development in Kenya, 1946-55: Land, Livestock and Water," Nov. 1952.

and protected valuable cattle. The LNC had imported high-grade bulls in the late 1930s and early 1940s, purchasing them from settlers in the Rift Valley.⁹³ They hoped to improve the local zebu breed with better quality stock. Wealthy farmers benefited most: a 1960 survey found that while half of Nyeri's cattle were owned by farmers with 5 acres or less, farmers with 10 acres or more were much more likely to own improved stock.⁹⁴ The farmers of Mathira division, home to most of Tumutumu's schools, benefited most. In 1951, the DC thought that Mathira division had the largest percentage of paddocked land in the district.⁹⁵ By 1960, Mathira farmers owned nearly half the cattle in Nyeri district.⁹⁶ Mathira farmers were much more likely to own improved cattle than farmers in other Nyeri districts. The readers of Tumutumu's schools were becoming cattle barons.

Smaller farmers feared that the fences and cattle paddocks of land enclosure meant disaster. Smallholders' fears at the fences of land consolidation stoked Nyeri's cattle war in the mid-1940s. In 1942 the LNC ruled that all cattle in Nyeri district should be dipped against rinderpest.⁹⁷ They hoped to protect their investment in high grade cattle, which were more susceptible to the disease than local breeds. All farmers were obligated to help pay to construct the dips; in addition the LNC charged 1/ per head to perform the operation.⁹⁸ Late in 1945 rumors circulated throughout the reserve that cattle were dying as a result of the dipping.⁹⁹ One informant, Paul Thuku, thought that 6 million cattle died from the LNC's injections.¹⁰⁰ The state did cull some cattle, always the unimproved breeds of smaller farmers. Some 1,012 head were culled in Tetu in 1945. The DC approvingly noted that meat consumption had increased.¹⁰¹ But Thuku's

⁹³SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council, meeting 25 February 1942.

⁹⁴Kenya African Agricultural Sample Census, 1960-61 (Nairobi, 1961), 20-21. See also Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 432-33.

⁹⁵KNA VQ/16/88: Nyeri district annual report, 1951.

⁹⁶Kenya African Agricultural Sample Census, 1960-61 (Nairobi, 1961), 28.

⁹⁷SA II/A/4: Nyeri Local Native Council, 25 Feb. 1942.

⁹⁸SA I/A/41-42: Nyeri LNC meeting, 6 March 1940.

⁹⁹SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1946.

¹⁰⁰Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

¹⁰¹KNA DC/Nyeri/1/2/1: Handing Over Report, 20 September 1945.

numbers highlight the wider scale of rural peoples' fears over the cattle dipping. Smaller farmers were terrified at the blatant expropriation of household resources threatened in the dips. Early in 1946 a crowd at a government LNC meeting attacked Muhoya, Turmutumu reader and government chief in Tetu division. He barely escaped, bolting in a taxi standing nearby.¹⁰² Some say the crowd tried to burn him, the punishment for sorcerers. Government guarded him with a police force for several months after the attack, and charged 25 persons with riot.¹⁰³ The LNC reversed the compulsory cattle cleansing ordinance in one division but maintained it in Tetu, punishing the perpetrators of Muhoya's attack. They refused to learn the lesson: most people stayed away from Muhoya's public meetings for months, drawing government sanctions.¹⁰⁴

What are we to make of Nyeri's cattle conflict? The easiest answer is probably correct: a smallholding peasantry refused to underwrite the ambitious profit of wealthy farmers. But the moral vocabulary of the conflict needs a deeper explanation.¹⁰⁵ Paul Thuku and others feared that the needles of the cattle cleansers would lay waste to smallholders' property. There were rumors that needles would similarly kill off Gikuyu children. The government in 1946 released a study of Nyeri district recommending that a considerable proportion of Nyeri's "excess" population would have to be resettled to ensure agricultural productivity.¹⁰⁶ Many Nyeri people thought the report sounded like genocide, reported the DC: they feared that half the African population was to be evacuated, the other half sterilized with vaccinations.¹⁰⁷ In 1948 the Nyeri LNC ruled that women could not have operations at British hospitals without the consent of husbands.¹⁰⁸ Even wealthy elders thought hospitals were dangerous place. Wage-earning

¹⁰²KNA PC/CP/4/4/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1946.

¹⁰³SA I/B/7: Turmutumu annual report, 1946.

¹⁰⁴KNA PC/CP/4/4/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1946.

¹⁰⁵I here follow Lonsdale, "Moral Economy," 434-35.

¹⁰⁶N. Humphrey. *The Kikuyu Lands* (Nairobi: Government Printer. 1945).

¹⁰⁷KNA PC/CP 4 4/1: Nyeri district annual report. 1946.

¹⁰⁸SA II/A/4: Nyeri LNC meeting. 17-20 May 1948.

men in Nairobi agreed about the danger of hospitals: the "40 Group" met for the first time in 1947 and passed resolutions banning injections for children. They also banned cattle dipping, and sent armed men to Tetu, Muhoya's division, to close down the dips. They attacked and killed Muhoya's brother for opposing them.¹⁰⁹ Needles were a deadly business. Tumutumu's hospital treated 21,803 new outpatients in 1947, but only 7,513 in 1948.¹¹⁰ Missionaries attributed the drop to an increase in fees: they were raised from 20 cents per day in 1947 to 40 cents in 1948. But there was a darker side to the drop in hospital attendance. Some thought the hospital was populated by zombies, and staffed with devilish doctors. Wilson Kariuki wrote to the Tumutumu Presbytery late in 1947 to complain that Peninah, his niece, had languished in the hospital for fully 1 year and 9 months without recovery. When she was finally discharged, the white doctor beat her severely.¹¹¹ Kariuki, enraged, went to the hospital and beat a nurse in retaliation. Imprisoned by the DC, he accused the doctor of forsaking Christian virtue for private malice:

It's the work of the doctor to administer medicine and to console the sick through hospitality and prayers, the sick are supposed to be treated well to enable them to receive the Lord so as to get salvation in their lives. Now, the hospitality the sick get in mission hospitals is a serious beating...I never knew that people in God's communion could have curses in their hearts. Had I known that I could never have taken Peninah to Tumutumu hospital. Because I have learnt that they have curses, that's why I have decided to quit everything related to this C.S.M. Church.¹¹²

Stories about needles that sucked African blood, about patients made into victims of cursing doctors were current all over East Africa in the late 1940s.¹¹³ Kahinga

¹⁰⁹H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975), xxx.

¹¹⁰SA I/C/1: Tumutumu hospital reports, 1947 and 1948.

¹¹¹TT Maciira maria maingi file: Wilson Kariuki to Tumutumu Presbytery, 1947.

¹¹²TT Maciira maria maingi file: Wilson Kariuki to Tumutumu Presbytery, 1947.

¹¹³c.f. Luise White, "'They could make their victims dull': Genders and Genres. Fantasies and Cures in Colonial Southern Uganda," in *American Historical Review* (December 1995): 1379-1402.

Wachanga was surprised in 1952 to see a friend from Nyeri who he thought had been slaughtered in 1940, taken by the anemic Nairobi fire brigade for his blood.¹¹⁴

Missionaries dismissed stories like these as untrue. We must read them less for their truth or falsity and more for what they reveal about how Gikuyu understood their situation. For in the same year that the 40 Group warned Nyeri people about the needles of the cattle dips, missionaries noted that patients in Tumutumu hospital had begun to request a new drug, penicillin, by name.¹¹⁵ It was administered by injection. Gikuyu were discriminating in their condemnation of needles. What was being opposed was not the needles themselves. Gikuyu distrust of the needles of rural cattle dips had to do with whose cattle, and children, were subjected to the injections required by an increasingly intrusive state power. Fears over needles were fears that a foreign power would lay waste to smallholders' households.

Sorcery rumors put a name, a threatening face, to the disabling flux of moral decay. Land shortages, wealthy men's fences, low cash wages, all made it difficult for men like Vincent Mwaniki or Frederick Ruheni to establish their households. Class formation destroyed familial order. It unmanned poor men, and made women whores. Gikuyu speculated on the roots of moral chaos with stories about needles and fences. Needle tales like those that circulated during the cattle war concretized oppressive social relations, giving tangible form to the processes that Gikuyu men and women knew to be de-gendering them. Sorcery tales were for men and women terrified at rural capitalism's inhuman face a means of humanizing oppression, a way to map out the wilderness of social chaos. Sorcery rumors were also a means of speculating on British power, which after the war intruded upon the most intimate arenas of family life with an array of needles, latrines, and other technologies. This "second colonial occupation" was

¹¹⁴Kahinga Wachanga. *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975), 9.

¹¹⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1947.

government's effort to manage Gikuyu families, and property, for the modern colonial future. Gikuyu knew well that their posterity was at stake. By signposting British power, by talking about the technologies of colonial social engineering, sorcery rumors mapped out a terrain of resistance for the insurgents of the future.

IV. The Problem of the British

After the war, state power seemed to Nyeri smallholders to be increasingly arbitrary, and malevolent. Government policy on the Karatina Dried Vegetable Factory fed peasants' worries. In the wake of the war, government proposed to sell the factory, first to a British firm, later to a private Indian developer, Shams ud-Din.¹¹⁶ It looked like theft to the clans on whose land the factory had been built. They protested to the LNC; one LNC elder was deposed for claiming that the DC favored European interests.¹¹⁷ There were rumors that Gikuyu posterity was threatened by the machines of the DVF. The soldiers of NDESABA, wealthy with cash and eager to prove their corporate integrity, hoped to bury British sorcery. Liliani Gachigua, a member of the Association, explained their motives:

The whites wanted a machine which would help cultivate 20 miles of land...In fact if the 20 square miles had been taken, the entire Mathira population would have gone! We said we did not want it and it was even reported to the press. The committee was about 40 people. We went to Nyeri and we said the (LNC) was like a leopard in our eyes and the whites are buffaloes, he did not help us. We knew that if they took we would not benefit. It's like the Gikuyu say: "a piece of meat is not thrown away, not before the bone has been chewed." This means it's always good to try to the end. We said we cannot agree. The men from the war agreed to buy the machine and bury it!¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶*KNA* PC/CP 4/4/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1946.

¹¹⁷*TT* LNC Minutes file: LNC, meeting 10 February 1947.

¹¹⁸Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

Encouraging themselves to persevere with a proverb about commitment, the ex-soldiers used cash to protect Gikuyu land and posterity from the rapacious greed of the government. They approached the governor in 1946 and asked to buy the factory. The governor refused. One ex-soldier remembered that government asked for too much money, 8 million shillings.¹¹⁹ Another, Gachigua, thought the governor motivated by jealousy: a white woman had advised the governor that the soldiers' proposal "was not good because it would encourage intermarriage between whites and Africans."¹²⁰ Fears about posterity were at stake on both sides of the DVF debate. After their initial rebuff, the ex-soldiers reorganized themselves as a new company, the "United Companies of Muumbi Factory."¹²¹ They pledged 6 million shillings to buy the factory. Muumbi was the Eve of Gikuyu ethnogenesis, the mother of the "nine full" clans. She matched the jealously barren white woman with the soldiers' own hopes for posterity. The soldiers' cash investment promised to spawn Gikuyu progeny against British malevolence. The governor was unimpressed with the soldiers' fertile ambition: he refused the Companies of Muumbi and ordered the factory moved to Thika district, there to process pineapples for export.

Accusing stories about barren white women got directly to the heart of the matter. At stake in Gikuyu over British machines and needles was the critical question of posterity, the possibility of progeny. Land crisis threatened men's virility, making them into zombies. British needles sucked life out of women, and killed children. Fertility, the very powers of procreation, were endangered by the needles, fences, and machines of the 1940s. It was a cuttingly revealing critique of British technology. For after the war, the British used technology--latrines and needles--to organize the most intimate aspects of peasant livelihoods. This "second colonial occupation," in Nyeri as elsewhere in Kenya,

¹¹⁹Oral interview: James Wamugunda.

¹²⁰Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

¹²¹*KNA PC CP/4/4/3*: Nyeri district annual report, 1946: Wanyoike, "Karatina," 130.

played out as a struggle over peasants' labor time and domestic arrangements. Household hygiene was at the center of state plans for a reformed peasantry. Plague afflicted the Nyeri reserve in 1936. Officials hoped to limit the disease, and teach lessons about hygiene, by insisting on new standards of cleanliness for peasant homesteads. The DC ruled in 1937 that all households should clear bush for a 10 yard radius to discourage rats.¹²² More, peasants were supposed to construct "rat-proof" stores to protect grain, fitting the legs of grain stores with tin to keep the vermin from climbing them.¹²³ By 1940 the LNC spent as much on the materials to make the new stores as it did on rural education.¹²⁴ Schoolchildren competed to kill rats, presenting their tails to the DC in exchange for prizes.¹²⁵ Older men and women were not so eager: government inspectors burned houses with grass roofs that harbored rats, and overturned the grain stores of those who refused to install the new tin legs. Informants remember the late 1930s as the time when the old round houses with grass roofs finally disappeared, many burnt by state officials.¹²⁶ It was a disaster for smallholders who could scarcely afford the tin roofs and square houses of wealthy readers. There were protests in Tetu over the anti-rat campaign, in which at least one headman was beaten for disturbing household grain stores.¹²⁷

Anti-plague campaigns brought destructive state authority to bear on smallholders' households. State-led hygiene was a problem of domestic order for worried peasants. After the war, state efforts to reform Gikuyu domestic production put latrines at the center of sanitary debate. Gikuyu were always careful of their feces: adults defecated in bushes away from fertile homesteads; children went to the household rubbish heap to relieve themselves. Plague in 1936 inspired the government, for the first time, to take an active role in rural waste disposal. The Director of Education insisted on cement-topped

¹²²*KNA* DC/Nyeri/1/1/3: Nyeri district annual report, 1937.

¹²³*KNA* DC/Nyeri/1/5/1: DC Nyeri, Safari report, December 1936.

¹²⁴*SA* II/A/4: Nyeri LNC meeting, 27 August 1940.

¹²⁵Oral interview: Daniel Muriithi.

¹²⁶Oral interview: Jerida Kirigu; Mwangi wa Ndemeyu.

¹²⁷*KNA* VQ/16/12: Intelligence report, Nyeri district, June 1937.

latrines for all school compounds.¹²⁸ The P.C. wanted more, arguing in 1938 that the LNC should force householders to build latrines. He reasoned that latrines were responsible for the "good health of the Europeans."¹²⁹ After the war, the provincial administration, backed by an array of government scientists and domestic instructors, became more insistent about latrines. In 1949, the LNC ruled that the head of every household should dig pit latrines three feet in depth. Those who refused to use latrines were subject to a fine.¹³⁰ Government health inspectors toured the reserves, searching out householders who neglected to dig latrines and clear bush around homesteads. The sanitation campaign was a domestic disaster for some, remembered Mwangi wa Ndemeyu:

Latrines were dug by some specialists from the government. They used to wear shukas emblazoned with the letters LNC. They went around and would even report on those homesteads that were not swept and even homes that could be found with dead rats. On reporting the local headman would be instructed to destroy all the houses...¹³¹

Latrines were part of the post-war state's attempts to rationalize peasant production. Government sanitation rules fell heaviest on cash-poor smallholders, whose grass-covered houses and eroded land made them uniquely subject to state sanction. To some it was a disastrous invasion of privacy. There were rumors in the 1930s that the latrine tops were boundary markers, meant to mark out land for future expropriation by Europeans.¹³² Latrines were a concrete mark of subjugation, laying homesteads open to British domination. More, the land rumors attested to Gikuyu worries that latrines would

¹²⁸SA I/E/8: "Grants in aid to elementary schools," S. Nyeri DEB, 30 December 1936.

¹²⁹SA I/A/41-42: Nyeri LNC meeting, 18 June 1938.

¹³⁰SA II/A/4: Nyeri LNC meeting, 14-17 November 1949.

¹³¹Oral interview: Mwangi wa Ndemeyu.

¹³²KNA PC/Central/8/7/3: DC Embu to Provincial Commissioner, 2 October 1934.

waste property with the stink of sorcery. Gerard King'ori built a latrine at his father's house in 1940, on returning home from boarding school. He remembered:

My mother and father were opposed to going (to the latrine) because my father said he could not have his excrement mixed with that of the children. And I accosted him, "Now father, does this mean you will be 'washed by the dew to look for a bush in which to help yourself?' and he replied, 'Yes, I cannot agree to mix my excrement with yours.' And I would make fun of that statement by saying 'Do you think we will later divide it among ourselves?' (Laughs) So for the first latrine, they never went there.¹³³

King'ori laughed away his father's fears. But elders' worries about latrines were an intensely serious matter. Some elders thought that if their feces were mixed with those of their children, the children would die.¹³⁴ One informant, Joyce Wanjiru, speculated that if elders rose from the dead they would be shocked back to the grave at the prevalence of latrines in contemporary Gikuyuland.¹³⁵ The LNC's latrines were shockingly dangerous. They were an deadening manifestation of state authority. The DC reported in 1945 that elders feared that latrines and anti-plague measures were designed to sterilize Gikuyu women.¹³⁶ Gikuyu called the DC who led the sanitation campaign *Tuthu*, "Rotten." It was a critique of smelly latrines--and of dangerously corrupt state policies. Arthur Kihumba remembered that students in rural outschools refused to use the LNC's latrines. They smelled, he remembered, like corpses.¹³⁷ Latrines reminded school children of the stench of death. Like the needles of cattle dips and the fences of land enclosure, latrines threatened Gikuyu posterity with extinction. They were marks of a malevolent power, intruding on the most intimate of household matters.

¹³³Oral interview: Gerard Gachau King'ori.

¹³⁴Oral interview: John Muriuki.

¹³⁵Oral interview: Joyce Wanjiru.

¹³⁶*KNA PC/CP/4/4/1*: Nyeri district annual report, 1945.

¹³⁷Oral interview: Arthur Kihumba.

British social engineering was a terrifyingly effective means of sapping the domestic fertility of the poor. By talking about smelly latrines, rat stops, needles and fences, Gikuyu put a concrete form to the oppressive power of wealthy men and British bureaucrats. Witchcraft stories staked out the moral operation of British power. And by mapping out the terror of class formation and rural impoverishment, sorcery stories gave directions to the insurgents of the 1950s.

Violence was a legitimate antidote to sorcery. Early in 1952 a wave of arson broke out in Aguthi and Thegenge.¹³⁸ Some victims were burned in their homes, a Gikuyu punishment for suspected sorcerers. Chiefs and headmen were especially at risk: Muhoya, leading cattleman and chief in Tetu, escaped several attempts on his life.¹³⁹ Mathira churchmen, also cattleholders, were similarly victims of arson.¹⁴⁰ The British thought the arson part of Mau Mau's political agitation. Gikuyu seem to have seen the Nyeri burnings as a cleansing fire, freeing the households of the poor from the burden of wealthy sorcerers. Popular songs condemned the rich as *eriri*, those who thought only with their stomachs, or *thaka*, handsome but barren ones who had envious motives for destroying victims' fertility.¹⁴¹ Some in Thegenge took oaths to ensure commitment: witchkilling was a dangerous business.¹⁴² Worried elders, frightened at the prospect of violence, insisted that witches were a matter best resolved peacefully in law. The Nyeri LNC ruled in 1947 that all those accused of being witches should take an oath of denial, regardless of whether the accused was a Christian.¹⁴³ Church elders looked like suspects. Hoping to protect themselves from sorcery accusations, LNC elders elaborated new, trustworthy symbols of authority. In 1949, they adopted a council emblem picturing Mt.

¹³⁸F.D. Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: 1960), 124-26.

¹³⁹KNA VQ/16/89: Nyeri district annual report, 1952.

¹⁴⁰Oral interview: Daudi Gachonde.

¹⁴¹Lonsdale, "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 440, citing Leakey and Kinyati's collections of Mau Mau hymns.

¹⁴²KNA VQ/16/86: Nyeri district annual report, 1950.

¹⁴³TT LNC Minutes file: LNC meeting, 11 August 1947.

Kenya with the sun rising behind it.¹⁴⁴ Council members were to wear skins of monkeys and ostrich feathers. It was a desperate attempt to gain the high ground of Gikuyu moral discourse, and to guard themselves against accusations of malevolent witchcraft with invented symbols of legitimate leadership.

Gikuyu knew themselves in a battle over posterity, a moral conflict over children and the future. Some readers, as I intimated in the previous chapter, hoped that schooling would protect Gikuyu from moral disaster, knitting together new moral defenses for changed times. The government's Beecher Report undercut the foundations of their imagined polity, destroying readers' constituency of hope by making schooling into delinquency.

The Beecher Report

The British were bloodsuckers. The Beecher Report in 1950 destroyed the very disciplines through which Gikuyu hoped to protect themselves from the rot of immorality. The Report was government's effort to rationalize African education. It put limits on English, and made it difficult for poor children to go to school. Gikuyu feared it would suck the life out of them. Presbyterians and independents alike had hoped that education would rebuild Gikuyu polity, creating morally decisive tests of citizenship for a people demoralized by sexual strife. The Report made schooled citizens into illiterate vagabonds, wastrels unable to master themselves. Beecher was a disaster to readers' hopes for a redeemed, moral future. Violence was necessary to protect Gikuyu polity from morally corrupt British bureaucracy.

The Beecher Report, named after its missionary chairman, established a rigid hierarchy of learning. Primary school would last only four years; only one in three pupils could hope to pass the Common Entrance Exam into intermediate school. Children from

¹⁴⁴ *TT* LNC minutes file: LNC meeting, 14-17 March 1949.

ages seven to eleven only would be allowed to attend primary education. It was a direct attack on the children of the poor, who went to school sporadically to raise sufficient funds for fees. For few impoverished parents could afford to keep their children in school continually, especially after the Report raised school fees to 22/- in the first four years. Missionaries insisted that the fees be paid in full at the beginning of the year.¹⁴⁵ Land-poor parents often failed to raise sufficient sums. The Beecher Report threatened to make education a privilege of wealth. More, the Report spurned Gikuyu hopes for self-mastery through schooling. English was only to be taught in Standard Five, after the entrance exam for intermediate school. Children who failed the exam would learn only vernacular languages. Schools that taught English earlier were liable to government sanction.

Gikuyu responded to the government's acceptance of Beecher's Report with horror. In Murang'a, women at the Anglican school in Mukerenju clapped, sang loudly and hurled abuse at the missionary who came to explain the Report.¹⁴⁶ In Nyeri, young men and women interrupted Sunday services at the church at Kiru singing songs of protest.¹⁴⁷ Students stayed away from school in Othaya division; the few who broke the strike were beaten.¹⁴⁸ Mission schools in Murang'a lost some 4,000 pupils in 1951, the year after the Report was adopted.¹⁴⁹ At Tumutumu, one school committee refused outright to accept Beecher, vowing instead to join an independent school association.¹⁵⁰ Anglican school committees similarly rejected the Report.¹⁵¹ Worried Scots missionaries attested that the Report could be implemented only if another regiment of the Kings African Rifles were available to enforce it.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵Shannon, "Whither Education?," in *Kikuyu News* 200 (June 1952).

¹⁴⁶*KNA* DC/Murang'a/3/4/21: Langford-Smith to DC Fort Hall, 7 January 1952.

¹⁴⁷*KNA* DC/Murang'a/3/4/21: Langford-Smith to DC Fort Hall, 4 June 1952.

¹⁴⁸Oral interview: Gerard King'ori.

¹⁴⁹*KNA* DC/FH/1/33: Fort Hall Annual Report, 1951.

¹⁵⁰*TT* Supervisors file: Lamont to elders at Kandani, 12 February 1952.

¹⁵¹*KNA* DC/FH/1/33: AAC Gataguini school to Education Officer Weithaga, 8 January 1952.

¹⁵²Shannon, "Whither Education?," in *Kikuyu News* 200 (June 1952).

KISA schools divided over Beecher. Both sides were guided by the hope that education would redeem Gikuyu from moral decay. As I showed in the previous chapter, independents in the 1930s argued that self-mastery demanded careful discipline, sustained investments in English education. By learning English, independents hoped to master themselves. They hoped also to master the British, beating government at its own writing game. Shocked by Beecher's demands, independent readers argued over their theory of education. Eight schools in Nyeri, led by KISA president Johanna Kunyiha, agreed Beecher's rules. Kunyiha formed the Kenya African Churches and Schools Society and lobbied for government grants.¹⁵³ Ngatia wa Mweri, the chairman and landowner at Kabiruini school in Mathira, supported Kunyiha.¹⁵⁴ Their conservative theory argued that political redemption required continued learning and cooperation with the British, careful commitment to learn foreign secrets. Calling for continued discipline, Kunyiha condemned those who refused the report: he warned that "twenty years of labor were going to waste" by refusing the Report.¹⁵⁵ Kunyiha knew that learning English required long-term, disciplined investments in education.

The rump of KISA schools, led by the Kiambu men Peter Gatabaki and Jomo Kenyatta, refused to accept Beecher's report at a province-wide meeting in 1950.¹⁵⁶ They accused Kunyiha of cooperating with British sorcerers. One informant remembered that Kunyiha was deposed because

he went to the side of government before the Emergency was declared. He was told he could not lead people any longer because he even caused the deportation of his own children. People were in fact proposing that he be killed but the government refused.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³*KNA* Educ/1/3284: KISA Gikumbo to Director of Education, 27 October 1950.

¹⁵⁴Oral interviews: Lista Warutere; Newton Ngama Thabari; James Wamugunda; *KNA* VQ/16/86: Nyeri district annual report, 1950.

¹⁵⁵Oral interview: Lista Warutere.

¹⁵⁶*KNA* Educ/1/3284: Rowland Getteriah to Director of Education, 1 February 1951; *KNA* VQ/16:88: Nyeri district annual report, 1951; Welbourne, "Independency in Kikuyu."

¹⁵⁷Oral interview: Paul Inoi.

To his critics, Kuniya looked like a traitor to the cause. Independent readers had long hoped that English would make moral agents out of Gikuyu, allowing men and women to master themselves in the midst of a fluid world. Beecher turned education into destitution, sapping the life out of schools and making students into shiftless wanderers. The angry independent school leader Johanna Karanja protested the Report in this way in 1951:

When students fail to pass exams...they are made to grow into wanderers and go out with haphazard education without a promising ending and consequently become worthless to themselves, their parents, and even to their country.¹⁵⁸

Students who failed the CEE would contribute nothing to the building of Gikuyu polity. The Beecher Report would turn virtuous learning into dissipated vagabondage: unable to learn English, students would wander about, wasting themselves and their family's hopes. Rather than a moralizing discipline of agency and self-mastery, Beecher made education into moral decadence.

Beecher destroyed readers' hopes for self-mastery through education. The Report was equally a threat to the second stage of independents' theory of education. Readers had hoped that English would be a vocabulary with which to make the British pay heed, a grammar with which to play with government power. Beecher's report turned students from colonial citizens into ignorant laborers, unable to participate meaningfully in colonial discourse. Some thought the Report was a ploy to produce more workers for white settlers' plantations. Elders on the Nyeri African District Council, the successor to the LNC, suspiciously wondered "why most children must leave school at age 11?"¹⁵⁹ Jomo Kenyatta knew the answer, preaching in rural schools that the students expelled at

¹⁵⁸KNA MK/2:5: Karanja to EO Kiambu, 8 February 1951.

¹⁵⁹SA II A.4: NADC meeting, 15 February 1951.

Standard IV would be able to work only as laborers.¹⁶⁰ Manual laborers could scarcely be good citizens; more, they could scarcely be men. Gikuyu polity demanded disciplined investment in learning: as Kenyatta put it, "we must get the magic (of learning) by all means and at all costs." Peter Gatabaki, by 1950 President of KISA, was similarly worried about Gikuyu posterity. KISA refused to accept the Report, he remembered, for these reasons:

Only young Africans would be allowed to go into school--older ones were refused so that the whiteman would continue to have enough flow of labor. KISA wanted its pupils to go farther in education than the government or mission wanted them to. The kind of education that the government allowed was the kind that produced clerks and houseboys.¹⁶¹

Gikuyu hopes for the future were at stake in the Beecher Report. The Report threatened to turn the English-speaking citizens of readers' imagined polity into delinquents, monolingual laborers who wasted Gikuyu hopes. Beecher sketched out a hopeless future. More, the Report was a very present attack on Gikuyu resources. Beecher assigned European inspectors to oversee local schools, and ruled that all school fees should be collected by government agents, not by locally-controlled school committees. The Report looked like the most blatant form of theft. Independent school leaders at Ngangarhi in Nyeri objected, arguing that Africans, not Europeans should supervise schools.¹⁶² Fees should be kept at home, devoted to the upkeep of local schools instead of lining government pockets. *Mbari* property was under siege: Beecher threatened to expropriate Gikuyu land and wealth. Independent school leader Johanna Karanja framed the issue in this way:

¹⁶⁰Bildad Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom, 1921-1963: The autobiography of Bildad Kaggia* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975), 88-89.

¹⁶¹Oral interview: Peter Gatabaki.

¹⁶²*KNA CMS:1/614: KISA Ngangarhi to Member for Education, 21 March 1950.*

The leaders who voluntarily run and manage their schools are being ignored by the Beecher Report irrespective of the fact that they subscribe the money for the school buildings which on completion they no longer are expected to play any part in...and are forced to step out on the business with their willing hands folded with great propriety.¹⁶³

Beecher made a mockery of principled Gikuyu investment in education. The Report laid waste to Gikuyu property, alienating *mbari* land and property to the British and turning students into undisciplined vagabonds. Some thought the Report looked like sorcery, creatively linking Beecher with the needles of cattle dips and the deadly latrines of the LNC. There were renewed rumors about a white woman whose jealousy drove state policy. Paul Thuku described the Report in this way:

The Beecher Report was very bad. In 1947, the European women's committee met and declared a sexual strike to their husbands because their children were about to become slaves of the black people. (They feared that) the blacks had gotten too much education.. So they feared their children will never get employed because the blacks will be at the helm and would not be like slaves. The women were told to call off their strike and ideas on how the blacks were to be oppressed were put forward through education and killing animals...the goal was to make Kenya a white dominion. It was called the East African European dominion. This is when the Beecher Report was proposed...(Beecher) was the chairman of the committee selected to collect views on education in Kenya. This committee did a very bad report of injecting black people's cattle with a drug and killing them. Six million cattle died. And black children could not go beyond Standard IV, when the Common Entrance Exam was. At most one percent were allowed to pass. Others who failed were sent to work on white farms to harvest coffee...The chiefs and headmen were beating people a great deal. All this was done to fulfill the women's claims.¹⁶⁴

Barren, asexual Mamiwata women lurked behind the Report, sucking the life out of black children and killing Gikuyu cattle with needles. Stories about barren white women were current all over Nyeri at the time: NDESABA supporters had similarly seen

¹⁶³KVA MK.2 5: Karanja to EO Kiambu, 8 February 1951.

¹⁶⁴Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

a white woman behind the DVF. Her malevolent asexuality endangered posterity, threatening men and women with an infertile future. Stories about barren white women put a terrifyingly human face to British social engineering, marking government policy for what it was: an effort to intrude into and manage the most intimate aspects of Gikuyu life.

Gikuyu in the 1940s knew themselves to be a battle for posterity. Land shortages endangered families, turning men from moral agents into shiftless wanderers and making women into prostitutes. Rural class formation attacked both men's and women's fertility, their vital sexuality. Rumors about needles, fences and latrines, barren white women and malevolent British bureaucrats, were signposts in a morally disabling wilderness. They helped Gikuyu to map out moral disorder, crystallizing unequal relations of power and assigning blame for social decay. Sorcery stories were speculative means of assigning blame for the wasting of Gikuyu houses, creative efforts to concretize, and manage, social decay.

Sorcery stories were also directions for insurgency. For insofar as such frightening tales were signposts, insofar as stories about needles marked out and made knowable a morally fluid terrain, then they gave directions for an insurgent politics. Sorcery stories proposed radical solutions to the problem of social decay. In 1953 Mau Mau rebels served typed closure notices on several schools in Nyeri. They threatened that the legs and arms of children who continued to learn at "Beecher schools" would be chopped off, and soup made of them.¹⁶⁵ The British thought the notices meant to intimidate schoolgoers. It seems more likely that Mau Mau thought themselves converting the wasting sorcery of British administration into consumable fat. For as I show in this dissertation's final chapter, Mau Mau was a struggle over fertility, a desperate effort to guard Gikuyu posterity from the destruction of private marital strife

¹⁶⁵*KNA VP.9/20: African Affairs Report, Central Province, 1953.*

and British sorcery. The battle played out as a struggle over words, and writing. Mau Mau used bureaucracy, the discipline of record keeping, to inaugurate a new social order in the forest. By crafting a new nation-of-words, Mau Mau hoped to address the private social disorder that afflicted Gikuyu families. More, they hoped that bureaucracy would serve as a bridge to a new, redeemed future, freeing Gikuyu polity of the weight of British sorcery.

The most immediate others of this new polity were members of the East African Revival. Missionaries thought Mau Mau and Revival inimically opposed. Indeed, revivalists throughout Gikuyuland seem to have suffered most from Mau Mau violence. But as I show in the following section, the violence between Mau Mau and revivalists in Nyeri was a family argument. Mau Mau and Revival look like different, but intimately related, answers to the same problem: the social disaster of household disorder. What divided Mau Mau from Revival was, I suggest, language. In open speech revivalists--most of them women--cleansed themselves of the taint of household sorcery and worked out new languages of trust. By carefully controlling speech, Mau Mau established disciplined languages of self-mastery that called Gikuyu to moral duty. Mau Mau and revival were protagonists in a long-running Gikuyu struggle between orality and writing. Their history, I suggest, opens up new ways of thinking about the engendering politics of speech and literacy.

Chapter Eleven

Wordy Women The East African Revival in Tumutumu

The history of the East African Revival has been written as biography, telling the heroic story by which men and women accepted the message of salvation.¹ For central Kenya, the formal history reads something like this. The revival began in the Anglican station at Gahini in Ruanda, when the Keswick revivalist and CMS missionary Joe Church, together with the Ganda landholder Simeoni Nsibambi, convened the first convention in 1931. In 1937, evangelists from Uganda preached at a missionary-organized convention in Kabete, in southern Gikuyuland. Obadiah Kariuki, later Bishop of the Anglican Church, and others were "saved." Revived Christians like Kariuki spread the message throughout Anglican churches in Kiambu, Murang'a and Embu. At the heart of their message was the public confession of personal sins, with stealing, envy, fornication and witchcraft prominent among them. With the patronage of missionary tutors at the Protestant theological college in Limuru, the Revival quickly gained acceptance. The Presbyterians, at first suspicious of what looked like an Anglican plot, convened a revivalist convention in 1944, at Chogoria, with 500 people in attendance.² In 1947, the first convention organized by Africans was convened at Kahuhia, the Anglican station in Murang'a district. It drew 3,000 attendees. Subsequent yearly

¹The East African Revival's historians include: Hastings, *The Church in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 596-600; Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 242-43; C.E. Robins, *Tukutendereza: A study of Social Change and Sectarian Withdrawal in the Balokole Revival* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1975); and Joe Church, *Quest for the Highest: An Autobiographical Account of the East Africa Revival* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981). The most thorough recent account is Kevin Ward, "'Tukutendereza Yesu': The Balokole Revival in Uganda," in Zablon Nthamburi ed., *From Mission to Church: A Handbook of Christianity in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1991), 113-44.

²Jack Duncan, "The Chogoria Conventions," in *Kikuyu News* 170 (Dec. 1944).

conventions held in Kigaari, Kabete and Thogoto drew as many as 15,000 people.³

Missionaries, exultant, thought themselves in the days of Acts.⁴

What these heroic histories of spreading messages and personal conversions gloss over are the social circumstances that impelled men and women to think themselves "converted," passed from darkness to light. As the previous chapter demonstrated, men and women in Nyeri were in the 1940s intensely worried about sorcery and moral chaos. Husbands and wives contended openly about masculine infertility and domestic obligation. Revival was one grammar with which they argued. Terrified at a morally inchoate world, men and, more often, women used the rhetoric of good and evil, God and the Devil, to corral dangerous social flux into a language of moral aspersion, and personal virtue. Revivalists were not the first to make creative investments in Christian dualisms: as I showed in Chapter Three, male readers in the 1920s had imagined God, *Ngai*, in order to make claims about generation redemption. Female readers in the 1940s, worried over men's moral delinquency, imagined the Devil. They found in Christian evil a grammar to condemn men's dissipation, a way also with which to cleanse themselves of the taint of sin.

The argument for Revival was largely carried out by women, worried about male dissipation and terrified at household disorder. By preaching vocally against sin, by defeating the Devil in their speech, women were also preaching against men's indiscipline. Men thought them insane. Male readers, I showed in previous chapters, were committed to rebuilding Gikuyu polity through writing. They thought laws, rulebooks, and English names would restore moral discipline among a people in flux. Women's vocal confession of sins paraded household injuries openly. Revivalists broke church laws, pulling up the palisades around readers' nation-of-words. Revivalists' many

³c.f. John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith*, 249-50; KNA Government House. 4/305: Capon to Mitchell. 1949.

⁴Mowatt. "The Challenge of Revival," in *Kikuyu News* 190 (Dec. 1949).

words threatened to reveal Gikuyu secrets to invasive British ears. Church elders and “Mau Mau” leaders alike condemned wordy women for their indiscipline, their sexual and moral delinquency. They banned Revival from the church in 1948, and forbade the “saved ones” from speaking in church assemblies. Tumutumu’s debate over Revival was a battle over gendered order, played out as a struggle over the moral virtues of literacy and orality.

Oral politics

Condemning husbands for their sins, calling men to renewed familial duty, women joined the Revival at Tumutumu in the late 1940s. A few men joined as well. By 1950 three-fourths of most Tumutumu churches were filled with women.⁵ Domestic conflict inspired the first revivalists. This is the inescapable conclusion drawn from a careful reading of revivalists’ stories of personal conversion. Revivalism was for women worried by men’s delinquency a means of negotiating marital obligations. Alice Wanjeri contemplated suicide after her husband married another wife in 1948, but joined the revivalists at the urging of her friends.⁶ She was not alone in seeing in Revival an answer to husbands’ greed: one leader remembered that many wives of polygamous men joined the movement in the late 1940s.⁷ Abinjah Wanjcheke, from Murang’a, joined the revivalists after her husband married a second wife and began to treat her as a “slave.”⁸ He beat her and cast her out of his house; she eventually settled with another revivalist family and was given a plot of land to farm. Revivalism was for women threatened by the domestic tyranny of men a means to seek redress. The revivalists demanded renewed marital discipline of delinquent husbands. Phares Wahinya, a laborer in Kiambu, had

⁵SA I/B/7: Tumutumu annual report, 1940; SA I/C/2: Tumutumu annual report, 1950.

⁶Oral interview: Alice Wanjeri.

⁷Oral interview: Geoffrey Ngare.

⁸Dorothy Smoker, *Ambushed by Love: God’s Triumph in Kenya’s Terror* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1993), 93.

been a heavy drinker and adulterer. After being "saved" in 1946 he ran home and pleaded for forgiveness from his wife.⁹ Geoffrey Ngare, from Tumutumu, heard a revivalist sermon and was convicted of beating his wife with angry words.¹⁰ Revivalism could rebuild marital bonds fractured by the stresses of gendered struggle. Francis Ndigwa, of Embu, was saved in 1942 but spent three years in continual argument with his wife. In 1945 he and his wife celebrated a new marriage, this one consecrated by other revivalists.¹¹

Revival was for worried women a rhetoric with which to condemn husbands' moral and economic delinquency. In a wilderness of gendered disorder, where it was difficult to recognize men as men and women as women, revivalist thought corralled the dangerous flux of male dissipation and household strife into a dichotomized moral universe. The Devil--conspicuously absent in the moral universe of mission bureaucrats--allowed women and worried men to put a name to the personal play of evil and sorcery afflicting Gikuyu households.¹² Missionaries reported that revivalist preachers illustrated their sermons using posters picturing Apollyan and Christ fighting, or of life's travelers on two ways--one to destruction and the other to the Eternal City.¹³ Their earliest leader, Heshbon Mwangi from Murang'a, was "saved" after hearing a sermon on Hebrews 11:24 asking him to come from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of Christ.¹⁴ Christian teleology posed private choices within a dualistic moral narrative. But the revival was not only about the next world. The Christian dichotomies of revivalist preaching had immediately Gikuyu resonances. Revivalists thought their salvation cleansed them of the

⁹Smoker, *Ambushed*, 105.

¹⁰Oral interview: Geoffrey Ngare; Smoker, 229.

¹¹Smoker, *Ambushed*, 258.

¹²Birgit Meyer has come to similar conclusions in her work on Pentecostalism in Ghana, for which see "'If you are a Devil, you are a Witch and if You are a Witch, you are a Devil': the integration of 'pagan' ideas into the conceptual universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22 (2) (1992), 98-132.

¹³SA II/BA/10: Irvine, Chogoria annual report, 1949.

¹⁴Smoker, *Ambushed*, 87.

real private pollution of sorcery. They confessed publicly to the intimate sins of hatred, jealousy, lying, envy, making false accusations, and selfishness. Some confessed to practicing witchcraft in secret.¹⁵ These were Christian sins. But they were also very Gikuyu misdeeds.

The dualistic moral imagery of revivalists' preaching managed a fluid social world, corralling the flux of gender disorder and creating for worried women a language with which to argue. Christian dichotomies were for women a rhetoric with which to typify men's irresponsibility, a rhetoric with which also to claim moral integrity for themselves. Christian redemption had in the 1920s converted youthful readers' whoring after cash and cotton clothes into a claim on Gikuyu political power. In the 1940s, women of the Revival re-translated redemption, hoping that Christ's blood would freed them from sorcery. Gikuyu knew sorcerers for their private jealousy, which sucked the life out of their victims. Revived women claimed in their public confessions of sin to be free of sorcery, to be redeemed from the curse of death. Conversion was a means of protection. It was also a way to claim the moral high ground in household debates. Eunice Kagio of Murang'a was "saved" after she realized that her life had become a "stinking thing" to God. She rejoiced that Jesus' blood had washed her clean from sin.¹⁶ Revivalists told each other to "walk in the light" in public sermons and private devotionals.¹⁷ Sorcerers were known to practice their smelly magic in the dark. Christian salvation protected revivalists from the dark stink of sorcery. Some even mistook the revivalists an anti-witchcraft league: in 1945 a few testified that the Holy Spirit had thrown them to the ground, making them feel as though they were being burned.¹⁸ Gikuyu had long punished sorcerers with fire. The Christian death of the old Adam and the burning of witchcraft were one. The largest revivalist conference in central Kenya,

¹⁵Smoker, *Ambushed*, 161, 196.

¹⁶Smoker, *Ambushed*, 263.

¹⁷S.I II/D/30-34: Hesbon Mwangi to revivalists, 1949.

¹⁸S.I II/D/30-34: Hesbon Mwangi to revivalists, 1949.

held at Kabete in 1949, was thematically centered around *Isaiah* 1:18, which read “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.”¹⁹ The verse was emblazoned on a banner hanging over the speakers’ platform.²⁰ Cleansing marked Christian redemption: but cleanliness was also a Gikuyu virtue, distancing believers from the play of sorcery and pollution. Revivalists were careful to guard themselves against the taint of sin, refusing to eat with those who were not revived.²¹ Some refused to take communion from the hand of church pastors who they suspected of trafficking with the Devil.²² Revivalism guarded Gikuyu households from devilish pollution.

Posing social discord within the Christian teleology of good and evil, women thought through the Devil to argue about marriage. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, daughter of first-generation readers and early schoolteacher, was among the first to be “saved” at Tumutumu. She had married Eustace, another schoolteacher, in September 1937 after a lengthy court case with a previous suitor (described in Chapter Four). Cecilia saw God’s providence at work in her marriage to Eustace. Soon after the marriage, however, continual marital discord made her doubt God’s wisdom:

The happiness we had enjoyed was destroyed by the Devil and we became a pair of fighters and complaining people, until I declared that the Devil had come into our prayers, that this was not my real choice. And even one day I asked the Lord that if this is the kind of life that I would see in old age, He should call me home! for I did not feel strong enough to live such a life.²³

Many of their arguments, remembered Cecilia, were over her travels as a schoolteacher: Eustace was jealous of her educational attainments. But on a deeper, more anguished level, marital strife looked like dangerous bedevilment. The Devil had entered

¹⁹KNA Government House/4/305: Capon to Mitchell, 1949.

²⁰Smoker, *Ambushed*, 168.

²¹SA II/D/30-34: Philp, notes on conversation with revivalists and Tumutumu elders.

²²TT “Marua makonii synod ona members acio” file: C. Muhoro to Geoffrey Ngare. 1 June 1950.

²³Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki, “History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki” (unpublished ms., 1982).

into her marriage, setting husband against wife and making Cecilia wish for death. Christian evil put a name to dangerously intimate disagreements. Revivalism protected Cecilia from the Devil's power. In December 1947 the Anglicans in Kahuhia organized a revivalist convention that drew some 3,000 people. Among the attendees was Doris Nyambura, an evangelist for the Tumutumu Women's Guild. Nyambura invited Cecilia to her home for a meeting after the convention. After a long night of preaching and singing, Cecilia was "saved," vocally confessing how she had forsaken Bible reading, fought with her husband, and thought herself better than he. Cecilia remembered that she spent the weeks after the meeting at Nyambura's reading the Bible. She found that

the word salvation is all over the Bible because it was Jesus' main work...I also came to understand even persecuting my husband that he did not love me was because I had not trusted in Jesus as my only true husband.

Careful re-reading of the Bible gave Cecilia words to rethink marital strife. Revivalism corralled marital disorder into teleology, posing the Devil against Christian redemption. Christ's defeat of the Devil was thus a moral victory for Gikuyu worried by household strife. Cecilia remembered that her husband initially thought Nyambura had drawn his wife into lunacy. In November 1948, however, Eustace himself was "saved." Afterwards, remembered Cecilia,

our work for the Lord became lighter and lighter with time. Now it is very light...I used to say that it was *ngoma* (spirits) who had invaded our home. It was me who failed to commit everything to the Lord.

Revivalism gave Cecilia, like other Gikuyu men and women, words with which to condemn the unspeakably intimate dangers of marital discord. Anchoring their lives to the moral narrative of Christian redemption, Cecilia and other women gambled on the end of history. Evil, they knew, would be defeated. Good would prevail. The sure promise

of redemption lifted the flux of marital strife into the surely established Christian categories of the end times, giving women means to imagine themselves freed of burden of moral decay. Christian dualisms allowed women to re-imagine themselves. Teleology also gave them a language with which to argue.

At stake in men's and women's debates over the taint of marital jealousy and the cleansing of Christian salvation was the critical question of posterity. As I showed in the previous chapter, women worried at husbands' deceit condemned wage-earning men as infertile, unable to fulfill marital duties. They accused husbands of moral delinquency, of whoring after prostitutes in Nairobi. Revivalism was for some women a means to imagine a new social order, a new regime of fertility. This is how we must read the revivalists' prohibition on beer-drinking. Beer-drinking and fornication were among the sins that revivalists most frequently confessed. Both alcohol and unthinking sex threatened Gikuyu posterity by making men infertile. Teetotalling was a way to demand abstinence, moral discipline, of men. Hosea Munene remembered that his wife, after being "saved" in the late 1940s, had condemned him for wasting household resources on cigarettes and beer.²⁴ Revivalists argued that teetotalling made for an upstanding posterity. G.N. Muurage, writing to the Tumutumu Presbytery in 1948, argued that government should ban beer-drinking because beer led to

1.) laziness 2.) weak children will be born 3.) venereal diseases will increase and there is no cure for these.²⁵

Teetotalling revivalists called delinquent men to account, blaming household disorder on their beery indolence. Gikuyu posterity was endangered by marital strife. The women of Revival hoped Christian repentance would birth a new social order,

²⁴Oral interview: Hosea Munene.

²⁵*TT* Marua makonii Kirk Session kana members acio file: G.N. Muurage to Tumutumu Presbytery, 18 December 1948.

protecting children and households from men's alcoholic impotence. Doris Nyambura, Women's Guild evangelist, said as much at a church meeting in 1949. She used the occasion to preach about "the necessity, for the children's sake, of the Church in the home."²⁶ She used as her text *Ephesians* 4:7-12: "to everyone of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." Christian grace, the promise of redemption, gave women like Nyambura words to imagine new standards of domestic harmony.

Committing themselves to the future by preaching about the need for moral discipline, the women of the Revival invested in new standards of public trust and responsibility. I showed in previous chapters how readers of the 1920s and 30s used Cash Books, bureaucratic procedures, to demonstrate their responsibility to illiterate elders. Sorcery accusations in the 1940s made it imperative for Gikuyu men and women to revisit the bureaucracies, the trustworthy writing, that bound them together. For there were rumors in the late 1940s that male bureaucrats' record books and cash receipts were simply disguises for their greed. Tumutumu's churches, by the 1940s financially autonomous from the mission, suffered a marked decrease in income in the wake of the war. The most marked declines in giving came in parishes populated by migrant workers.²⁷ By 1949 the church was Ksh 27,000 in debt.²⁸ The poverty of the church reflected the impoverishment of the Nyeri countryside, where land shortages and declining real wages left households with little disposable income. Church pastors accused members of shirking Christian duty, robbing God of his due.²⁹ But there was another, deeper, reason for the decline in church giving. Tumutumu's elders in the 1940s were involved in multiple land cases, using government courts to consolidate

²⁶ Arthur, "Diary," in *Kikuyu News* 187 (March 1949).

²⁷ *TT* Marua makonii Kirk Session file: Mihothi ya kanitha, 1945-47. Mihuti and Kiamangi parishes seem to have suffered the most from the decline in giving.

²⁸ *TT* Presbytery of Kenya file: Church leaders meeting, 24 June 1949.

²⁹ *TT* Reports file: C. Muhoro, sermon notes, 1948.

landholdings at the expense of tenants and junior *mbari* members. Some thought church envelopes were going directly into their pockets. Receipts were rarely issued for church tithes; record books showed suspicious shortfalls.³⁰ Church members' diligent tithes fattened the coffers to greedy elders. Cecilia Mugaki, shortly after being "saved" in 1948, voiced church members' fears. She complained that

1.) Conducting classes was not done properly because the teachers came directly from their garden work, 2.) no receipts were issued for money collected in church, 3.) that church laws be reviewed especially on the matter of marriage, female circumcision, and the drinking of beer, for they are no longer observed, 4.) that church elders extend their debates outside their meetings, 5.) that those working for the church should not have other work they are doing--cultivating, or filing land disputes, businesses, herding. People might think they contribute money to be used against them.³¹

Revivalists like Cecilia thought church bureaucracy an instrument of dictatorship. Fired by indignation at the moral shortcomings of the church's bureaucracy, revivalists condemned church elders for their greed and called on new, orally-proven standards of virtue to prove their public responsibility. Insofar as there was a revival "movement" in Tumutumu in the late 1940s, it took shape orally. Speech, not literacy, called revivalists to Christian commitment. Many revivalists remembered being "saved" after hearing a Voice reminding them of their sins.³² Walter Mwangi Rurie of Murang'a, for example, was eating at table when he heard a Voice tell him, "Walter, you are full of sins--very many sins."³³ He lost his appetite, went to his room, and pleaded for forgiveness from God. The Word had called mission readers, *athomi*, to Christian commitment. Revivalists, in contrast, called themselves *ahonoku*, the "saved ones" or, more tellingly,

³⁰TT Conference Reports file: Meeting of Tumutumu churches, 15 August 1949.

³¹TT Presbytery of Tumutumu file: Issues addressed at Tumutumu meeting, 25 July 1948.

³²Paul Mwangi of Nyeri, Bedan Ileri of Embu, and Geoffrey Kamau of Meru remembered being "saved" after hearing a Voice from heaven, in Smoker, *Ambushed*, 60, 208, 213.

³³Smoker, *Ambushed*, 195.

“those who escape.”³⁴ Vocal confession of sin, not reading, defined revivalist communities. They testified in public about their salvation, meeting under trees to confess their sins in meetings that sometimes lasted for hours. Heshbon Mwangi, an early leader from Murang’a, enjoined the “saved ones” to be forthright about their talk in 1949:

We need to watch this pilgrimage so that Satan may not kill some of us before we reach the heavenly city...we must not joke or talk lightly of sin or play with it. Worldly people speak soft words like butter and those who have not wisdom to discern what they are after are deceived and fall. The Lord help us to go on! Walk in the light always, make use of the precious blood that you may conquer daily and hourly in this battle.³⁵

Public speech invited revivalists to new community of trust. Revival in Tumutumu played out in public as a new language. Revivalists sang, in Lugandan, the hymn “Tukutendereza Jesu,” “Let us praise Jesus,” to open their meetings.³⁶ The phrase became a sort of password for the group. Missionaries reported in 1949 that they used the phrase continually in conversation.³⁷ Revivalists greeted one another with “Tukutendereza Jesu,” and identified other “saved ones” based on their reply.³⁸ Revival’s critics complained that they spoke to one another in a “foreign dialect.”³⁹ Speech constituted the *ahonoku* as a community.

Erasing the future?

Revivalists’ public talk defined gendered lines of debate over orality and literacy at Tumutumu. Male church elders banned the revival from Tumutumu’s churches at the

³⁴Bensen, *Kikuyu-English Dictionary*, 162.

³⁵SA II/D/30-34: Heshbon Mwangi to revivalists, 1949.

³⁶MacPherson, “East African Revival,” in *Kikuyu News* 193 (Sept. 1950).

³⁷SA II/D/30-34: Philp, notes on conversation with revivalists and Tumutumu elders, 1949.

³⁸c.f. David Karigi, in Smoker, *Ambushed*, p. 161, who identified a group of strangers in 1952 by calling out “Tukutendereza Jesu!” to them.

³⁹SA II/D/30-34: Muhoro, “Memorandum on PCEA church: confusion of teaching,” March 1950.

beginning of 1948.⁴⁰ More, they ruled that no members of the group could preach in church. The church cut off funding for Geoffrey Ngare and other theological students who had joined the revival at the Protestant school in Limuru.⁴¹ Some elders condemned the revivalists as heretics.⁴² Others, in an internally critical accusation, called them *mikora*, lazy loafers or hooligans.⁴³ By 1952, Charles Muhoro, moderator of the presbytery, asked church leaders to “beat them, excommunicate them, and imprison them.”⁴⁴ Debates over revival were a violently serious matter.

What was behind Tumutumu’s ‘resistance’ to the Revival? The African church hierarchy at Chogoria and Thogoto, both Presbyterian mission stations, had by the late 1940s embraced revivalist theology. Anglicans in Kiambu and Murang’a were always at the forefront of the movement.⁴⁵ Missionaries regarded Tumutumu as an aberration, and worried that elders’ “defensive conservatism” would split the church.

But there was more than conservatism in Tumutumu elders’ reply to the vocal claims of the revivalists. Undergirding Tumutumu’s sometimes violent debate over the Revival were contending, deeply gendered theories of social order. Women preached publicly, orally, about private wrongs, calling men to repentance. Their Christian dichotomies organized household strife into a rhetoric of argument, a rhetoric with which to negotiate with husbands. Male elders thought revivalists’ preaching would heat up private conflicts, destroying concord in the church. Elders hoped to restore moral order in writing, in bureaucracy, not in speech. They had long made creative investments in texts, using English disciplines to master themselves and to manage social change. Cash Books and English names, they argued, made for moral order, rewarding those who invested their labor in learning with reputations, names for the future. The women of the Revival

⁴⁰TT Kirk Session minute book, minute for 21 February 1948.

⁴¹Oral interview: Geoffrey Ngare; SA II/D/30-34: Lamont to Philp, 5 October 1949.

⁴²SA I/C/3: Lamont to Calderwood, 23 January 1948.

⁴³KNA MSS 3/408: Lamont to Dickson, 2 January 1948.

⁴⁴SA II/C/25: Irvine to Lamont, 25 April 1952.

⁴⁵c.f. Karanja, *African Faith*, Ch. 7.

were importunate word-mongers. Their public speaking endangered readers' nation-of-words, their hopes for moral redemption and political entitlement through bureaucracy. Tumutumu's debate over the Revival was structured by men's and women's contending answers to the problem of social decay. It played out as an argument over orality and literacy.

Elders disputed the moral economy of speech with revivalist preachers. Private sins, marital strife, had always been a household matter, a terrifying problem addressed, and resolved, within households. Domestic discord was *kirira*, secret knowledge, walled off from public consumption. Revivalists publicly aired private *kirira*, confessing in public meetings to sins of sexual indiscipline and moral delinquency. Their irresponsible words fired up social discord. We can hear something of Tumutumu elders' worries in one man's description of revivalist preaching.

(The revival) was called *Ndukananderehere* by detractors ("You will not bring me"). We hated them because of the way they used to jump and some other funny things. It was funny because it appeared like child's play. You know preaching at that time was cool. We were used to the Scottish way: the Europeans had come in a cool and decent manner. They would not speak harshly to people. They preached in a slow and orderly manner--also in a mature manner and they would not cheat you. The revival was disruptive.⁴⁶

Church bureaucracy cooled private disputes with laws, with bureaucratic procedure. Record books and writing protected men's households from social disorder just as surely as fences had protected Gikuyu cattle and families in the past. Revivalists' speech pulled up the palisades around readers' households, publicizing moral conflict to invading ears. Women's preaching threatened men's efforts to wall off the wild with writing. Their words were like "child's play," the opposite of the reasoned, self-mastered, disciplines of elders. Charles Muhoro, moderator of the Tumutumu Kirk

⁴⁶Oral interview: Daudi Gachonde.

Session, condemned the revivalists in 1950 for “preaching because of existing disagreements.”⁴⁷ Revivalists’ vocal confessions ignited private vendettas. Their public preaching about husbands’ sins reminded some elders of the gossiping busybodies condemned in *I Timothy 5*.⁴⁸ Wives’ public talk threatened to open up private marital disputes and set husbands and wives against each other in public argument.

Unrestrained women, preaching openly about private wrongs, upset households with their words. Public preaching made them delinquent, sexually uncontrollable. For opening up men’s households to public view, revivalists threatened the moral basis of Gikuyu sexual order. Wordy women were undisciplined, likely to be prostitutes. One elderly woman from Tumutumu put it this way:

Tukutendereza (the Revival) was hated because people thought there were no open dealings: they convened at a place and spent the night there, men and women ostensibly fellowshiping. Also there was hugging including between men and women and most people felt this was not good. Few followed them.⁴⁹

Revivalists’ open airing of private sin was a sexual problem. There were rumors that traveling evangelists had rights to any women or girls who were members of the revival.⁵⁰ Some missionaries reported scenes of sexual license at revivalist meetings, where men led by the Holy Spirit would seek out women to lay with. At least one revived woman, from Murang’a, recounted sexual indiscretions among group members.⁵¹ Philp at Tumutumu reported that revivalist men and women slept together in the same room.⁵² Tumutumu elders, alarmed at revivalists’ delinquency, attacked the group for destroying gendered order. The synod committee appointed to investigate the revivalists

⁴⁷SA IL/D/30-34: Muhoro, “Memorandum on PCEA church: confusion in teaching,” March 1950.

⁴⁸MacPherson, “East African Revival,” in *Kikuyu News* 193 (Sept. 1950).

⁴⁹Oral interview: Grace Kanini Njeru.

⁵⁰AIM Papers on ‘Isms’ file. “Report on Ruanda Activities,” 10 August 1950.

⁵¹Smoker, *Ambushed*, 261-63.

⁵²SA IL/D/30-34: Philp, notes on conversation with revivalists, n.d.

in 1949 condemned the group for "their manner of greeting which involve kissing and hugging and ecstatic jumping."⁵³ More, revivalists called each other by intimate names reserved for the closest of kin relations. As a result, the committee maintained, they broke up marriages, "creating strife instead of harmony between husband and wife." "Their preaching is such that it could cause war (*mbaara*)," the committee concluded.⁵⁴ One revivalist was known to preach with the aid of a spear. Ill-considered words set husbands and wives against each other, and brought Gikuyu to the brink of violent conflict.

Revivalists' public profession of marital wrongs made elders doubt their sexual discipline. Public speaking also made women into bad citizens. It was here, around the question of citizenship, that the oral culture of the revival clashed most tellingly with the bureaucratic morality of the church. Readers hoped to find a nation-of-words in their record books and letters: their play with English record books and letters engaged Gikuyu with British power. Writing was a practice of citizenship. Revivalists were contemptuous of church bureaucracy. Their undisciplined preaching made them bad citizens, disrespectful of the moral law with which elders hoped to rebuild Gikuyu polity. The investigating committee appointed by the Presbyterian synod criticized the Revival on 21 counts. Thirteen of the criticisms had to do with bureaucratic infractions. Among other wrongs, revivalists were known to: meet in secret without the knowledge of chiefs; fail to show respect for church leaders; deprive the church of their tithes; show disrespect for Holy Communion and other sacraments of the church; improvise new rules; refuse to obey the laws of the land; and refuse to accept the benediction from the pastor at the end of the service.⁵⁵ Their willful disregard for bureaucracy went to the heart of the matter.

⁵³SA II/G/2: PCEA "Subcommittee investigating persons associated with the 'Ruanda' revival," 28-29 October 1949.

⁵⁴SA II/G/2: PCEA "Subcommittee investigating persons associated with the 'Ruanda' revival," 28-29 October 1949.

⁵⁵SA II/G/2: PCEA "Subcommittee investigating persons associated with the 'Ruanda' revival," 28-29 October 1949.

Zakariah Mutahi, Tumutumu pastor posted to Nanyuki in 1950, had the DC arrest the revivalists in town. He testified that they impeded church worship, meeting for days on end without a government permit.⁵⁶ Revivalists were subversives.

Revivalists' wordiness made them into deviants of the nation-of-words that readers thought themselves creating. Unwilling to recognize the moral necessity of church law, revivalists' politics were questionable. There were rumors in 1950 that the revivalists, meeting 15,000 strong in Kabete, had sold the Nairobi City Charter to the British.⁵⁷ It was a telling critique. At the insistence of European settlers, Nairobi had been raised to the status of a full-fledged city during Charter Week celebrations in March. Gikuyu feared that the new city would expand its boundaries 32 miles into Kiambu, alienating yet more land to Europeans.⁵⁸ Gikuyu property was threatened by revivalists' wordiness. KCA elders, from their underground headquarters at Chief Koinange's homestead in Kiambu, began administering oaths against revival in 1948. Oath-takers promised not to reveal any secrets to outsiders.⁵⁹ Politicians pilloried revivalists for their willful delinquency, their irresponsible destruction of the literate house of Gikuyu unity. One writer in the Gikuyu press condemned the Revival in this way in 1950:

I ask you, how much money was raised at the (Revival) convention in Embu and Kabete when there was not enough money to finish the school at Githunguri? Will you not believe me when I tell you again that salvation will only come from Githunguri? In asking this, I am sad at heart to know how much money I wasted in seeking the King of the Jews...I tell you no schools have been built for us by Jesus.⁶⁰

⁵⁶SA II/C/25: Zakariah Mutahi to Calderwood, 22 February 1950.

⁵⁷MacPherson, "East African Revival," in *Kikuyu News* 193 (Sept. 1950).

⁵⁸Spencer, *Kenya African Union*, 210-11; Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: 1960), 83.

⁵⁹MacPherson, "East African Revival"; SA II/G/4: Mau Mau confession forms, 1955.

⁶⁰KNA MAC KEN 33/1: Martin Capon (at CMS Weithaga), prayer letter, Sept. 1949-August 1950.

Githunguri, the independent schools' teachers' college in Kiambu, was the crowning achievement of Gikuyu bureaucratic theory. By investing in Githunguri and other independent schools, Gikuyu in the late 1930s hoped to work English education into the stuff of a new, literate tribe, a nation of words with which to contest British power. The word-mongers of the Revival wasted Gikuyu resources, and words, on foreign gods. Revival was irresponsible, delinquent: its members endangered Gikuyu polity by undercutting the bureaucratic basis of literate unity. Revivalists' orality, their willful disdain for the literate structures of Gikuyu unity, was at once a political and a moral problem. The wordiness of the Revival simultaneously attacked the bureaucratic morality of Gikuyu politics and the intimate basis of gendered order.

Disciplining Revival

Terrified at the oral immorality of the revival, Tumutumu's church court disciplined the revivalists by controlling their words. In 1948 the court banned the revivalists from preaching in the Tumutumu area.⁶¹ Some elders attempted to prevent revivalists from meeting in private homes for prayer.⁶² The elders forbade the Rev. Solomon Ndambi, "saved" at the convention in Kabete in 1949, from talking about his experiences.⁶³ Within months of Ndambi's conversion, the court transferred him from Tumutumu to the faraway church in Chogoria.⁶⁴ The church's ban on revivalist speech was called the *muhingo*, the closed door. Church discipline was meant to close revivalists' mouths, stifling their public preaching of private ills. There was a second, protective means to the *muhingo*. Church leaders hoped that the closed door would wall out the British, protecting Gikuyu homesteads from foreign invaders. To revivalists the

⁶¹SA I/C/3: Lamont to Calderwood, 23 January 1948.

⁶²KVA MSS BS/1:8: Philp to Barlow, n.d. (but 1948).

⁶³SA II/C/22: Lamont to MacPherson, 16 September 1949.

⁶⁴SA II/C/22: Lamont to MacPherson, 5 October 1949.

muhingo felt like dehumanizing censorship. Peterson Muchangi, nephew to Ndambi and himself an early revivalist, described the ban in this way:

Ahonoku were not allowed to speak in church--I could not even greet people, or even tell them what I am doing. It was like I was completely an outcast. So in the church we were disciplined, but when we walked out we built our church outside under the trees, and we started singing, and giving testimonies. So outside we took advantage. People would not leave after the service and would listen to us.⁶⁵

The church's ban on revivalists' words was meant to silence wordy women, restoring marital order with silence. It is clear that revivalists kept talking. Banned from speaking in church, revivalists convened their meetings after Sunday services, outside the church building. Some went farther. At Kibirigwi, revivalists broke into the church building to hold day-long prayer services in 1951.⁶⁶ The pastor, Johanna Wanjau, suspended them from communion for six months. Incensed, revivalists spread rumors that Wanjau was a servant of the Devil.⁶⁷ Church discipline looked like evil malevolence. But there was a material side to revivalists' condemnation. Rev. Wanjau was at that time deeply involved in land litigation over Tumutumu hill.⁶⁸ Some revivalists thought Wanjau a greedy sorcerer, sapping life from the church. Revivalists met outside Kibirigwi after services, loudly singing and confessing. Some preached that Wanjau was possessed by evil spirits. Their public professions were an effort to compass the church bureaucracy with Christian teleology, an effort to open space for moral judgment on elders' power.

Early in April 1952, Wanjau, enraged at revivalists' words, attacked the group at Kibirigwi in an attempt to halt their preaching. He assaulted one of the woman preachers,

⁶⁵Oral interview: Peterson Muchangi.

⁶⁶TT Correspondence with Kikuyu file: Calderwood to Muhoro, 17 April 1951.

⁶⁷TT Marua makonii Kirk Session file: Executive Committee of Tumutumu Presbytery, 8 April 1952.

⁶⁸ Cristiana Pugliese, *Gikuyu Political Pamphlets and Hymn Books, 1945-1952* (Nairobi: French Institute for research in Africa, June 1993), 54.

holding her by the breasts while commanding her to keep silence.⁶⁹ Called before the church court to explain himself, Wanjau accused some of the revivalists of marrying outside the church. Their disregard for church law was the best evidence against revivalists. The Tumutumu church court supported Wanjau against the loud women of Kibirigwi. Charles Muhoro, moderator of the Presbytery, instructed church leaders to "beat them, excommunicate them, imprison them."⁷⁰ Solomon Ndambi, speaking for the revivalists, reminded the elders that the early Christians had suffered in a similar way. Tumutumu's violently local arguments made some revivalists aspire to martyrdom.

One year later, Wanjau was dead, murdered by "Mau Mau" rebels.⁷¹ He was the only Tumutumu church pastor to perish during the Emergency. Missionaries remembered him as a martyr, killed by the anti-Christian forces of Mau Mau. Reality seems to have been more complex. There were rumors early in 1953 that Wanjau had himself joined the "Mau Mau."⁷² If the rumors were true, Wanjau would have been only one of many Gikuyu who, seeking to keep peace within families torn by sorcerous divisions, found ways to speak to the young men of "Mau Mau." Revivalists, too, do not remember Wanjau's murder within the frame imagined by missionaries. They talk about the murder as a continuation of a longer struggle within local Gikuyu communities over the morality of the Revival. As one elderly woman put it,

During the period of the Emergency that person who drove us away was mutilated and killed by Mau Mau. You see Mau Mau was assisting the people of God.⁷³

As the contested history of Wanjau's murder suggests, Tumutumu's debate over Revival was part of a long, continuing struggle among men and women to work out new

⁶⁹SA II/C/25: Irvine to Lamont, 25 April 1952.

⁷⁰SA II/C/25: Irvine to Lamont, 25 April 1952.

⁷¹TT Miscellaneous file: Muhoro. sermon at St Andrews, 20 December 1953.

⁷²SA II/C/22: Lamont to Calderwood, 2 January 1953.

⁷³Oral interview: Maritha Gakeria wa Maina.

standards of public trust in a time of moral chaos. Rural capitalism in the 1940s had divided Gikuyu, setting husbands against wives, landholders against tenants, elders against youth in dangerously heated argument. The terror of gender crisis made Gikuyu rethink the public institutions that bound them together. Revival and church bureaucracy, oral preaching and literate book-keeping, women's rhetoric and men's writing, were contending, gendered, answers to the common problem of discord. Both literate bureaucrats and revived preachers hoped to work out new tests of self-mastery, new standards of private discipline, among husbands and wives intimately divided by the terror of class formation. Tumutumu's violent debate over Revival was part of a long struggle over Gikuyu words.

Mau Mau continued the struggle. The sociology of Mau Mau recruitment has received thorough scholarly treatment. But the intellectual history of Mau Mau, the means by which Gikuyu men and women argued themselves into violence, has received little attention. My argument is that Mau Mau must be seen in part as a war of words, an effort by Gikuyu angered at the acquisitive sorcery of wealthy Gikuyu and British men to work out new Christian languages of politics. Mission readers, translating the Bible in the *ituika* of the 1920s, had invented a vocabulary for Gikuyu that made private property a condition for public responsibility. The men and women of Mau Mau revisited Christian texts in the 1950s, using new words to call Gikuyu to service and to condemn the jealous sorcery of the wealthy. Their re-translation of the Bible, their re-investments in bureaucracy, offered up new words for Mau Mau's politics.

Chapter Twelve

Writing in Revolution Moral renewal and the Bureaucratic Politics of Mau Mau

Old Gikuyu divisions turned bloody in Mau Mau. Early in 1952, young wage workers returned from Nairobi began administering “Mau Mau” oaths widely throughout Mahiga location. The oaths demanded sexual and vocal discipline of both men and women, and committed them to battle against sorcerers. Presbyterian mission readers generally refused to take the oath.¹ They reported on the beginning of oath-taking; some translated the oath for British officials.² The Presbyterians in Mahiga were led by Francis Wanjohi, local landholder who, in the 1930s, had accused independent school leaders of mismanaging the Cash Book. At the onset of the Emergency, Kagere independent school was partially destroyed, turned into a Home Guard post. Wanjohi was captain of the Guard. At the urging of British officials, mission readers appropriated the iron roofing sheets and carved stones from the independent school for use in their own building. The Presbyterians also carted off the church bell, the mark of public accomplishment that in the 1930s had voiced Kagere’s hopes for *ituika*.³ Independent school supporters were made to help lift the load. Some remembered that they were “whipped like slaves” by the Home Guard.⁴ One elderly man compared Wanjohi to Pharaoh.⁵ Early in 1953 Wanjohi was killed by Mau Mau fighters from the Aberdares forest. Some of his killers were ex-students from Kagere. He was the only Presbyterian church elder to perish in Mahiga.⁶

Turnutumu missionaries thought Francis Wanjohi, like others whom the British named loyalists, was heroically martyred for the faith by anti-Christian Mau Mau. It was precisely by framing the violence of the Emergency in such dualistic terms that the British

¹Oral interview: Onesimus King’ori.

²Oral interview: Macharia Gachanu.

³Oral interviews: Beatrice Nyawira; Joseph Mwangi Mwaura.

⁴Oral interviews: Elijah Kiruthi; Francis Huria.

⁵Oral interview: Hudson Kimunyi.

⁶*TT* Ordinations book, elders.

comprehended, and combated, Mau Mau. Once the local violence of the early 1950s had been regimented into a war between two mutually opposed sides, then Mau Mau's partisans became visible, and coercive courses of action became practicable. Missionary history structured British policy. R.G.M. Calderwood, moderator of the Presbytery, traced Gikuyu social division back to the 1929 circumcision crisis:

The outbreak of 1952 was really a renewal of that of 1929. It was carefully planned and built up in the post-war years, and found very able leaders. Cassandra-like, the churches warned of what was happening and missionaries passed on information received from pastors and teachers, but little note was taken.⁷

Missionaries thought Mau Mau the fulfillment of twenty years' agitation, the carefully thought-out product of a few ingenious minds. The chief culprits, they thought, were the *iregi*, independent church supporters who left the church over the circumcision pledge and had since darkly plotted against missionary endeavor.⁸ Government bureaucrats, searching for identifiable culprits, agreed with missionaries about the danger of independent schools. They closed KISA schools throughout Gikuyuland at the outset of the Emergency, leaving some 780 students in Nyeri district alone without education.⁹ Kenyatta's Kenya Teachers' College in Githunguri was razed, its books, blackboards and typewriters distributed among mission schools in the area.¹⁰ Willy Jimmy Wambugu, Stephano Waciira, and other Nyeri KISA leaders were detained. The British fought Mau Mau by destroying independent schooling.

Kenya's nationalist historians generally accepted British perspectives on the Christian history of Mau Mau's violence but overturned its prejudices. Mau Mau

⁷ SA II/G/1: Calderwood, "Mau Mau: What Is It?," 4 September 1953.

⁸ For a contemporary non-missionary version of this history, see Louis Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London: Methuen, 1954), Ch. 4.

⁹ KNA VP/2/14: Education Officer Nyeri to Director of Education, 10 October 1953.

¹⁰ KNA MK/1/1: DO Githunguri to DC Kiambu, 22 November 1955.

insurgents became patriots, committed to the national cause. Mission schools converted from seedbeds of progress into agents of cultural imperialism. Independent schools were transformed from hotbeds of sedition into centers of nationalist education. Both nationalists and British rulers justified the violence of the 1950s by contrasting the barbarity of their opponents with the most compelling achievements of their own culture, so better to explain why their world deserved to be so bloodily defended. Mau Mau had to be “lumped” into a coherent whole so as better to combat it, or protect it. So too did its enemies have to be seen as unified, to merit the investment of British blood, or to bear the weight of nationalism’s villains. Later historians were equivocal about the churchly origins of Mau Mau but sure about its integrity, its usefulness as a historical category. Marxist historians thought Mau Mau a class-based movement, composed of clear-minded workers and peasants driven by the structural injustice of the colonial economy.¹¹ Radical historiography thus documented class formation in the Rift Valley and in Nairobi, showing how the progressive impoverishment of the 1940s led to the structural outcome of Mau Mau. Kenya’s liberal historians, meanwhile, asked agonized questions about the “failure” of Kenyan nationalism.¹² Mau Mau, they thought, was a tribal movement, playing on the populist sensibilities of Gikuyu in order to outmaneuver the moderate nationalism of the Kenya African Union. Far from being an inspiration to the new Kenyan nation, Mau Mau, argued liberals, was an aberration, best forgotten.¹³

¹¹For radical histories of Mau Mau, see Donald Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau From Within: An Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (New York: Modern Reader, 1966); Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (London: James Currey, 1989); Maina wa Kinyatti, “Introduction,” in *Thunder from the Mountains: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs* (London: Zed Books, 1980).

¹²B.A. Ogot, “Politics, culture and music in central Kenya: a study of Mau Mau hymns,” in *Kenya Historical Review* 5 (2) (1977), 275-86; and B. Kipkorir, “Mau Mau and the politics of the transfer of power in Kenya,” in *ibid.*, 313-28.

¹³This paragraph draws inspiration from John Lonsdale’s reviews of Mau Mau’s historiography: “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: The Problem,” in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London: James Currey, 1992), 265-314; and Lonsdale’s introduction to Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (London: James Currey, 1997), xvi-xxx.

None of these histories can make adequate sense of Wanjohi's murder. For nationalist, Marxist, and liberal histories alike "lump" Mau Mau in order to ask critically evaluative questions of it, questions about the political failure of moderate political movements, or about the structural roots of class conflict, or about the history of anti-colonial struggle. None are sufficiently attentive to the humanity of history, to the intimate arguments in which Gikuyu came to terms with structural change. For structures do not make history. Humans do. The moral languages with which Gikuyu speculated on structural change were never pre-determined. Since the 1920s, men and women at Mahiga had argued about the structural questions posed by colonial power--land alienation, class formation, missionary cultural imperialism--with inherited ethnic vocabularies of conflict. Local readers hoped that British Cash Books would structure generational politics, creating standards of public responsibility in which young men could invest for the future. They worked up the energy to argue with the British by speculating on elections, square houses and tea in arguments with their elders. Where Gikuyu disagreed, they did so because local theories of politics were pressingly divisive, because *mbari* politicians would not recognize an authority that exceeded family power. Without understanding these deep reservoirs of personal identity and ethnic debate, without considering how internally divisive were the arguments that Gikuyu conducted about colonial power, we can scarcely comprehend the terrible violence of the 1950s.

For Mau Mau carried old Gikuyu arguments about politics and morality forward. This chapter is about how Mau Mau partisans rewrote their language. By doing so, I show, they gave birth to a new political entity, a bureaucratic nation, given shape with record books but fired by the moral promise of *ituika*. Mau Mau was, in part, a war over words. Gikuyu knew they had to get their language right before they could fight the British. Their investments in language were driven by a morally obligating sense that readers' wealth was draining the life out of poor men and women, that rural capitalism

was destroying Gikuyu posterity. Faced with evidence of social decay, terrified by British needles, Mau Mau first fought intimate battles to rebuild social order. They demanded that wordy women curb their tongues, that dissolute men control themselves. Sexual and vocal self-mastery, demanded in Mau Mau oaths, protected Gikuyu households from destruction. When they did engage with the state, Mau Mau's patriots used bureaucratic procedure to shape a moral polity, a redeemed nation of books in which fighters could invest their blood. Mau Mau fighters imagined *ituika* through bureaucracy. They learned their most important lessons from independent schools' theory of education, which Mau Mau adopted as its own history. Driven by a sense of generation destiny, Mau Mau fought the British to birth the moral revolution for which the independents had long hoped.

The first section below examines how one Mau Mau intellectual, Bildad Kaggia, thought through new idioms of moral agency and political unity by translating the Bible. Kaggia's words demonstrate how closely linked linguistic reform was to moral reform in Mau Mau's thought. In the second section, I demonstrate how Mau Mau used oaths and writing to commit Gikuyu to sexual and vocal discipline. Mau Mau began as a moral project, an effort to discipline men and women made into delinquents by class formation. Mastering themselves with oaths and promises of upright conduct, Mau Mau battled the British with bureaucracy. They used record books to mark out the boundaries of a new polity, a polity redeemed from the waste of sorcery. They were inspired by the promises of *ituika*, by the sure hope that their private sacrifices would birth a new moral order. Not all shared their hopes. Gikuyu were, as ever, divided in their visions of the future. In the third section I show how *mbari* politicians argued with the young men in the forest. Old Gikuyu arguments about property and unity, *mbari* and *ituika*, structured the violence of Mau Mau. Principled people on both sides worked to limit the damage, working for

politics of sorcery and cleanliness. *Akorino*, the Gikuyu poor, were faced daily with evidence of readers' malevolent wealth. Like the revivalists, the *akorino* actively opposed sorcery, refusing to drink the blood used in Gikuyu oaths and carefully refusing to shake hands with outsiders, for fear of contracting contamination. They drew most of their members from the dispossessed of the Rift Valley, who by the end of the Second World War were denied even the dubious right to rented land by increasingly jealous white settlers. But while their Christian practice appealed to the poor, they did not preach on their behalf: *akorino* refused to mix godliness and politics, retreating instead to pray in caves.

Kaggia's own prophetic vision owed much to the culture of the *akorino*. Like them, the people of Kaggia abjured English baptismal names: mission church members who joined Kaggia were rebaptised using their former, Gikuyu names.²² Their marriage ceremonies involved none of the tea and fried food that marked readers' weddings: Kaggia himself made certain that at his own wedding only Gikuyu food was served.²³ Kaggia worked for a "clean church," a church purged of the "European customs" imposed by the mission churches. These were marks of a kind of separatism, an identity politics that asserted difference over the hegemony of readers' dress and food. Yet Kaggia's concern with cleanliness equally evoked Gikuyu concerns over sorcery and pollution. Readers' material theology, for 'prophets' like Kaggia, was dangerously acquisitive: Christian elders' wealth sucked the life out of the poor. Kaggia's followers' ways of dressing and naming were an attempt to cleanse Christian life of the dangerous greed of the readers, an effort to translate Christian theology to speak in the register of poor men and women's fears. His project appealed to those on the outskirts of the Protestant establishment. "Uneducated" people, the poor unable to pay the high fees required of

²²Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 74.

²³Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 75.

mission schools, were attracted to the movement.²⁴ In at least one Presbyterian church in the northern district of Nyeri, women who consistently argued with their husbands--we do not know about what--joined the movement and brought numerous church members with them.²⁵ In Nairobi, wage-earning young men worried about the unproductive future which faced them repudiated their Anglican ties and joined Kaggia.²⁶ At the Anglican station at Weithaga, missionaries worried about a "fifth column" within the church after Kaggia attracted supporters from among leading families.²⁷ Kaggia's movement capitalized on the social disorder of the late 1940s, providing for mission Christianity's malcontents imaginative ways of engaging with an increasingly bleak future.

Kaggia's political project, unlike that of the separatist *akorino*, demanded vocal and sustained arguing if this contentious politics of translation was to take hold. Kaggia knew that "God had to be brought to our side."²⁸ He sought to dislodge God from the mute congregations of the mission churches by making Him speak loudly and polemically, in public debates with mission supporters. Throughout 1947 and 48, Kaggia engaged in public arguments with mission church leaders, culminating in 1948 when he and three of his followers debated Obadiah Kariuki, a leading Anglican cleric, and two others for three full days at a church in Fort Hall. Kaggia relished the opportunity to "drive my message straight into the heart of the Pharisees." We can get some sense of the ways he argued in the following:

Besides converting people to my kind of Christianity, the objective of myself and my followers was to destroy the hypocritical "synagogue Christianity" of the establishment Church. We compared the clergy and the whole hierarchy of the "mzungu church" to the Pharisees of old, those who outwardly professed godliness but were ungodly inside. Like Jesus, I changed the emphasis from

²⁴Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 65.

²⁵TT Ibuku ria kiama kia coci, minute for 25.8.49.

²⁶CPK North Highlands Rural Deanery file: Report on youth work in Nairobi for the quarter ending 30.9.47.

²⁷KNA MAC/KEN 33/1: Martin Capon, prayer letter, 23 January 1948.

²⁸Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 56.

peace across the barbed wire with which the British divided them. Common commitment to posterity, to a fertile future, bound Gikuyu together even as their pasts drew them apart.

Translating Mau Mau

Terrified at the invasive power of the rich, emasculated by their inability to earn self-mastery through wage work, some Gikuyu poor translated their sense of injury into imaginative politics. We can see this translative practice in action in the life and thought of Bildad Kaggia, the Pentecostal prophet and radical trade union leader who officered the Nairobi branch of the Kenya African Union until his detention at British hands in 1952. Kaggia has long been recognized as one of the intellectuals of what came to be called Mau Mau.¹⁴ But his thought, like that of other Gikuyu politicians, has received little attention.¹⁵ I suggest below that Kaggia's creative retranslations of the Bible may take us close to the language in which the Gikuyu poor argued about class formation in the 1940s. As I showed in Chapter Three, first-generation readers of the 1920s had translated the Bible into an acquisitive vocabulary of self-mastery, a means to demand of share of wealth and power from their elders. Faced in the late 1940s with evidence that wealthy readers were empty shells, that their Christian souls were corrupt tombs sucking the life out of the poor, Kaggia re-translated the Word into a call for productive unity. Condemning the wealthy for their refusal to enable others, calling for cooperative work among those who would rebuild moral order, Kaggia re-wrote the Christian self into a self-less grammar of a Gikuyu common-wealth. His radical re-translations help to illuminate the language with which Mau Mau obligated Gikuyu to do their moral duty.

¹⁴Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Historical Perspective* (London: James Currey Press, 1989), 139; Marshall Clough, *Fighting two sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940* (Niwott: University Press of Colorado, 1990), 180-182; Throup, *Economic and Social Origins*, 243, 271. Kaggia has written his own autobiography in *Roots of Freedom, 1921-1963: The autobiography of Bildad Kaggia* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975).

¹⁵I refer here to Jomo Kenyatta: c.f. John Lonsdale, "Jomo, God and the modern world" for a critique of historians' failure to take intellectual biography seriously.

In Kaggia's thinking the need for a critical translation of Christian language arose from the avarice of the new Gikuyu elite, the readers. Their fences, paddocked land, and fat cattle made other Gikuyu poor: Kaggia's own father was rendered landless when his greedy relatives sold his land and left him to work as a wage earner in Nairobi.¹⁶ Kaggia worked his way out of poverty by learning to read English, joining the British army and traveling to England as a military clerk in 1945. His experiences led him to formulate a critique of British colonialism in Kenya, a critique sharpened by his interaction with non-conformist Pentecostals in Newcastle.¹⁷ At the heart of this critique was the problem of politics: Gikuyu literati, he thought, "had so much faith in the *mzungu's* (European's) continued political dominance and in his intellectual power and capability that they simply abdicated from politics."¹⁸ The avarice of mission readers made them the pawns of the missionaries, who worked in league with officials to extract wealth from the Gikuyu poor. How, Kaggia wondered, could he liberate his people's minds?¹⁹

Kaggia's answer was akin to that of other Gikuyu "praying churches," *akorino*, who alone among Gikuyu Christians thought that the Holy Spirit was the most demanding person of the Trinity.²⁰ Since the late 1920s, *akorino* had condemned material wealth and demanded that followers abjure the clothing, carefully trimmed hair and baptismal names of readers' culture.²¹ If readers were the Gikuyu establishment of the 1940s, then the *akorino* were the revolutionaries. Readers built their nation-of-words in books, and valued wealth as a sign of divine favor. Married to a liberal materialism more interested in property than in the immediacy of evil, readers declined to enter into the dangerous

¹⁶Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 8-9.

¹⁷Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 45-46.

¹⁸Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 63.

¹⁹The title of Ch. 6 of Kaggia's autobiography is "How could I liberate their minds?"

²⁰Language I owe to John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 1999.

²¹For a description of *akorino* philosophy, see David Sandgren, *Christianity and the Kikuyu: Religious Divisions and Social Conflict* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 127-131. and Francis Githieya, *The New People of God: The Christian Community in the African Orthodox Church (Karing'a) and the Arathi (Agikuyu Spirit Churches)* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1992).

'converting the heathen' to 'demolishing the citadel of ungodly formalism and hypocrisy.'²⁹

Readers of a generation before had similarly translated Matthew Chs. 5-7 into a rhetoric of condemnation. They found in the woes that Jesus announced to the Pharisees ways of condemning their suspicious elders, who refused to recognize their generational integrity. Driven by the evidence of readers' wealth in the 1940s, Kaggia retranslated Matthew into a critique of hypocrisy, a critique also of readers' sorcery. Their sleekly fat bodies disguised their emptiness, their barrenness. Kaggia called them the "devil's congregation."³⁰ It was more than Christian name-calling. It was judo by translation. Kaggia upended readers' claims that wealth made for virtue, that salvation came through property. As we shall see, his criticism opened space for a new model of Christian commonwealth.

Kaggia's upending of readers' materialism required new Christian languages of politics. As I showed in previous chapters, readers in the 1920s translated the Christian vocabulary of "soul," "mind," and "conscience" into a grammar of subjectivity with which to argue with elders. Claiming to know better than their fathers, they claimed Christian redemption suited them for Gikuyu leadership. The Gikuyu Bible preached that salvation made for wealth, that property rewarded Christian diligence. Kaggia thought readers' rhetoric amounted to theft. He knew that readers' selves were morally barren, that the *ngoro* they so lovingly fabricated was a disguise for sorcery. Readers' Christian selves were dangerously stand-offish, greedy for property and power. Faced with evidence of readers' sorcery, Kaggia looked for words with which to imagine new Christian politics. We can hear him casting about for language in his correspondence with Arthur Barlow, who was by the late 1940s engaged in translating the last portions of

²⁹Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 70.

³⁰Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 71.

the Old Testament. Kaggia wrote to Barlow on two occasions: once in 1946, while he was resident in England in war service, and again in 1949, as the leader of the *Andu a Kaggia* and a member of the Mau Mau central committee in Nairobi. As I shall demonstrate below, the two letters reveal Kaggia's creative effort to think through a new Christian language of common-wealth. Criticizing readers for their morally empty selves, Kaggia called for cooperative unity among those who would till the soil of the future. He retranslated Christian vocabularies of the self, asking not for an inheritance of wealth but for self-less labor, diligent investments of sweat for the future. The evidence is thin, and my deductions must be speculative: Kaggia himself is prudently silent on these matters. But the evidence suggests that in the Christian vocabulary of unbelief, and in the rhetoric of speaking in tongues, Kaggia found ways to make the Word into a call for Gikuyu unity, a grammar of cooperative self-mastery.

Kaggia in 1946 sent Barlow a Bible marked with his suggested emendations. As a military clerk on duty in England, he first argued about the translated Bible with John Arthur, the Scots missionary who oversaw the production of the Gikuyu Old Testament.³¹ This Bible unfortunately does not survive; we must infer its content from Barlow's brief comments on it and from Kaggia's own list of retranslated words, sent to Barlow in 1949. Kaggia in 1946 was apparently concerned with Corinthians chapters 12-14, a passage which he had marked extensively.³² This is Paul's exhortation concerning the exercise of "spiritual gifts" to the Corinthian church, which had sacrificed church order for chaotic displays of prophecy and preaching. In the Gikuyu of the 1926 New Testament, the passage insisted that the variety of matters (*maundu*) within the church come from one spirit (*Roho*), and abjured readers to be sympathetic but watchful of this diversity of expression. Kaggia's concern with this passage undoubtedly had much to do with his

³¹ Kaggia describes his trip to the BFBS office in London, and his argument with the ex-missionary John Arthur, by then overseeing Gikuyu Bible translation, in *Roots of Freedom*, 48-51.

³² *KNA MSS (BS) 1/2: UKLC correspondence, 1914-47: Barlow to Kaggia, 13 February 1946.*

own discourses with the Assemblies of God congregations in Newcastle, in whose churches he preached condemnation on British imperialism and whose vocal styles of worship he found attractive.³³ Yet Kaggia's concern with the legitimacy of the gifts of the Spirit equally had to do with a long-standing Gikuyu aversion to pestering God. Jomo Kenyatta as ethnographer in 1938 had poured scorn on the Gikuyu prophetic sects as "a bunch of lunatics"; their endless prayers substituted words for work and needlessly troubled God.³⁴ Kaggia's translation of Corinthians sought to absolve charisma of this criticism: prophets, he argued, were not lunatics, they were *arathi*, the Gikuyu prophets who had communicated with God in the days before Christianity. Missionaries had used the Swahili word *munabii* to translate "prophet," worrying that the Gikuyu term *murathi* would confuse Christian prophecy with false, heathenish soothsaying.³⁵ Kaggia argued forcefully that true prophecy was *urathi*, that Gikuyu knew true prophets by their success: "A true *murathi* is believed...to be in direct communication with Ngai, who gives him instructions in his sleep, just like Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Isaiah."³⁶ Kaggia sought to beat missionaries at their own language game, to make *urathi* the subject of a new, Christian sentence against missionary attempts to screen it off. He equally worked to bring Christian charisma within the ken of Gikuyu politics, demonstrating that prophets could speak powerfully in Gikuyu, just as *arathi* had a century before. The twinned point became important as Kaggia worked through the tenor of his prophetic voice.

By 1949 Kaggia had sharpened his tongues and worked out a fusion between Pentecostalism and Gikuyu politics. He was by then the president of a clerical workers

³³c.f. *Roots of Freedom* 45: The Assemblies of God "impressed me with their sincerity and true love. They were not like the hypocrites I used to see in clerical robes in Kenya. These people practiced what they preached and loved Africans live themselves without discrimination."

³⁴Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938), 277. cited in Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities."

³⁵Scouten, an early AIM translator, used *mundu wa nyama wa mburi* (the man of goat meat) for prophet (AIM Kikuyu language file: Scouten, word list, n.d. (but 1907)). By 1913 the UKLC had settled on *munabu* for prophet (AIM Committees, misc. 1930s to 1970s: UKLC meeting 13-14 August 1913).

³⁶Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 50.

union and a leader in the 'Mau Mau' movement, one of the Twelve who oversaw the administration of the oath of unity in the environs of Nairobi.³⁷ Working for the renewal of Gikuyu morality through Mau Mau, Kaggia found in Christian language useful ways of talking about unity of purpose, works with which also to criticize the greedily wealthy. His argument began with *Galatians* 6:6, the first translation he advocated to Barlow in 1949 and a passage to which he apparently referred at length in 1946.³⁸ The passage reads in English "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things." In the 1926 Gikuyu translation, complained Kaggia, the passage had become a demand that students "give unto his teacher all his good things," all his property. The crux of the problem was the verb *-gaya*, which the earlier translators had used for "communicate." *Gaya* was "to divide (on inheritance)," the verb by which readers of the 1910s and 20s had made claims on their elders' property. Kaggia complained in 1949 that this translation compelled the Gikuyu poor to part with all their livestock, their *indo*. The poor, he wrote, "had interpreted it to mean they were to give all their good things to the church, because God had commanded them to do so."³⁹ *Gaya* as a claim for Christian inheritance was by the late 1940s a dangerously acquisitive demand on property, thought Kaggia: Gikuyu poverty required a new word. Kaggia settled on the translation *Reke mundu....magiage ngwataniro na mumuruti maunduini mothe mega*--"let he who is taught....always have *ngwataniro* with his teacher in all good matters."⁴⁰ The key word in this phrase is *ngwataniro*, the cooperative labor by which 19th century Gikuyu had cleared the forest of its stubborn trees and rendered it up for civilizing agriculture. In the late 1940s, *ngwataniro* was a powerful metaphor for Gikuyu cooperation: the oath of unity which was later called a "Mau Mau" oath was variously

³⁷Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 108.

³⁸KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Bildad Kaggia, "Amendment of mistranslations of the Kikuyu New Testament," n.d. (but January 1949).

³⁹Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom*, 49.

⁴⁰KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Bildad Kaggia, "Amendment of mistranslations of the Kikuyu New Testament," n.d. (but January 1949).

called the *muuma wa uiguano* (oath of cooperative hearing, agreement) or the *muuma wa ngwataniro*. The work of political resistance demanded unity, working together, in order to free Gikuyu land of the “stumps” of those who persistently stood apart, the wealthy loyalists. Kaggia’s translation invoked this calculus of cooperation in calling for *ngwataniro* between learners and teachers. His translation distanced the text from elders’ dangerous claims on Gikuyu property, the *indo* they so eagerly desired. Instead, Kaggia asked for cooperation, unity, in “all good matters” (*maundu mothe mega*). Those desired “good matters” were the imagined future of Kaggia’s Gikuyu and the subject of the remainder of his translations.

Kaggia’s plea for cooperative unity was accompanied by a series of translations that denigrated the wealthy, those whose property set them apart from others and inclined them to resist *ngwataniro*. Another of Kaggia’s suggestions to Barlow concerned *I Peter* 2:7, “unto you who believe he is precious, but unto them who be disobedient, ‘the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner.’” It seems likely that Kaggia, turned out of Anglican churches and imprisoned at missionaries’ behest, imagined himself as the object of this sentence, the stone which the builders had rejected. But in Gikuyu, Kaggia’s translation becomes a compelling critique not of missionary discrimination but of Gikuyu stubbornness, and a promise of deliverance to those who assent or believe. The key term in this regard is “disobedient,” referring to those false builders who had rejected Christ. The 1926 missionary translation had used the verb *-ihoka*, to “have faith” or to “hope in,” both for “you who believe” and “the disobedient”: those who believe were *aria mwihokete Ngai*; the unbelievers were *aria maramwihokete (Ngai)*.⁴¹ Kaggia wanted to translate the passage using *aria aremu* for “unbelievers” and *aria mwitikitie* for “you who believe.” *Aremu* was a contentious translation: it was derived from the verb *-rema*, which in 1938 meant “be unmanageable by; ‘stump’; be too

⁴¹Missionaries had decided to use *-ihoka* for “believe on” or “hope in” from 1907. *AIM Kikuyu Language* file: Minutes of language meeting, 17 June 1907.

difficult for; obstinate; too big; undisciplined; disobedient; make stuck; cannot move."⁴² *Rema* equated unbelievers with stumps, which held up productive cultivation and took sweat to dig out. For forest-clearing Gikuyu, stumps meant hard work: without machinery, it had taken Gikuyu up to two man-days to fell a single tree and up to 50 days to clear an acre.⁴³ By calling unbelievers "stumps," Kaggia claimed that the uncooperative were unproductive hindrances to edifying work. But he equally located them within the discursive ken by which 'Mau Mau' defined its friends and enemies. Those who refused to take oaths of unity in the 1940s and 50s were called "stumps" by Mau Mau. Mau Mau units that fought in the Gikuyu reserves were named the Kenya Levellation Army: their job was to uproot loyalists.⁴⁴ Kaggia himself capitalized this connection between trees and loyalists: his autobiography, *Roots of Freedom*, was a post-colonial pun at the expense of the loyalist "stumps" who had inherited the Kenyan state.⁴⁵ The *andu aremu* of 1 Peter were not simply "unbelievers": they were hindrances to unity, the *ngwataniro* which Mau Mau sought to cultivate among Gikuyu. It was to these stubbornly disloyal 'stumps' that Kaggia seems to have addressed the threat in the second part of the verse: the unity which they had rejected would become the chief cornerstone holding up a new Gikuyu polity. The stumps would be dug up and crushed through the sweat of cooperative work.

Kaggia's Christian translations of unbelief and cooperation criticized the wealthy for their sorcerous greed, their uncooperative lusting after private gain. It seems that Kaggia also found in his retranslations the language to think through the meanings of oath-taking, the cultivating practice that rendered the wilderness of Gikuyu immorality into productive unity of purpose. Kaggia seems to have thought about oath-taking as speaking in tongues, the disruptive practice which, in 1946, he had so vigorously

⁴²SA UZ/26: Beecher, *A Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (Nairobi: CMS Bookshop, 1938), 177.

⁴³Lonsdale, "Moral Economy," p. 333; Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below*, 31-32.

⁴⁴Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, p. 247; Lonsdale, "Moral Economy," 332.

⁴⁵A speculative interpretation owed to John Lonsdale. "Moral Economy of Mau Mau," 333.

defended. His translation of *I Corinthians* 14 bears evidence of this fusion between tongues and oaths. Translators in 1926 had rendered the phrase “speaking in tongues” in *I Corinthians* 14:6 as *-aria mohoro maria matangimenyeka*, “speak matters which could not be known (*menya*).” This translation had placed charisma outside the ken of readers’ knowledge: tongues were simply an unknowable matter, and probably not interesting for 1920s readers intent on making themselves heard by their elders. Kaggia in 1949 wanted “speaking in tongues” as *kwaria thiani*, “‘ground up’ speech.”⁴⁶ *Thiani* was a noun that evoked pulverizing, pulping, the sort of work done by women in grinding millet or by men in grinding snuff.⁴⁷ *Kwaria thiani* pulverized words, fractured sentences, made language stand for something besides communication and meaning. But *kwaria thiani* also appears to have been a metaphor for the kinds of coded speech used by ‘Mau Mau’ when talking of oath-taking. One of my informants described this way of talking thus:

People knew each other and messages were disseminated using interpersonal contacts. Those who had not taken were called fleas (*thua*). The greetings between those who had taken were distinct. If you have not taken and entered a house of among those who had taken, they would say “Hey, there are fleas here!” meaning there is someone among them who had not taken. The owner of the house would retort--”its the wife who did not sweep well,” and the case would rest there and the life of the one who had not taken would be there... This ground-up (*thiani*) language was taught amongst those who took the oath.⁴⁸

In an environment where vernacular speech had to be guarded, where ill-directed words could bring detention at British hands, Kaggia found in Biblical injunctions regarding charisma a powerful way of thinking about strategic communication. Mau Mau words, like the charismatic gifts described by Paul, had to be carefully regulated. Open speech was dangerous. *Kwaria thiani* protected Gikuyu words from irresponsible ears. Mau Mau supporters in the reserves, nervous about betrayal by neighbors, relied on coded

⁴⁶KNA MSS (BS) 1/3: Kaggia, “Amendment of mistranslations of the Kikuyu New Testament.”

⁴⁷Bensen. *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* (London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1964).

⁴⁸Oral interview: Macharia Gachanu.

language to distinguish friend and foe. Loyalists were fleas, *thua*, whose insidious biting irritated the Gikuyu body; oathing ceremonies were “tea-parties,” marks of *athomi* respectability now seized for the discursive use of dissenters. Mau Mau supporters greeted one another by shaking hands and scratching simultaneously.⁴⁹ Carefully coded words put off ill-intentioned listeners, and defined languages of trust and obligation. Mau Mau exchanged letters with each other written in a kind of code which at once brought together native speakers and excluded those exterior to its project.⁵⁰ Mau Mau, like the sorts of tongues practiced by Kaggia’s *arathi*, demanded a language of trust, a series of idioms that allowed its believers to talk to each other.

Kaggia’s Bible translations evoke precisely this language of trust. In the Biblical language of charismatic speech, and in the vocabulary of unbelief and cooperation, Kaggia found a richly evocative stock of metaphors with which he and others similarly committed to the building of Gikuyu unity could criticize the stubbornly wealthy. But this was also a language of inclusion, of friendship: those who assented (*itikia*), as Kaggia wrote in *I Peter 2:17* above, found in Jesus Christ something precious. *Itikia* was the same verb that readers had used a generation before to cajole their reluctant elders into agreeing with them, making them into what missionaries called “believers.” Kaggia in 1949 seems to have asked his readers to assent to, or to believe on, something different. He asked for cooperative work, for pulling together, so as to rebuild the Gikuyu body and to reknit the fractured bonds of trust between disobedient and obedient, wealthy and poor.

Kaggia’s tendentious translations never made their way into authorized missionary texts. But Mau Mau continued to imagine new worlds in Bible translation. In 1953, James Karanja was told by Mau Mau oath administrators to stop reading his Bible “because the missions were cheating people with the Bible--that they were the ones who

⁴⁹Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

⁵⁰c.f. Ian Henderson, *Manhunt in Kenya* (New York: Doubleday and co., 1958) for a description of one such series of written exchanges.

wrote those lies for the people.”⁵¹ Biblical criticism led to anti-colonial politics. Early on in the war, missionaries found that students in Presbyterian schools had rubbed out the name Jesus Christ in church hymnbooks and penciled in the name Jomo Kenyatta.⁵² Forest fighters marched to the tune of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Other fighters set Lamentations Chapter 5 to music, and sang it “when we were praying, when being chased, and when we were killing.”⁵³ Mau Mau general Karari Njama used Peter’s vision in Acts to explain to illiterate fighters why it was proper to eat wild game captured in traps.⁵⁴ Kahinga Wachanga had the Chief Native Commissioner read the Ten Commandments out loud during peace negotiations, to illustrate the many sins that the British had committed.⁵⁵

This translative practice, this speculation on the language of politics, organized Mau Mau as a political community. For Mau Mau was, among other things, a war of words. Kaggia knew that it must be so: new politics always demand new vocabularies, new ways of thinking about the self and others. Confronted with evidence of readers’ greedy wealth, terrified at the destructive babble of marital strife, Mau Mau invested in Gikuyu words to restore order. Supporters in the reserves found in *kwaria thiani*, ground-up speech, a language of self-mastery, a vocabulary with which to claim trust and condemn opponents. Forest fighters invested in writing, using record books to create lineages-of-words through which they might, someday, live again. Disciplined writing, careful speech, control over words gave shape to Mau Mau’s political vision. By guarding their words, Gikuyu imagined a new social order, an order invigorated by ethnic tales of moral redemption.

⁵¹SA ILG/4: James Karanja, Nairobi, to church elders at Thogoto, 22 December 1954.

⁵²TT Minutes via DSC file: District School Committee. letter to teachers, 12 February 1953.

⁵³Oral interview, Paul Thuku Njembwe. Gitugi location. Othaya division. 18 June and 19 July 1998.

⁵⁴Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 420.

⁵⁵Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 118.

Writing in Mau Mau

Karari Njama, General Secretary to the Mau Mau fighters who followed Dedan Kimathi in the Aberdares mountains, arrived at General Gikonyo's forest camp early in 1954 famished, having last eaten over four days earlier. In the meeting that ensued immediately after his arrival, Njama found himself unable to speak from hunger. Desperate for words to reassure his listeners, he read *Matthew* Chapter Five aloud from the Bible he carried with him. Bildad Kaggia had read the same passage aloud in his debates with wealthy mission readers over hypocrisy in 1949. So had readers in the early 1920s, arguing with their elders about generational power. The passage promised that the meek would inherit the earth, that those who hungered after righteousness would be filled, that those who mourned would be comforted. Njama explained in this way:

Though this is a time of war, the time of peace is just at the corner, coming...when it arrives, each of us shall receive happiness equal to the misery he or she has suffered in the forest...those who are happy now shall be very miserable when freedom comes, while we shall be very happy, balancing the suffering we are about to overcome.

Njama then read aloud a letter received from the British liberal Fenner Brockway promising to address the matter of Mau Mau in the British Parliament. He handed the letter to another literate fighter to verify its contents. Brockway's letter, Njama told the fighters, proved that "the pen battle in which I was very much engaged was as great as the rifle battle." He ended the meeting by promising to issue army ranks to the forest fighters the following day.⁵⁶

What linked Matthew's promise of redemption, of future peace and fertility, with the pens and paper with which Njama conducted battle? Why did Njama and other leaders, some only marginally literate, carry carbon paper, pencils and pens, typewriters,

⁵⁶This episode is recounted in Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Below*, 367-68.

and stamps with them into the forest to conduct guerrilla war against the British? Why did Mau Mau's generals spend as much time writing, or dictating to others, as leading in battle? Njama's answer, posed to a skeptical audience of forest fighters, was that writing promised moral reward, that pens and paper could birth redemption. Brockway's letter, Njama's pens and paper, brought *Matthew's* promises within reach, taking Mau Mau readers to the cusp of a moral revolution, giving tangible form to the promises in the Beatitudes.

This section is about how Mau Mau battled over writing to birth the peace and fertility promised in *Matthew* but imagined most powerfully in *ituika*, generational redemption. My argument is that writing organized Mau Mau, giving tangible shape to a redeemed polity in which partisans could invest their cash, sweat, and blood. Mau Mau was, first, a moral war, a war against sexual and political delinquency. Gikuyu knew they had first to master themselves before they could master the British. The moral tyranny of self-mastery meant that Mau Mau's most pressing internal questions had to do with moral agency, with how women and men could be virtuous. Mau Mau oaths committed men and women to sexual discipline, and to vocal control. How Gikuyu, Christians included, attempted to rebuild moral order in a world of gendered flux constitutes the first section, below.

Mau Mau was a moral discipline before it was a colonial revolution. When Mau Mau imagined the state, when they engaged with the question of the British, they did so with record books, stamps, typewriters, and other emblems of bureaucratic authority. Mau Mau's revolutionary writing is the subject of the second section. They learned their most important bureaucratic lessons from independent churches, which had long practiced writing in order to best the British. Mau Mau adopted independents' theory of education as their own history. They thought themselves the fulfillment of independents' investments in learning, the embodiment of Kagere readers' cash outlays for *ituika*. A

powerful sense of generational duty obligated the young men of Mau Mau. But Mau Mau was more than a generational war. What bound Mau Mau together was the unifying promise of citizenship, imagined in *ituika* and worked out most obviously in the disciplines of bureaucracy. Called to public service by the rainbow dragon of *ituika*, Mau Mau used cash books, typewriters, stamps, and envelopes to create a new polity in the forest, a counter-state cleansed of the technological sorcery of British power and the internal division of household politics. *Ituika* fired Mau Mau with visions of a redeemed future. Bureaucracy committed them to diligent struggle, memorialized their work, and created reading communities in which to invest sweat and blood.

* * *

Mau Mau began with strenuous efforts to rebuild rural social order, a necessary first step before Gikuyu could fight the British. For Gikuyu knew that public power demanded private self-mastery, that they had first to master themselves before they could master the colonial state. Class formation made it difficult for men or women to master themselves. The fences of the rich sapped smallholders' virility, turning men into wanderers and women into prostitutes. Rural capitalism destroyed social civility; more, it made Gikuyu into perpetual juniors, dependent on the British. A sure sense of political obligation guided Mau Mau partisans in the 1950s to make new efforts to restore moral order. Mau Mau oaths, administered first by older men and, later, by desperate young men, demanded that men and women curb their tongues and mind their morals. Vocal and sexual discipline restored trust between men and women, cooling the wordy danger of marital arguments. Mau Mau oaths committed Gikuyu men and women to social order, to the productive *ngwataniro* demanded by Kaggia. Many Christians thought the oath a moral duty. Mau Mau partisans and church people agreed that the future demanded moral resolve, that prostituted women had to be good wives and dissipated wage workers good men if Gikuyu were to best the British.

The best evidence of Mau Mau's conservative moral project comes from its oaths. Gikuyu had long administered oaths, called *miuma*, to ensure commitment among responsible men and women seeking out purposive unity. These were the sort of oaths that KCA elders in the southern Gikuyu district of Kiambu began administering to regional party leaders in the mid-1940s. It was offered to men of property, landed elders whose reputation attested to their trustworthiness. Oathtakers promised to tell no secrets to the government, to give money to the KCA, and to answer when called to service.⁵⁷ KCA leaders, newly released from government detention after the war, were the first to take this oath of commitment. The KCA oath spread into Nyeri through KCA circles.⁵⁸ Willy Jimmy Wambugu, chairman of KISA schools in Nyeri district, began administering the oath to independent school supporters in Mahiga late in 1948.⁵⁹ Candidates were asked to contribute 60/ to take the oath. Teachers avoided talking of the oath in school: children were likely to tell tales.⁶⁰ Oaths were a matter for mature adults, men whose property evidenced their disciplined control over words.

Early in 1952 young men returning home from wage work in Nairobi began administering more violently persuasive oaths in Mahiga and throughout Nyeri district. As I showed in earlier chapters, young wage workers were the first victims of rural capitalism: wealthy men's riches destroyed their households and sapped their virility. Terrified at the power of the wealthy, unmanned by their lack of property, the young men hoped that oaths would restore moral, gendered order at home. Some had taken oaths, often more than one, from age-group members in the city. Oaths in Nairobi appear to have worked their way through local networks of young workers connected by ties of affinity at home. Mohammed Mathu, at work in the city, took the oath from a man from

⁵⁷SA II/G/4: David Waiyaki wa Munyua and Watson Waiyaki, oath confession forms.

⁵⁸Spencer, *The Kenya African Union*, 203-205.

⁵⁹Oral interviews: Newton Ngama Thabari; Macharia Gacanu; Corfield, *Historical Survey*, 180.

⁶⁰Oral interview: Onesimus King'ori.

his home village in South Tetu.⁶¹ Kiboi Muriithi, while living in Nairobi, was similarly tricked into the oath by a friend from his home village.⁶² Many Nyeri men took the oath as a commitment to domestic duty. Joseph Kiodoro, for example, returned to Mahiga after taking the oath in Kiambu. He administered oaths for six months until being arrested in July 1952.⁶³ Some Nairobi men were driven by shame at up-country parents' unwillingness to take the oath. Kiboi Muriithi heard while working in Nairobi that his mother, at home in Tetu, had refused to take the oath of unity. Appalled, he hastened home to reason with her.⁶⁴ Paul Inoi returned from Nairobi early in 1952 to administer the oath at his home in Mahiga. He made careful arrangements for his young daughter, leaving her with his mother in case he should be arrested.⁶⁵ Oathing demanded familial responsibility of young men.

These oaths, later called "Mau Mau" by the British, were a careful effort to quell the moral chaos that afflicted smallholders' homes. Josephine Wanicu, who took the oath in Nairobi in 1952, promised as follows:

I will not chase away another wife if she married (my husband). I will not bewitch the generosity of my husband. I will not steal from other Gikuyu. I will give thanks to our Gikuyu. If I see a dispute/battle I will not scream. I will not dig *mitaro* (anti-erosion trenches) when asked to dig them.⁶⁶

Ruth Wambuku promised this on the same day:

I will not do sorcery against Gikuyu. I will not make trouble if my husband buys another wife. I will not go into prostitution leaving my children impoverished. I

⁶¹Mohammed Mathu, *The Urban Guerilla* (Richmond, CA: LSM, 1974), 10.

⁶²J. Kiboi Muriithi, with Peter Ndoria, *War in the Forest* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 5.

⁶³Oral interview: Joseph Kiodoro.

⁶⁴J. Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the Forest*, 6-7.

⁶⁵Oral interview: Paul Inoi.

⁶⁶SA II/G/4: Josephine Wanicu, "Second oath confession form," 7 April 1955.

will not put sorcery on the child of my husband. I will give thanks for the land. I will not go with other tribesmen.⁶⁷

Mau Mau oaths demanded sexual constancy of young women like Wambuku and Wanicu, diligent commitment to marriage, and careful silence. Mau Mau similarly required sexual discipline of young men. Young men who took the oath were forbidden from consorting with prostitutes. Mohammed Mathu, oathed in Nairobi, was beaten, tied up in a bag, and fined 80/ for continuing to live with his prostitute girlfriend.⁶⁸ Those who took the oath called themselves "circumcised" in conversation with others. Some men were cut on their genitals by oath administrators at Githunguri.⁶⁹ Both circumcision and oath-taking were Gikuyu disciplines, proving adulthood and ensuring a fertile posterity for Gikuyu families. Violence was sometimes necessary to restore discipline. At least one Mau Mau unit in Murang'a forcibly conducted mass circumcision ceremonies for the daughters of mission readers.⁷⁰ They were given the oath at the same time.

Mau Mau oaths committed Gikuyu to struggle against sexual indiscipline. In the same breath, Mau Mau demanded vocal control among oathtakers. As I suggested in earlier chapters, the moral chaos of the 1940s made men and women argue about intimate wrongs in church courts and in other public gatherings. The wordiness of social conflict opened up household disputes to ill-intentioned outsiders, tearing down the walls with which men guarded their families and their property. Wordiness was as much a problem of social order as was sexual indiscipline: both destroyed households. Mau Mau oaths required Gikuyu to curb their tongues. Oathtakers in Nairobi and Nyeri alike promised to be careful of their speech, lest they reveal secrets to the British. Many also promised, in

⁶⁷SA II/G/4: Ruth Wambuku, "Second oath confession form," 7 April 1955.

⁶⁸Mohammed Mathu, *The Urban Guerilla* (Richmond: LSM, 1974), 13-14.

⁶⁹SA II G.3: Criminal Investigation Department, "Report on Mau Mau ceremonies," n.d. (but 1954).

⁷⁰CPK Mau Mau file: N. Langford Smith to L. Beecher, 16 January 1954.

the same sentence, not to sell land to the British.⁷¹ Peter Munene, then teacher at Ruare school, remembered that Mau Mau printed notices saying “everyone should listen, guide your tongue, curb your tongue seven times before you say a word.” The notices, remembered Munene, “taught us not to be a loud mouthed person.”⁷² The need for strategic silence was particularly pressing at Mahiga, where the independent school was turned into a Home Guard post at the outset of the war.⁷³ Henry Muciri Mbage’s parents kept him from going to school after Mau Mau men began spending the night in their home. They feared he would tell tales to his teachers.⁷⁴ William Macaria was slapped to the ground by a neighbor when he loudly claimed to know the whereabouts of an uncle in the forest.⁷⁵ Oath administrators carefully guarded their activities from prying eyes, as Esther Mwihaki Mbau remembered:

Oathing was done very secretly. Like in my house, oathing was done and it was organized so that no one could realize. While oathing was taking place in the house, other men were sinking a pit latrine outside, so no stranger could even think of what was happening. That was a way of confusing the government. So you see, we ordinary people were Mau Mau.⁷⁶

Government’s sanitary campaign in the 1940s had despoiled Gikuyu households, making mothers and fathers worry about a polluted posterity. In Mau Mau, latrines guarded Gikuyu attempts to renew household morality.

So did carefully-coded speech. For Mau Mau’s control over words was more than a strategic device, more than an instrument of secrecy in a divisive guerrilla war. Mau Mau’s struggle to discipline words and sex was a war against household indiscipline, a war also against uncontrolled women, and a creative effort to rebuild Gikuyu moral order.

⁷¹SA II/G/4: Mau Mau oath confession forms.

⁷²Oral interview: Peter Munene.

⁷³KNA VP/2/14: DO Othaya to DC, 31 August 1953.

⁷⁴Oral interview: Henry Muciri.

⁷⁵Oral interview: William Macaria.

⁷⁶Oral interview: Ester Mwihaki Mbau.

By demanding sexual and vocal control of young men and women, Mau Mau oaths demanded that they master themselves. Mau Mau's war on sex and talk was an effort to restore moral discipline, a necessary first step before Gikuyu could hope to fight the British.

Committing themselves to self-mastery by controlling their speech and sex, young men and women elaborated "ground up speech," the vocabulary of tongues by which Kaggia had called Gikuyu to unity, into a vocabulary of trust. "Speaking in tongues" was for Mau Mau a way to prepare Gikuyu to work together, a way also to screen off interlopers. Those who took the oath referred to themselves by their Gikuyu patronyms, not by English baptismal names. The distinction facilitated communication among those joined in common purpose. Maritha Gakeria, lodged in a government-run village in Othaya, remembered that her brother, a guerrilla, sent her secret messages under the name Gakeria. Gikuyu names built up trust among Mau Mau's supporters. Those Christians who kept English names, remembered Gakeria, were likely to be killed.⁷⁷ Tumutumu's Kirk Session, worried at the renaming epidemic, passed a minute admonishing parishioners that "we cannot return to the names of Gikuyu."⁷⁸ The politics of naming defined boundaries of belonging among Gikuyu. Those who had taken the oath, in Mahiga and elsewhere, spoke to each other in ways that confounded their neighbors. Daniel Muriithi explained this linguistic division:

It was a complicated war which one could not understand who was fighting who amongst the local people because in the day you would spend the day with a Mau Mau and unless you disciplined your talk, your own friend could have you killed. But those who had taken the oath used to know each other. They had their own way of talking and they could talk about you and you would not know while talking to them.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Oral interview: Maritha Gakeria wa Maina.

⁷⁸TT Ministers file: Kirk Session, minute for 14 July 1954.

⁷⁹Oral interview: Daniel Muriithi.

Carefully-coded speech defined moral and political commitment among Gikuyu. Mau Mau played language games to identify its friends from its enemies. Karari Njama found that Mau Mau guards challenged intruders approaching their forest camps high in the Aberdares by calling out "Number?" in English. The appropriate response was "*Mugwanja!*," "Seven!" in the Gikuyu language. Intruders who replied in English were liable to be shot.⁸⁰ Mt. Kenya units seem to have created a similarly bilingual vocabulary of recognition.⁸¹ Mau Mau supporters in the reserves referred to those who had not taken the oath as "fleas."⁸² It was a term of aspersion: Gucu Gikoyo, before taking the oath, was disconcerted when girls from his home village smirked and giggled at him. Paul Thuku, an oath administrator at Mahiga, remembered that Mau Mau supporters scratched themselves when shaking hands.⁸³ Those who refused to take the oath irritated the Gikuyu body politic. Oath-takers identified others by asking "When were you circumcised?" Those who had taken the oath were supposed to reply "I was circumcised at Karimania's."⁸⁴ *Karimania* was a term connoting diligent labor, the turning over of the soil in cultivation. Mau Mau made intimate connections between the virtuous work of cultivation and the moral disciplines of circumcision and oath-taking. All renewed Gikuyu polity.

The coded speech of Mau Mau was a vocabulary of self-mastery. "Ground-up" talk built up trust among those committed to the rebuilding of Gikuyu order. It was a language of citizenship, of patriotism, of self-discipline in a world where many people spoke too often. Mau Mau partisans were especially worried about revivalists. Their vocal preaching revealed Gikuyu secrets to the British. More, their talk about domestic

⁸⁰Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 161-63.

⁸¹c.f. Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 73; J. Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the Forest*, 33.

⁸²Oral interview: Machaira Gachanu; see also Gucu wa Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), 33.

⁸³Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

⁸⁴J.M. Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 28.

conflict aggravated divisions among the disciplined people that Mau Mau thought themselves creating. Violence was a moral necessity to silence their wordiness. As one informant put it, "those with loud mouths and the saved were not wanted."⁸⁵ Ephantus Ngugi, an early revivalist from Murang'a, had his teeth knocked out by Mau Mau early in the war. They also broke up the megaphone he used in preaching, saying that "this will never speak again."⁸⁶ Heshbon Mwangi, another early preacher, was struck repeatedly in the mouth by Mau Mau.⁸⁷ James Karanja, after taking the KCA oath in Nairobi, was waylaid by Mau Mau after he had attended a revivalist meeting. They told him that his head would be severed from his shoulders and grass would grow from his mouth should he speak to revivalists about the oath.⁸⁸ Mau Mau violence was not indiscriminate. Violence was meant to shut revivalists' mouths.

Some revivalists responded to Mau Mau violence with their own words, working their redemption into a language of protection. Rufus Karaka, a revivalist in Thika, was attacked by Mau Mau fighters in 1953. He shouted "Jesus! Jesus!" at the top of his voice, and escaped unharmed. He avowed that Jesus' name had saved him.⁸⁹ Revivalists' words brought protection. But a more common protective strategy was silence. Revivalists in Murang'a lived together in the Weithaga Anglican mission for the duration of the war. They were careful to keep silent about Mau Mau, refusing to bear arms or to inform on the armed men that periodically passed through the compound. Timothy Gathu explained their thinking in this way:

If you were talking about (Mau Mau) too much, then they would fight you. If you kept silent, they wouldn't touch you...they might ask for food, but they wouldn't

⁸⁵Oral interview: Maritha Gakeria wa Maina.

⁸⁶Smoker, *Ambushed*, 111.

⁸⁷Smoker, *Ambushed*, 89.

⁸⁸SA II.G/4: James Karanja to church elders, 22 December 1954.

⁸⁹Smoker, *Ambushed*, 119. See also Beth Kimenyi's story, p. 194.

attack you. They killed a lot of Christians but I think it was those Christians who were talking. They were not so cruel to those who would not talk about them.⁹⁰

Mau Mau's violence was in part a discriminating war on the wordy excess called up in household sorcery and celebrated in revivalists' preaching. Indeed, it appears that Mau Mau and Presbyterian criticism of revivalists was remarkable similar. Both Christian bureaucrats and Mau Mau moralists condemned the revivalists for their public exposure of intimate wrongs. Both groups sought to quell the private divisions of household conflict with renewed standards of moral discipline.

The coincidence between church elders' and Mau Mau's criticisms of revivalist women's gabbing highlights the harmony in their moral visions of the Gikuyu future. Both church bureaucracy and Mau Mau oaths committed Gikuyu to domestic and political order, to cooling silence in the face of moral decay. Church men and women certainly saw no great divergence between the moral vocation of the church and that of Mau Mau. At least the war turned violent in mid-1953, Mau Mau oaths were one of a series of ways that Christian men and women troubled by domestic conflict sought redress. Church courts were flooded with confessions early in 1953. Many confessed to taking Mau Mau oaths alongside other, older, moral infractions of the church. Phylis Wanja, for example, appeared before the court in June to confess that she had circumcised her daughter, failed to pay church tithes, and taken the Mau Mau oath.⁹¹ Grace Gathoni confessed in June that her parents, non-Christians, had commanded her to be circumcised on her return from work in Nairobi. She had taken the Mau Mau oath at the same time.⁹² The virtuous sexual discipline of female circumcision and the moral project of Mau Mau committed women to domestic fidelity. Church elders seem to have comprehended Mau Mau's moral project, and recommended Christian alternatives. Eva

⁹⁰Oral interview: Timothy Gathu.

⁹¹*TT* Kirk Session minute book: minute for 20 June 1953.

⁹²*TT* Kirk Session minute book: minute for 20 June 1953.

Muthoni of Ngorano confessed in January 1953 to being married outside the church and to taking a Mau Mau oath.⁹³ The court mandated that she contract a church marriage after attending sacrament classes for three months. Reuben Kariuki and Eliud Kabau both confessed to taking Mau Mau oaths in December 1952. The church fined them, and advised both them and their wives to prepare for Christian weddings.⁹⁴ Proper marriage, the court maintained, was the solution to the moral problems of marital strife, not Mau Mau oathing.

Gikuyu Christians, both women and men, were pragmatic about Mau Mau: there is little in the church court records to show that Presbyterians thought Mau Mau and Christianity irreconcilably opposed. Both the church and Mau Mau worked to contain dangerous household disorder. Many Christians seem to have regarded oathing as religious duty. Outschool teachers, dependent for their salaries on the household discipline of school supporters, took the lead: 30 Tumutumu teachers were dismissed in January 1953 for taking active parts in oathing ceremonies.⁹⁵ By October the DC wanted all Tumutumu schools in Mathira division closed: both teachers and students thought Mau Mau a just cause.⁹⁶ Some teachers, both mission and independent, acted as secretaries for Mau Mau oathing committees. They recorded the names of initiates, and tracked their donations in record books.⁹⁷ Christian literacy served Gikuyu purposes. Cornelius Kanyiri, headmaster of the CSM school in Ruare, was detained for taking an oath in 1953. He thought the oath an opportunity to bring an end to Gikuyu social decay:

When I was arrested, I was waiting, I was ready ready ready, because when oath taking began, the oath said the first rule is unity, unity and love. There was not

⁹³TT Kirk Session minute book: minute for 17 January 1953.

⁹⁴TT Kirk Session minute book: minute for 14 December nad 20 December 1952.

⁹⁵SA II/C/22: Lamont to Calderwood, 2 January 1953.

⁹⁶KNA VP/2/1: Education Officer Nyeri District to Director of Education, 10 October 1953.

⁹⁷See, as examples of teachers acting as Mau Mau secretaries, KNA MK/1/1: DC Kiambu to EO Kiambu, October 1956. regarding Peter Mukiri, assistant government Education Officer in Kiambu and secretary for the Mau Mau committee in Wangigo. Karari Njama, while teaching at the KISA school in Muthua-ini in Othaya, acted as secretary for a Mau Mau committee, for which see *Mau Mau from Within*, 138.

one person who would judge the other, not one who would steal the other person's things, or destroy something that belonged to another. Second, the colonizer would have to go home, because the self-mastery we had before the colonizer came would be the one we would have now.⁹⁸

Missionaries thought Christian cooperation with Mau Mau an abdication of religious vocation. Teachers who took oaths were traitors, pilloried in missionary rhetoric as fence-sitters, lacking the moral fiber to make a stand against Mau Mau.⁹⁹ But Tumutumu teachers made no such profound divisions between the moral goals of Christianity and Mau Mau. This was a theologically pragmatic world, not the Manichean one missionaries imagined. Teachers like Kanyiri thought oath-taking a corrective to the sorcerous strife that endangered Gikuyu. Oaths called Christians to public service. In 1952 it was commonly thought throughout Nyeri that one could be a member of the church and a member of Mau Mau at the same time.¹⁰⁰ Tumutumu Presbytery thought it necessary, in April 1952, to be clear: the church could have no cooperation, no *ngwataniro*, with Mau Mau.¹⁰¹ But Anglican missionaries lamented that over 80 percent of their teachers had taken the oath.¹⁰² The number may have been higher for Presbyterian schoolteachers: Tumutumu missionaries thought it impossible to discipline all of them.¹⁰³ Many Christian elders, too, took Mau Mau oaths. Of the 100 elders on the government's pre-Emergency Locational Council in Mathira, 18 were detained for taking oaths, 37 were suspected of Mau Mau sympathies, and 18 were killed in forest fighting.¹⁰⁴ Mau Mau's principled call to moral discipline resonated widely among men and women agonizingly worried about household strife.

⁹⁸Oral interview: Cornellius Kanyiri Kanja.

⁹⁹c.f. *KNA DC/Murang'a* 3/4/21: Hooper to CMS teachers, January 1953.

¹⁰⁰*CPK CMS Correspondence, 1929-56* file: Knight to Bishop of Mombasa, 29 October 1952.

¹⁰¹*SA II C* 26: Presbytery of Tumutumu, 24 April 1952.

¹⁰²*KNA DC Murang'a* 3 4 21: Hooper to CMS teachers, January 1953.

¹⁰³*TT* Fort Hall Supervisor file: Kingston to Cyril Hooper, 19 July 1955.

¹⁰⁴*KNA VP* 1/17: DO Mathira to DC Nyeri, n.d. (but 1954).

United in disgust at moral indiscipline, Christians and Mau Mau alike committed themselves to a redeemed future by taking oaths. They imagined themselves preparing the ground for a moral revolution. Old stories from the past, and lessons learned at school, fired up Mau Mau's revolutionary engagement with the British. Independent school readers had once imagined the state through Cash Books and receipts, using bureaucratic procedure to play games with British power. They hoped their practice would English would pay off. Mau Mau adopted independents' educational theory as their own history. They thought themselves the embodiment of *ituika*'s moral revolution, the English-speaking leaders of a redeemed Gikuyu polity. Standing the ends of independents' church history, Mau Mau birthed generational redemption through record books, receipts, and stamps. As I show below, writing in Mau Mau served two, intimately related purposes: it gave men worried about being forgotten a future in which to invest their blood; and it marked out political and moral boundaries that provincialized British rule. Writing, in other words, created a nation of citizens, a moral entity deserving of self-sacrifice.

Called to public service by the rainbow dragon of *ituika*, Mau Mau used cash books, typewriters, stamps, and envelopes to create a new polity in the forest, a counter-state cleansed of the technological sorcery of British power and the internal division of household politics. *Ituika* fired Mau Mau with visions of a redeemed future. Bureaucracy committed them to diligent struggle, memorializing their work and creating reading communities in which to invest sweat.

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It is important here to be attentive to context, for Mau Mau's ideology was argued out in local settings. Mau Mau's bureaucratic call to generational service resonated most powerfully, and divisively, in regions like Mahiga, where *ituika*'s politics had long been a matter of public debate. Paul Thuku was an oath administrator in Mahiga location. He

worked picking coffee on settler farms in Nanyuki until the oath called him home in 1952. He remembered that Mau Mau initiates were given a history lesson before taking the oath. It went:

When the whites came, there was a man called Chege. When the leaders were negotiating with the whites, the whites did not want to listen to the leaders but wanted to take (all the land). When Chege weighed their intentions he told them: "you have refused to listen to us because of our pierced ears. Now we have gone to bed to give birth to children which we shall not pierce the ears. These are the ones you will talk with." And this is true because the whites were fought by those who had no pierced ears. These were people like the white man himself and could talk a language, English, both could understand.¹⁰⁵

Mau Mau appears to have borrowed its history, its self-justification, from independent schools' theory of education. In the 1930s, earnest readers had invested in independent schools to learn the disciplines of English. By doing so they wagered in the future, preparing young men and women to do battle with the British. The men of Mau Mau, many graduates of independent schools, thought themselves the fulfillment of 1930s readers' hopes. Their schooling had suited them to engage with British power: they knew English, the grammar of power, and could demand respect from colonial officials. Their ears were sewn back. They knew how to play with British rules of recognition.

Driven by a shared sense of generational destiny, young men in Mahiga took the lead in oath-taking. Oaths were administered directly after church in the Kagere independent school beginning in 1950.¹⁰⁶ Onesimus King'ori, teacher at Kagere, acted as general secretary for the local oathing committee.¹⁰⁷ The oath was sometimes administered at his home, with King'ori keeping a close eye for intruders. He kept careful records identifying those who took the oath, burying the record book to ensure secrecy. Their names, promised the oath administrators, would be recorded in a record

¹⁰⁵ Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

¹⁰⁶ Oral interviews: Emily Gathoni wa Waciira; Macaria Gachanu: Corfield, *Historical Survey*, 180.

¹⁰⁷ Oral interview: Onesimus King'ori.

book kept by Kenyatta in Kiambu. Those whose names were written in the book would be entitled to grants of land after Africans got self-government.¹⁰⁸ The bureaucracy of record keeping enlisted Gikuyu as citizens in a new state-in-formation. Bureaucracy was a discipline of political commitment.

But Mau Mau's fighters were not all young men. Older men also went into the forest, hoping to reap reward from their investments. For some ambitious traders, going to the forest was a sensible wager on Mau Mau's political promise. Harrison Githenji, leader of the Birithia Orthodox church after the schism at Kagere in 1938, had used cash earned from wage work with the government to open a shop in the trading center near Kagere in 1951.¹⁰⁹ He appears to have seen business opportunities in the forest war. His business partner, Hezron Wagacatha, explained the arrangement in this way:

I also wanted to go into the forest but Githenji would tell me its not wise for both of us to go. We wanted us to protect out investments because we had started joined ventures like shops. But even (when he was in the forest) we knew each other's movements very well. During those days we were together but at night he would go into the forest.¹¹⁰

For men like Githenji, Mau Mau was a calculated business venture, a carefully thought-out wager in the moral and bureaucratic promise of *ituika*. Githenji ran a hospital in the forest for Stanley Mathenge's fighters, many of them men from Mahiga.¹¹¹ He seems to have gotten drugs and other supplies from his shop, which he visited regularly.¹¹² Mathenge and other forest leaders encouraged shopowners like Githenji to keep careful records of their contributions to Mau Mau, for future reimbursement by an

¹⁰⁸c.f. Corfield, *Historical Surcey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: 1960), 97.

¹⁰⁹*Muoyo wa Harrison Githenji Ngari*, held in possession of Newton Ndiritu Muigai, Othaya, Nyeri.

¹¹⁰Oral interview: Hezron Wagacatha.

¹¹¹See Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*. 176 and 292 for mentions of Githenji's forest work.

¹¹²*KNA VP:9/10*: Assistant Supervisor of Police to Director of Operations, 30 May 1953 for Githenji's ties to Mahiga.

independent African government.¹¹³ Mau Mau's record-keeping allowed traders to parlay private investments into a claim on political entitlement. *Ituika's* purposive call for private sacrifice, memorialized in records of expenditures and receipts, made patriotic duty of monied investment.

Record keeping committed Gikuyu to the moral renewal promised in Mau Mau, lending shape and substance to the new politics promised in *ituika*. Fired by a powerful sense of generational duty, young men in the forest battled over bureaucracy to imagine a new state, a new polity in which to invest their blood. I suggest below that there were two dimensions in which forest fighters made use of bureaucratic procedure. In the first, internal, dimension, writing helped to resolve questions of commitment among a people terrified at being forgotten. By ensuring that fighters' private sacrifices would be remembered, Mau Mau's diligent record-keeping created lineages-of-words in which fighters could invest their sweat and blood. Books created kin, and inspired commitment to the future. But in a second dimension, Mau Mau used books to imagine a new state, a new political entity, that overturned British power by making it look relative. This was the revolutionary dimension to Mau Mau's writing. The letters, stamps, and identity cards of Mau Mau were the patriotic stuff of a counter-state imagined in print and given birth in battle. Drawing political and material boundaries with bureaucracy, Mau Mau crafted a new polity in the forest, cleansed of the bodily wasting of sorcery. Mau Mau wrote in the fertility of *ituika*.

To turn to the first moral context of Mau Mau's record-keeping: at stake was the rigorous demand of the future, the divisive test of memory. Forest fighters were terrified of being forgotten. Landless and cash-poor, many fighters had failed the critical Gikuyu test of memory: they lacked the property that established families. Some, desperate for wives, could scarcely hope for sons in which they might, in some way, hope to live again.

¹¹³Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 195; Maina wa Kinyatta, *Kimathi's letters: a profile in patriotic courage* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 27, 107.

Record-keeping reminded Mau Mau's descendants of their fathers' private sacrifice, creating families, lineages of the future for whom guerrillas could invest their blood. The question of public memory was the central concern of the famous Mwathe meeting of August 1953, convened in the Aberdares to organize far-flung bands of forest fighters. The meeting was a rigorous lesson in bureaucracy. Dedan Kimathi, formerly a student at Tumutumu boarding school, lectured hundreds of attendees about book-keeping. Each Mau Mau camp was to keep ten record books, including a register, a hymn book, a history book, hospital records, accounts of military engagements, and a list of friends and enemies. Camp registers were to be divided into 16 columns, listing the names, locations, ranks, and duties of fighters.¹¹⁴ The books were to be a record of virtuous citizenship: even if they died, fighters' descendants would "take your share of the land and enjoy the freedom you died for" after independence. Kimathi wanted memorial halls constructed after independence, in which would be housed the registers and records of Mau Mau for public viewing. Mau Mau's bureaucracy was dedicated to popular memory.

Record books inspired confidence among Mau Mau's partisans, creating national lineages of the future by securing the memory of their private sacrifices. As one leader put it, encouraging his fighters, "if we succeed in liberating this country from European imperialism, our people will immortalize us. We will become their great ancestors."¹¹⁵ Record books made Mau Mau fighters into the respected *ngoma* of a new nation. Fired with hope, Karari wa Njama and others built the Kenya Young Stars Memorial Hall high in the Aberdares. He inaugurated the building before hundreds of fighters with the pointed reminder that "what you do, good or bad, is what (future generations) shall read of you."¹¹⁶ The moral expectations of future readers inspired virtuous conduct of forest fighters. Writing fostered purpose among Mau Mau by creating reading publics joined

¹¹⁴Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 246-47; see also Gucu wa Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom*, 80.

¹¹⁵Kinyatti, *Kimathi's letters*, 26.

¹¹⁶Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 326.

through time in common purpose. Anxious forest leaders wrote their memoirs: General Tanganyika, formerly a student at Kabiruini independent school, spent days at a time writing a War Diary of his activities in the forest.¹¹⁷ Mohammed Mathu, pursued by colonial forces, was careful to set his record books on dry land before diving into a swamp for protection.¹¹⁸ Record books were as important as life. Colonial forces carted off three full sacks full of books from a raid on Mihuro, site of Njama's memorial hall.¹¹⁹ The expectant weight of Mau Mau's future went with them.

Mau Mau fighters wrote with an expectant eye on posterity. In writing, they forged communities of belonging, lineages of the mind in which to invest their diligent labor. Bureaucracy fostered internal discipline among a people desperate for descendants. It did so by securing the fixity of memory, by guarding fighters' valorous words and deeds for consumption in the future. But the written word, like the spoken language of oath-takers in the Nyeri reserve, was liable to spin out of control. Mau Mau units were constantly on the move; books were liable to be captured. Mohammed Mathu discovered the costs of writing when his record books, secured by the British from the swamp where they were hidden, were used against him during his interrogation.¹²⁰ Writing's fixity was for Mau Mau an ambivalent virtue: it secured memory for the future but offered evidence for British prosecutors. Mau Mau carefully guarded its books, and letters, from prying British eyes. Dedan Kimathi was careful to instruct his clerks at the Mwathe meeting to hide their record books away from forest camps. When Kimathi himself was captured, his books were buried and placed under armed guard in the forest.¹²¹ Mau Mau guarded its writings. Karari Njama instructed the 63 clerks assembled at the Mwathe meeting to use nicknames when recording the deeds of fighters to ensure that they would never be

¹¹⁷Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the Forest*, 63.

¹¹⁸Mathu, *Urban Guerilla*, 60.

¹¹⁹Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 433.

¹²⁰Mathu, *Urban Guerilla*, 63.

¹²¹Kinyatti, *Kimathi's letters*. xvii.

used by British courts.¹²² Waruhiu Itote, leader in the Mount Kenya forest, invented a new script to ensure secret communication. Numerals stood for consonants; minus signs joined letters together. Itote vowed that he could write the script "as fluently as with ordinary letters."¹²³ New orthographies protected Gikuyu words, and memories, from British readers.

The fixity of guarded writing served very present political purposes for forest fighters desperate for descendants. Mau Mau literally banked on books, investing their blood and sweat in hopes of being remembered in the future. But Mau Mau's bureaucracy was more than a memory bank. In writing, Mau Mau imagined a counter-state, a parallel polity somehow cleansed of the contamination of British power. This was the second, technological dimension of Mau Mau's writing. Independent school readers in the 1930s had once used writing to imagine colonial politics: practice with bureaucracy earned readers respect from administrators, obligating officials to pay heed. In the 1950s, Gikuyu practice with bureaucracy paid off. Accomplished with bureaucratic procedure, schooled in English, Mau Mau invested in record books, flags and identity cards to birth a moral and political revolution. Their writing made British power provincial, relative. And by provincializing British power, by pulling off a bureaucratic insurgency, Mau Mau rebels also thought themselves shaping a new moral order. Identity cards, post offices, and other marks of bureaucratic power defined the boundaries of a new moral community, cleansed on the contamination of British sorcery. Mau Mau walled out British sorcery with bureaucratic processes. They hoped that their revolution would eat up the British, turning waste into fat and restoring conviviality among men and women eviscerated by colonial power.

By creating a bureaucracy that paralleled the colonial administration, Mau Mau made British rule relative. Illiterate forest leaders found themselves at a loss for words

¹²²Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 257.

¹²³Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 79.

with which to engage the British. Stanley Mathenge, from Mahiga, lamented his silence early in the war: "as I do not know how to read, how can I speak to the Government while in this forest?"¹²⁴ War stifled Mau Mau's mouths. Literate bureaucracy constituted a language with which to make the British pay heed. Mathenge welcomed the schoolteacher Karari Njama into the forest rejoicing that he would be able to speak to the Government through Njama.¹²⁵ Literate forest fighters wrote letters to Home Guard units, threatening them with death should they venture outside their posts.¹²⁶ Writing engaged the British with Mau Mau's power. More, bureaucracy extended moral judgment on the British. A.G. Chumali wrote to the British Supreme Court in May 1954 to file a case against the governor, General Erskine, and other British officials for being members of a society "whose aims are to engineer civil war amongst the Gikuyu."¹²⁷ The British were a illegal society. Mau Mau made colonial power relative by crafting new symbols of sovereignty. In a ceremony held in the Aberdares in 1955, Dedan Kimathi became Prime Minister of the Kenya African Government and Knight Commander of the East African Empire.¹²⁸ Among his first activities was to plant flags on the three peaks of the Aberdares mountain range.¹²⁹ Mau Mau's flags and titles were markers of sovereignty, making British power look quaintly provincial.

By provincializing the British, Mau Mau opened up political space for a new moral polity, a polity cleansed of the waste of sorcery. Young men and women entering the forest were asked to destroy their government-issued identity cards, the *vipande* that European settlers signed when taking workers into employment. Gikuyu in the 1930s and 40s had thought the *vipande* instruments of sorcery, marks of a malevolently intrusive

¹²⁴Paul Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books, 1977), 60.

¹²⁵Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 183.

¹²⁶H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975), 64.

¹²⁷Kinyatta, *Kimathi's letters*, 60.

¹²⁸Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 449.

¹²⁹Njagi, *The Last Mau Mau Fiel Marshalls*, 40.

state power. Mau Mau fought to create new forms of subjectivity freed from the taint of sorcery. One group of recruits in Nyeri burned their *vipande* in a blaze that could be seen from three miles away.¹³⁰ Another group in Kiambu burned their identity cards and trampled over the ashes.¹³¹ Burning government cards kept fighters in the forest: lacking proper identification, deserters were liable to be arrested by the British.¹³² But burning had long been a Gikuyu punishment for *arogi*, sorcerers. Mau Mau's incineration of government cards looks like an attempt to cleanse the forest of the taint of British bureaucratic sorcery. Mau Mau agents in Nairobi printed off new identity cards to issue to forest fighters and to supporters in the reserves. They had "Kenya Land Freedom Army" printed on the letterhead.¹³³ Forest fighters' raids on schools in the northern districts were often aimed at securing pencils, books, and registers.¹³⁴ They were a moral necessity in a war given shape by the disciplines of literacy. Schoolteachers filled in the new identity cards, acting as secretaries to regional recruiting committees.¹³⁵ They wrote the names of recruits in record books, along with the names of loyalists, chiefs and others who refused to support Mau Mau.¹³⁶ Writing identified Mau Mau's new citizens, and its traitors. The forest leader Muthoni Kirima discovered that turncoats, those who had surrendered and returned to the forest to guide illicit British agents, were stamped on the genitals for men and inside the thigh for women.¹³⁷ British bureaucracy marked its victims. Mau Mau created new marks of identity freed from the stamp of sorcery. Early Mau Mau oathtakers in Githunguri were cut on the penis.¹³⁸ General Kariba carried his

¹³⁰J. Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the forest*, 17.

¹³¹Gucu Gikoyo, *We fought for Freedom*, 48.

¹³²Mohammed Mathu makes this point in *The Urban Guerilla*, 24.

¹³³Gucu Gikoyo, *We fought for Freedom*, 22.

¹³⁴CPK Mau Mau file: Keith Cole, supervisor of CMS Kigari (Embu), to secretary CMS, 1 September 1953.

¹³⁵c.f. Benjamin Ndua, forer teacher at Githunguri Teacher College, convicted by the British for creating false identity cards for Mau Mau. In *KNA MD/16/4: Internment Order*, Benjamin Ndua.

¹³⁶Maina wa Kinyatta, *Kimathi's letters*, 27.

¹³⁷Njagi, *The Last Mau Mau Field Marshalls*, 112.

¹³⁸SA II/G/3: Criminal Investigation Department, "Report on Mau Mau ceremonies," n.d.

own rubber stamp into the forest.¹³⁹ So did Dedan Kimathi. Bureaucracy literally embodied political commitment.

Mau Mau freed Gikuyu bodies from British power with writing. By doing so they hoped to convert men eviscerated by colonial power into moral agents, productive citizens. This was what Kienyu wa Ngai had in mind in a 1953 letter to the editor of the *East African Standard*:

Whatever you try to do we are with you day and night. You will issue your different laws, and we shall also issue ours. When you use force we shall also use force; when you employ argument we shall also employ argument. But this government should not be trusted now, for it does not use reason...All day a Gikuyu is asked to produce his card, his photo, his tax--and are we men, that we comply with all of this?...We have no fear of the government at all, although they are trying by many ways to castrate us in order to make us fear them."¹⁴⁰

Kienyu concluded by asking the African members of the government's Legislative Council to resign. They had been bought, he wrote, with British money, which sowed divisions among Gikuyu and caused the land to go to waste. British administration, with its identity cards and tax receipts, unmanned Gikuyu. Mau Mau's laws, and armed force, promised a more fertile future. Mau Mau units under General Kimbo in the Rift Valley served typed eviction notices on settler farmers, giving them seven days notice to pack their belongings and quit the country.¹⁴¹ Kimbo was himself the son of a squatter.¹⁴² His nickname, Kimbo, was the label for a popular cooking fat. Kimbo's judgment on settlers promised land-hungry Gikuyu access to the fat of the land. Mau Mau bureaucracy released Gikuyu from the grip of British administrative sorcery, turning wasting into congealed fertility. Kahinga Wachanga wrote to Governor Baring in July 1953

¹³⁹Paul Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books, 1977), 108.

¹⁴⁰*KNA MSS/88/1*: C.G. Kienyu s o Ngai to Editor EAS, n.d. (but 1953), translated by A.R. Barlow.

¹⁴¹Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 277.

¹⁴²*KNA VP/9/9*: "General information about Theuri Makua alias Kimbo Mutuho," 1953.

threatening that Mau Mau would eat all cattle, sheep, wheat and maize in the colony.

When they had finished, wrote Wachanga, Mau Mau would

start eating your flesh until the time of your last man. We have already started a factory for making tins which we will use to tin your flesh after finishing all your property.¹⁴³

Later in 1953 Mau Mau units in Mathira acted out Wachanga's promise, capturing a British soldier named Manley, slaughtering him, and slicing his flesh "like pieces of chicken."¹⁴⁴ Manley's head they propped onto a pole, turned so that he could watch his flesh roast over an open fire. One sent a letter to the nearby British garrison, inviting the soldiers to attend Manley's trial held in the High Court of Mau Mau. When the British arrived, Mau Mau attacked from ambush, killing some and driving the others away.

There are similar stories about Mau Mau's cannibalism populating the records of British officials.¹⁴⁵ What was at stake in these cannibal stories? The British read them as evidence of Gikuyu barbarism. But there may be a deeper, more productive level to stories about Mau Mau's dining. Gikuyu threatened by rural capitalism had long suspected that British courts, factories, latrines, cattle dips and needles ate up the poor, wasting human fertility with sorcery. Manley's barbecue was a decidedly gruesome parody of British courts, which diced up poor people's children, slaughtered smallholders' cattle and laid waste to fertile homesteads. The forest fighters' food may have been an effort to turn British sorcery into Gikuyu value. Eating up settlers' property, dining on the tinned flesh of the governor, digested British malevolence into Gikuyu fat and fertility. British sorcery emaciated Gikuyu children. Forest fighters seem to have

¹⁴³Kahinga Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 66.

¹⁴⁴David Njagi, *The Last Mau Mau Field Marshalls: Their Own Story* (Limuru: Ngwataniro Self-Help Group, 1991), 51-53.

¹⁴⁵c.f. F.D. Corfield, *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (Nairobi: HMSO, 1960), 168, for stories about how Mau Mau made steaks from the buttocks of their enemies, and dried their brains for later consumption.

found in eating a means of converting the wasting of British administration into the peaceful fertility of *ituika*.

Food embodied Mau Mau's struggle for fertility in the forest. Eating was in some way a revolutionary act, incorporating the sorcerous wealth of British settlers and Gikuyu landlords into a common-wealth of fat and fertility. Eating up the sorcery of the unforgiving wealthy joined Mau Mau in common purpose, giving flesh to the fertile polity promised in *ituika* and crafted in bureaucracy. Mau Mau units near the Nyeri reserve got their meat from loyalists' cattle.¹⁴⁶ Schoolchildren helped them steal some.¹⁴⁷ Kimbo's forces in the Rift Valley feasted exclusively on settler cattle.¹⁴⁸ The ill-gotten gain of wealthy sorcerers was Mau Mau's meat. Meat joined forest fighters in communities of consumption. Kimathi's Kenya Parliament mandated that each Mau Mau camp should have but one kitchen, headed by one cook. No cooking could take place outside the supervision of the head cook.¹⁴⁹ Centralized food distribution defined disciplined unity. The famous 1953 meeting at Mwathe was cut short after three fighters stole food from the common store. They were tied up for hours, and nearly beaten by a indignant Kimathi.¹⁵⁰ Food brought Mau Mau together in common purpose. Mismanagement of food led to political upset. Accusations that the quartermaster was mishandling food allocations in one Mau Mau unit led to a full trial, presided over by a General, Major General, Major and Captain.¹⁵¹ Improperly distributed food was more than a matter of private greed. Eating and unity were inextricably tied in Mau Mau's moral thought. Dining on wealthy men's property was insurgency in action, a creative effort to eat up the waste of sorcery.

¹⁴⁶Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 177.

¹⁴⁷TT DO and Chiefs file: DO Mathira to Tumutumu supervisor, 21 February 1955.

¹⁴⁸Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 277.

¹⁴⁹Kinyati, *Kimathi's letters*, 34.

¹⁵⁰Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 256-57.

¹⁵¹Gucu Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom*, 102-103.

Mau Mau's eating gave flesh to the fertile polity promised in *ituika* and worked out in bureaucratic procedure. British latrines, needles and fences made Gikuyu men and women worry about a future sapped of vitality. Mau Mau's record books and memorial halls subjected the British to new technologies of rule. The Nyeri politician Victor Wokabi framed the redemptive promise of Mau Mau in this way, in a letter published just before the Emergency:

Europeans are the knives and Africans are the meat. The time is coming when the Africans will be the knives and the Europeans the meat, and they will be cut to pieces.¹⁵²

The British read Wokabi's letter as an incitement to murder. It reads more like a criticism of British technology, and a promise about Mau Mau's meals. Mau Mau turned British needles, writing, and fences against the sorcerous white woman, the Mamiwata who refused to allow them to procreate. The battle over technology created meat out of the emaciated stuff of British sorcery. Record books created kin, establishing lineages of trust in which forest fighters could invest their blood. Guarded speech proved self-mastery, protecting households against listening ears. Carefully distributed meat enrolled Gikuyu in communities of consumption. Stamps, pencils and books gave tangible form to Gikuyu hopes for moral renewal. Mau Mau's struggle over technology gave shape and substance to the elusive promise of *ituika*.

Embodied in bureaucratic procedure, *ituika* made Gikuyu wastrels into citizens, patriots committed to a redeemed future. Kaggia had called for a similar commitment in 1949, when translating the Christian self into a grammar of self-less cooperation. Kaggia knew that the heroic self of readers' culture, the self made by wealth and established in the Word, was greedy, destructive. Wealthy readers' translations sucked the life out of others. Kaggia wanted a new grammar of self-hood, new ways to establish moral agency

¹⁵²Wokabi, editorial letter in *Muthamaki* (7 July 1952); quoted in Corfield, *Historical Survey*, 198.

for men and women terrified at a demoralized world. Mau Mau fought to create a new moral order. Through creative acts of political judo, Mau Mau turned the acquisitive wealth of readers, and the invasive technologies of the British, against them. British record books became memory banks, sure proof that fighters would not be forgotten in the future. Wealthy men's cattle became fighters' food, fattening bodies wasted by sorcery. Mau Mau imagined a new political order in the forest; more, they imagined a new moral order, one that put flesh onto wasted bones and valorized fighters' private sacrifices. Tales of moral revolutions long past inspired them. Writing gave shape to their dreams.

But not all Gikuyu shared the same dreams of the future. Some men and women hoped for redemption through private property, through family politics, not through the elusive dragon of *ituika*. Old divisions between *mbari* politics and *ituika*'s unity structured Gikuyu divisions. The British thought them divided into two camps, one "loyalist," the other "Mau Mau." The next section demonstrates how Gikuyu creatively unmade these artificial dualisms, sharing bread across barbed wire. For while Gikuyu were divided in their moral visions of the future, they were united common distrust of violence. Their common horror at death made Gikuyu fight precisely to avoid outright war. Women here took the lead, feeding Mau Mau at terrible personal risk. The British thought them members of Mau Mau's "passive wing." But there was nothing passive about women's participation in Mau Mau. What motivated women, and some men, was a shared sense of moral duty that protected life from death, fertility from corruption. Where Gikuyu came to blows, I show, it was because local histories of conflict made it impossible for them to argue any longer.

War and Peace in Mathira

When Gikuyu disagreed over Mau Mau, it was because they wagered on different answers to the problem of household division. I showed in previous chapters how

divisions between *mbari* and *ituika*, progressive property and generational redemption, structured Gikuyu politics in the 1920s and 30s. The debate turned violent in Mau Mau. Those who the British called "loyalists" were aspiring family autocrats, distrustful of any authority that brought men and women of different *mbari* together. *Mbari* elders' conservative theory of politics thought family progress, the accomplishment of private property, the best proof against moral disorder. They considered Mau Mau delinquent, wasters of property. More, Mau Mau's efforts to unite Gikuyu looked like an invasive try at dictatorship.

Daudi Gachonde, Tumutumu hospital attendant and leading loyalist, reasoned his refusal to take the oath in this way:

I hated the oath because I could not know the reason for it. Many people from this area took the oath but those who had got the Word of God didn't take it. Christians thought it was a dirty practice that made them backward.¹⁵³

Oathing made intimate family matters subject to outside interference, causing *mbari* politicians worry over dictatorship. Gikuyu oaths of commitment had been a household matter, administered by men of landed integrity. Mau Mau asked Gikuyu to take oaths in unknown places. More, many of the oath administrators--young laborers like Paul Thuku, above--lacked the fertile proof of integrity, land. To some *mbari* politicians, Mau Mau looked like an dangerous aberration: its young, irresponsible men destroyed households and endangered children. Henry Kiama wa Nduhiu, writing from Nanyuki in 1953, said as much in a pamphlet tellingly titled "War is not an egg."¹⁵⁴ It was a telling condemnation of young men's irresponsibility: their overeager radicalism had "caused their parents to repent." Property was endangered by Mau Mau: since the beginning of the Emergency, Gikuyu possessions had vanished, "lost like a poor man's

¹⁵³Oral interview: Daudi Gachonde.

¹⁵⁴*KNA MSS. 88/1*: Barlow papers: Henry Kiama wa Nduhiu, 15 September 1953.

potato vines." More than agricultural disaster, war had resulted in "death and the closing of all of our employments." Cash shortage and desiccated landscapes put children at risk: "a whole generation of Gikuyu has now ceased to be," lamented Nduhiu. Nduhiu asked for peace, for Gikuyu to cease hating one another in their hearts, and for parents to return their children to school. It was a conservative plea for family solidarity, for *mbari* progress.

Mau Mau looked irresponsible to *mbari* autocrats. Landlords thought property, the reward for disciplined work, would solve the problem of household strife, not the redemptive solidarity of *ituika*. Charles Muhoro, moderator of the Tumutumumu Presbytery, landholder and leading "loyalist," preached the gospel of household discipline in his sermons. One of his favorite texts was *Matthew* Chapter 22, the story of the king whose invitations to his son's wedding banquet were unthinkingly refused by friends and passerby alike.¹⁵⁵ Muhoro condemned those who took Mau Mau oaths: like those who refused the king's invitation, oathtakers occupied themselves with "those things of long ago" and ignored the king's summons to the wedding. They dirtied their banquet clothes by trafficking in oaths, making it impossible for one man to sit down to eat with another. Oath taking led to social discord, argued Muhoro, not to common fat. Muhoro called for repentance: clean banquet clothes were laid at the entrance to the king's hall, ready to be put on by those who heeded the invitation. Those who put on clean clothes would "live in the happiness which is brought about by marriage." Clean clothes and soap of mission schools, as ever, proved moral integrity. But more, the parable taught elders like Muhoro the virtues of discipline: renewed commitment to marriage would solve social disorder, not the irresponsible oaths of Mau Mau.

¹⁵⁵TT Sermon notes. Muhoro: "The King and the son's wedding," 11 May 1952.

Jomo Kenyatta joined the Presbyterians' call for discipline. Kenyatta slept at Muhoro's home the night before the famed KAU meeting in Nyeri in July 1952.¹⁵⁶ He toured the mission school before going to the meeting, and ate the goat that Muhoro slaughtered for him. At the meeting itself, Kenyatta condemned Mau Mau for its language, which he argued drew Gikuyu apart, not together. "I think Mau Mau is a new word," he said. "Elders do not know it." Ground-up language looked like an affront to Kenyatta, who called youth to diligent work. Young men should remember that there were no free things. They should cease their drinking and commit themselves to progress through sweat.¹⁵⁷ The British would not take Kenyatta's condemnation seriously: they thought him the chief organizer of Mau Mau. Missionaries worried that Muhoro himself had been seduced by Mau Mau. But neither Muhoro nor Kenyatta agreed with the impoverished young men of Mau Mau about *ituika*. Property, in elders' conservative thought, made for good politics, not the elusive promise of moral redemption through generational unity.

Old divisions between private property and public solidarity, between *mbari* advancement and *ituika*'s unity, structured Gikuyu division during Mau Mau. Nowhere was the debate more heated, with more potential for bloodshed, than in Mathira division, home to most of Tumutumu's schools. For Mathira, more perhaps than any other region in Nyeri, was divided over class and land. Mission readers, especially members of *Mbari ya Njora*, had benefited most from the grade cattle of the 1940s. The British thought it the most heavily cultivated region in the district, with the most strict landlords. Their fenced paddocks inspired division within and between families: Mathira had long been the most litigious of Nyeri's divisions. In the 1950s family arguments verged on violence. Mau Mau units marched in daylight throughout Mathira with flags flying and

¹⁵⁶Charles Muhoro Kareri. *Muoyo wa Charles Muhoro* (unpublished ms. in possession of Muthoni Mwhiki, Tumutumu).

¹⁵⁷The Nyeri meeting's minutes are in Corfiled, *Historical Survey*, 301-304.

bugles blowing.¹⁵⁸ They held regular barazas, public meetings, to discipline shirkers and to try legal cases.¹⁵⁹ If Mau Mau began as a war for bureaucratic sovereignty, then Mathira was its first conquest. Members of *Mbari ya Njora* felt themselves most at risk. Some of the dispossessed thought their property the ill-gotten gains of sorcery. As early as 1951 the DC identified Kirimukuyu, home to many *Njora*, as among the most dangerous locations in Nyeri.¹⁶⁰ There were posters plastered on trees around Tumutumu in 1952 condemning Charles Muhoro, affinal relative of *Njora*, to death.¹⁶¹ Men and women talked openly, in barroom arguments, about killing Muhoro. He carried a pistol as protection during the earliest days of the Emergency, drawing condemnation from revivalists.¹⁶² Muhoro was one of the first targets of Mau Mau attacks, ambushed--unsuccessfully--on the road outside the mission late in 1952.¹⁶³ By September 1953 nine Tumutumu elders and deacons were dead, together with six schoolteachers.¹⁶⁴ Church elders took the lead in forming Home Guard units in Mathira, hoping for protection behind barbed wire.¹⁶⁵ By 1953 Gikuyu divisions looked sharply drawn, with wire and barricades marking out political commitment.

Missionaries thought Mau Mau a war against the church. But despite *Njora* men's fears, Mathira was hardly a bloodbath. Tumutumu hospital was empty; only a few schools were attacked. Mau Mau's violence in Mathira was discriminating. The discriminating nature of violence in Mathira, more than any other evidence, gives lie to the easy dualisms in which the British understood and combated Mau Mau. For the earliest months of Mau Mau were less a bloody war than a desperate Gikuyu effort to guard households against the curse of violence. As I shall illustrate below, principled

¹⁵⁸KNA VP/1/16: Handing Over Report, DO Mathira, May 1954.

¹⁵⁹KNA VP/2/14: Education Officer Nyeri to Director of Education, 10 October 1953.

¹⁶⁰KNA VP/2/2: Nyeri District team meeting, 30 January 1951.

¹⁶¹Charles Muhoro Kareri, *Muoyo wa Charles Muhoro*.

¹⁶²SA II/B/9: Calderwood to Dougall, 20 December 1952.

¹⁶³SA II/G/3: Lamont, "Report on the situation at Tumutumu and in Nyeri district as of mid-October 1952."

¹⁶⁴SA II C/25: Muhoro to Calderwood, 8 September 1953.

¹⁶⁵SA II C/22: Lamont to Calderwood, 27 May 1953.

people on all "sides" of Mau Mau worked hard to preserve the peace. Women took the lead, supplying food and medicine to fighters in the forest. The British thought women members of Mau Mau's "passive wing," organized from above to supply forest regiments.¹⁶⁶ But there was nothing passive about Nyeri women's involvement in the war. Women in Mathira and elsewhere were guided by deeply-held values that protected life from death. Their strenuous efforts for peace cut across the dualistic frame with which the British understood Mau Mau, making it difficult to make simply distinctions between "loyalists" and "radicals." For Gikuyu were in any case joined in common revulsion at violence, and troubled at war's threat to posterity. When bloodshed broke out, it was because local histories made it impossible for Gikuyu to argue at more length.

On all sides the war began as a struggle to contain violence. The best evidence for forest fighters' control over violence is the chronology of the war. There were attacks on government chiefs and headmen early in 1953. But the men of the forest appear to have avoided widespread, divisive violence as a matter of principle. The first months of the war produced few casualties: there were only 31 men and women admitted to Tumutumu Hospital from November 1952 to April 1953 with bodily injuries.¹⁶⁷ Missionaries noted the relative peace in Mathira, and wondered.¹⁶⁸ Tumutumu station itself was lightly guarded: missionaries had only a few rifles to protect the compound. There were rumors in April that 900 Mau Mau were about to set upon the girls dormitory and carry them away into the forest.¹⁶⁹ Dormitory girls and boys, fearing attack, slept in the bush.¹⁷⁰ But the attack never transpired. Missionaries thought themselves protected by God's grace. It seems more apt to credit Mau Mau's discipline. For forest fighters avoided bloodshed to protect posterity. Early in 1953 Mau Mau units attacked the Presbyterian dispensary at

¹⁶⁶For histories of the "passive wing," see Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 130-33.

¹⁶⁷SA II/A/1: John Wilkinson, "The Mau Mau movement: some general and medical aspects."

¹⁶⁸SA II/G/3: Lamont, "Report on the situation in Tumutumu and in Nyeri district, as of mid-October 1952."

¹⁶⁹SA II/C/22: Lamont to Calderwood, 18 April 1953.

¹⁷⁰SA II/C/22: Brown to Calderwood, 29 May 1953.

Wandumbi. They were seeking medical supplies, and took with them supplies of penicillin, needles, laxatives, and other drugs. They spared both the dispenser and his wife, reasoning that "they helped the people."¹⁷¹ Rape was a capital offense for some forest fighters: when Gucu wa Gikoyo came upon a Mau Mau fighter raping a local woman during a raid, he and others chopped the man to pieces.¹⁷² Forest units were careful to avoid killing pregnant women.¹⁷³ In a war animated as much by fears of sexual indiscipline as by anti-British sentiment, Mau Mau battled to protect Gikuyu posterity from death.

Posterity was equally on the minds of Christians in the reserves. Church women regarded caring for Mau Mau as Christian vocation. Esther Mwhiki Mbau, longtime member of Kagere independent church, described the feeding operation in Mahiga location in this way:

Most women were not detained. They were collected together and put in villages...Women cooked for Mau Mau. You know most of the Mau Mau food was brought to my house and in the evening it was taken away to the other side of the River Gura. Also goats were taken away and was slaughtered and cooked there. You know it was very orderly. People were Gikuyu in the day but at night they became Mau Mau and they would go to slaughter the goats. Then people used to live two kinds of life: of Gikuyu and of Mau Mau.¹⁷⁴

The British thought women like Mwhiki had been forced to support forest fighters, compelled by social pressure or by Mau Mau threats to supply food.¹⁷⁵ What is clear is that Gikuyu women fed Mau Mau by their own resolve, guided by a deep moral sense that preserved life against death, fertility against corruption. Their dedication cut across ecclesiastical and political boundaries. Mau Mau units camped near Kirimukuyu

¹⁷¹SA II/B/7: General Mission Annual Report, 1953.

¹⁷²Gikoyo, *We Fought for Freedom*, 149.

¹⁷³Oral interview: Paul Thuku Njembwe.

¹⁷⁴Oral interview: Esther Mwhiki Mbau.

¹⁷⁵KNA DIO/R/4: District Intelligence Officer, Nyeri, to District Commissioner, 25 May 1954.

in 1953 got their food from sympathetic female cooks within Tumutumu mission itself, to the discomfited surprise of missionaries.¹⁷⁶ Cecilia Mugaki remembered that when General China's men hid near Tumutumu late in 1953, women of the church took them into their homes to feed them.¹⁷⁷ The 300 men camped near the Ngorano Presbyterian school at "Bush Number 9" in mid-1953 got their food from friends in the church.¹⁷⁸ Liliani Gachigua remembered that villagers around Ngorano slaughtered goats when Mau Mau men visited. Women cooks smothered the smoke to avoid questions from chiefs.¹⁷⁹ Christian vocation fed Mau Mau. Tumutumu hospital dressers cared for forest fighters' wounds. One mission midwife hid forest fighters in her house for months after they had been wounded.¹⁸⁰ Others dressed fighters' wounds at mission dispensaries. Five staff from Tumutumu hospital itself were detained by the government for treating Mau Mau in their homes, among them the leading African Hospital Assistant.¹⁸¹ Some Tumutumu medical dressers went into the forest, inoculating fighters against typhoid and administering penicillin to treat wounds.¹⁸² Christian charity, and a shared sense of duty, called Presbyterian women to protect the young men of the forest from the dangers of the wild.

Committing themselves to the future by caring for desperate young men, some women of the church converted their domestic labor into a demand for peace. Church women seemed to have hoped their diligent domestic labor would remind warring men of the need to protect life. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki remembered speaking thus at a government-organized meeting in 1953:

¹⁷⁶KNA VP/9/10: Assistant Supervisor of Police to District Operations Committee, 5 January 1953.

¹⁷⁷Oral interview. Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

¹⁷⁸Oral interview: John "Hem" Muriuki; Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the forest*, 18.

¹⁷⁹Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

¹⁸⁰SA II/D/17: Wilkinson, Annual Report to Director of Medical Services, 1953.

¹⁸¹SA II/D/17: Tumutumu hospital Annual Report, 1954.

¹⁸²SA II/A/1: John Wilkinson, "The Mau Mau Movement: Some General and Medical Aspects," July 1954.

Without joking I said 'my friends, when the animal is moving, what does it eat?' And they said, *kinuku* (small pieces of meat). Listen carefully, because I the one with the *kinuku*. People laughed. And there were a handful of men sitting on the side, and they said 'that women, she is deserving of a handclap.' So I told them, 'my women, why are we called people of outside? We are so called because when the sunrises, we wake up and light the fire, we give the husband food, we give the children their breakfast. And the husband gets up and goes away and we are left with the children. The goats in the house we bring out, the cattle in the corral we let out, so as I am working the field I am also grazing animals and feeding my children. When the sun sets I bring the cattle back, and bring the goats back in, and my children I take in, and light the fire, and when the husband comes home, he finds there is still smoke in the house. The husband cannot ask 'where has my wife gone?'. Let us remain at that mode. There is nothing that starts that does not have an end. This war is going to end. So let's do that, so that when this war ends, and the men come home, let the men go and fight and do what they need to do, but we women let's stay at home so that even if the husband comes in the middle of the night, he will always find smoke in the house.'¹⁸³

Cecilia's diligent work for the men of Mau Mau, the meat that she and other women fed forest-dwellers, called men and women to attention. Women's Guild members had in the 1930s listed their domestic work publicly, loudly, using their laundry lists to shame delinquent men with proof of feminine virtue. Women like Cecilia similarly used the evidence of domestic labor to demand virtuous conduct of men. At the conclusion of her speech, Cecilia remembered turning to the chief, sitting nearby, and demanding that he cease brutalizing young men detained for Mau Mau offenses. Evidence of women's work for posterity shamed violent men, demanding that they pursue the common good. The Mau Mau General China, hearing of Cecilia's dangerous speech, posted a letter commanding all of his men to keep away from Cecilia's house. She was, he wrote, to be a spokesmen for fighters detained by government.¹⁸⁴ Women's commitment to posterity, to a vital future, impressed men on both sides of Mau Mau with the need for control over violence.

¹⁸³Oral interview: Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki.

¹⁸⁴Recounted in *History ya Eustace Mugaki na Cecilia Muthoni Mugaki* (unpublished ms. in possession of Cecilia Muthoni, Tumutumu).

The earliest months of Mau Mau in Mathira were a principled war against uncontrolled violence, not the divisive, dualistic conflagration that missionaries imagined. The Home Guard look like the most desperate advocates of the peace. The first Guard units in Nyeri were headquartered around Presbyterian and Catholic schools, armed with rifles provided by the District Officer in Karatina. By November 1952 the Home Guard in Nyeri was the largest in the colony.¹⁸⁵ In Kirimukuyu, Tumutumu's location, 756 men joined by the end of 1952.¹⁸⁶ Some were impoverished men, hoping to protect private property against the war's demands. At Karonaini near Tumutumu, for example, one Matundo joined the Guard after Mau Mau appropriated his only cow. Another, Kingori, joined the Guard after he lost three cattle to the forest fighters. An unmarried man with only one acre of land, he had been saving the livestock to pay for brideprice.¹⁸⁷ Two of their fellows possessed neither land nor wives. The Home Guard in Mathira looks like smallholders' effort to protect private property. The British thought the Guard their first line of defense against Mau Mau. But early in 1953, the District Officer was dismayed to discover that many Home Guards in Mathira had taken Mau Mau oaths.¹⁸⁸ At Ngorano school in Mathira, Liliani Gachigua was the leader of the Guard detachment. He remembered that

We used to communicate with the Mau Mau and the government. Every village had guards who were on both sides. People in fact told the whites at Kiamariga that I was a good leader. One white man questioned this by saying that there had never been a fight at this place. But no school was closed here because people were clever. People knew when the government was coming and so the Mau Mau would go away. So no school was closed but in some other places there was a lot of problems because people were not able to control the two forces.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵Corfield, *Mau Mau*, Ch. XII.

¹⁸⁶KNA VQ/1/30: DC Nyeri to PC, 15 December 1952.

¹⁸⁷KNA VP 9/9: Intelligence Reports, Nyeri district.

¹⁸⁸KNA VQ/1/30: DC Nyeri, "Home Guard" circular, Feb. 1953.

¹⁸⁹Oral interview: Liliani Gachigua.

Of necessity, Gachigua and other Ngorano Guards were advocates for peace. They worked to balance the demands of government with the needs of Mau Mau, in order to protect Gikuyu property from destruction. Some took Mau Mau oaths.¹⁹⁰ At least one forest fighter regarded the Ngorano Guard as Mau Mau's "best spies," supplying ammunition and information to units camped near the school in late 1953.¹⁹¹ Enrollments in Ngorano school rose from 1952 to 1953, in marked contrast to the majority of Tumutumu's schools where enrollments dropped dramatically.¹⁹² Children at Ngorano took the oath and carried cigarettes and information to Mau Mau units hiding in the forest.¹⁹³ Wondering British officials questioned the Mathira Guard's resolve: while virtually all government and Catholic schools had been burnt by Mau Mau in 1953, no Presbyterian school was attacked.¹⁹⁴ The District Commissioner insisted early in 1954 that Mathira teachers should drill, in public, with the Home Guard "in order to implicate them with the government in the eyes of Mau Mau."¹⁹⁵ Ex-soldiers taught them to march in formation.¹⁹⁶ It was a desperate attempt to enlist Home Guards into a divisively regimented battle that they were eager to avoid. For Home Guard members in Mathira seem to have been Gikuyu moderates, not British loyalists. They worked to limit the unthinking violence threatened both by Mau Mau and by British intransigence.

So did teachers. An attempted murder at Ngorano school highlights the creative ways that teachers in Mathira found common ground with the men in the forest--and worked to protect Gikuyu posterity from unthinking violence. Ngorano, as I demonstrated in a previous chapter, was in the 1930s on the borders of Gikuyu cultivation. Dispossessed junior clansmen and tenants from Tumutumu, losers in land

¹⁹⁰Oral interview: Joseph Muriithi.

¹⁹¹J. Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the Forest*, 20.

¹⁹²SA II/C/22: Lamont, "Comparison between rolls of February 1953 and February 1952," 11 March 1953.

¹⁹³KNA VP/9/20: Ministry of African Affairs annual report, Central Province, 1953.

¹⁹⁴KNA VP/2/1: PC Central to Member for Education and Labor, 8 December 1953.

¹⁹⁵KNA VP/2/14: "Minute 10," no date.

¹⁹⁶Oral interview: Muriuki Kiuria.

litigation, had settled in the region in the late 1920s. They hoped to recreate civilization in the wilderness, planting crops up to the borders of settler farms and creating new forms of social organization that elided past *mbari* divisions. In the mid-1930s a second wave of migrants arrived in the region, pushing up school enrollments with "raw natives."¹⁹⁷ By the late 1940s land shortages had set Ngorano readers against each other. Some thought the prosperous Tumutumu migrants, most *Mbari ya Njora* relations, were sorcerers, lining their pockets at the expense of others. Rumors attested that they misused church money for their own purposes, that they conducted prayer meetings at night with children, that they preached with obscenities, that they caused fighting within the church.¹⁹⁸ Local arguments over land and sorcery accusations led to violence in Mau Mau. In October 1952 Mau Mau units burst into the Ngorano school seeking out the young son of Arthur Tutu, wealthy church elder and *Njora* clansman. Jotham Muturi, headmaster at Ngorano and elder at the church, described what transpired in this way:

By then some of my students had taken the oath and others had not taken...one of my students came upon where the Mau Mau were hiding and he came to school. The Mau Mau followed him into school. After a few minutes, I saw all the teachers streaming into my office, they had been collected by Mau Mau. They wanted to take away the boy. He was called Ndiritu Arthur. When he was seized he was put a rope around his neck and he was thrown away. I came out to plead for his freedom. I told them he cannot divulge any information. So he was left alone. Me I reported the incident after two days. I could not report immediately because I was Mau Mau. After reporting I was taken to detention.¹⁹⁹

Muturi commanded the teachers and the students to say nothing of the incident to government. He only reported to government officials days later.²⁰⁰ Silence was a strategic necessity: it allowed Mau Mau to escape. Disciplined silence protected students, teachers and rebels from unnecessary bloodshed. It took moral courage: Muturi was

¹⁹⁷SA VZ/6: Tumutumu station log book for 1935, entry for 31 March.

¹⁹⁸For these accusations, c.f. TT Parish file: JK Maithori, "Zakayo's Case," n.d. (but 1949).

¹⁹⁹Oral interview: Jotham Muturi.

²⁰⁰KNA VP/2/1: DO Mathira to Provincial Education Officer Nyeri, 1 December 1953.

arrested after reporting the incident, and banned from communion.²⁰¹ The British thought him and other teachers a member of Mau Mau's "passive wing."²⁰² But what guided Muturi, as other Presbyterians in Ngorano, was an active interest to posterity.

Ngorano teachers' commitment to posterity cut across the divisions in which the British imagined Mau Mau. General Kariba camped near the school for months. His fighters spent their days resting, enjoying food brought in by friends from the reserves.²⁰³ In November 1953, Kariba, fleeing from the famous battle of Tumutumu Hill, wrote letters to John Muriuki, teacher at Ngorano and Muturi's successor.²⁰⁴ Kariba asked him to find hiding places for six wounded fighters. Muriuki, together with the other teachers at Ngorano, had by then taken two oaths. The letters were intercepted by the government, and Muriuki was arrested, beaten and detained.²⁰⁵ Missionaries, appalled at the teachers' complicity with Mau Mau, closed the school and admonished Mathira teachers "on the need for the loyal performance of their duties at all times."²⁰⁶ Government indignation at Ngorano compelled Tumutumu missionaries to reorganize district school committees in 1954, which more than one nervous official thought had been "infiltrated" by Mau Mau sympathizers.²⁰⁷

Government policy worked by making legal and military distinctions between "loyalists" and "Mau Mau," "Christians" and "pagans." As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it was by making such divisions that the British sought to comprehend, and combat, Mau Mau. But as the evidence at Ngorano suggests, Mau Mau in Mathira produced few easy dualisms. Teachers like Muturi and Muriuki worked heroically to limit bloodshed. Home Guards protected Mau Mau from government violence.

²⁰¹ TT Kirk Session minute book: minute for 3 April 1954.

²⁰² KNA VP/2/1: Unkown, "Minute 10," labelled C/AAS.

²⁰³ Kiboi Muriithi, *War in the forest*, 18.

²⁰⁴ For descriptions of the battle, see H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 70; Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 346.

²⁰⁵ Oral interview: John Muriuki.

²⁰⁶ KNA VP/2/1: Lamont, supervisor to Tumutumu schools, to PEO Nyeri, 9 January 1954.

²⁰⁷ KNA VP/2/14: Minister of African Affairs to PC Central Province, 7 September 1955.

Missionaries thought the Ngorano Presbyterians traitors to the cause. But the actions of mission readers exhibit a deeper logic than the dualistic British language of traitorism can admit. For Presbyterians in Ngorano were guided by deeply held Gikuyu principles that protected life from death, that fostered posterity in the face of the dangerous pollution of bloodshed. Their vital principles cut across the binaries produced by colonial power, highlighting the artificiality of government's careful divisions between "loyalist" and "Mau Mau."

The first months of Mau Mau in Mathira were a war to preserve the peace, not a conflict between two mutually opposed forces. Mau Mau turned violent in Mathira, as elsewhere in Nyeri, toward the middle of 1953. In May there were attacks on a series of schools in the immediate vicinity of Tumutumu mission.²⁰⁸ Worried teachers, and students, slept in the bush. Hospital admissions increased dramatically: while there were only 31 admissions at Tumutumu hospital from November 1952 to April 1953, in May alone 26 men and women were admitted.²⁰⁹ British soldiers camped on the football field; barbed wire encircled school buildings.²¹⁰ In August there was a string of attacks on teachers who had not taken oaths.²¹¹ Many were related to *Mbari ya Njora*. Worried men and women took refuge in the mission compound, taxing food supplies.²¹² Others, no less worried about the consequences of violence, took refuge in the forest and joined Mau Mau. Dickson Kiragu, for example, fearfully went into the forest in 1953 because a man had died in his house while refusing to take an oath.²¹³ He was not alone: beginning in June, young men and women in Mathira division began leaving their homes *en masse* and going into the Mt. Kenya forest.²¹⁴ They joined the "Kenya Levellation Army," well

²⁰⁸SA II/C/22: Lamont, "Memo presented to Nyeri Emergency Committee," 26 May 1953.

²⁰⁹SA II/A/1: Wilkinson, "The Mau Mau movement: some general and medical aspects," July 1954.

²¹⁰SA II/B/7: General mission annual report, 1953.

²¹¹TT Parish file: Muhoro to Lamont, 21 August 1953.

²¹²KNA VP/2/1: CSM Tumutumu, 2 September 1953.

²¹³Oral interview: Dickson Kiragu.

²¹⁴KNA VP/9/10: Police Inspector Karatina to Special Branch Nyeri, 1 July 1953.

over 300 strong, which had recently moved into the division.²¹⁵ Their task was to level, to pull out the persistent stumps blocking Gikuyu unity, the *aremi* condemned in Bildad Kaggia's translation of *I Peter*. Gikuyu political metaphors were always close to the ground, to the historic lessons learned in the hard work of forest clearing. But leveling the turf of Gikuyu unity, as ever, took discipline. Here, too, Mau Mau was discriminate in its violence.

For Mau Mau was at its most violent where local histories set Gikuyu against each other most sharply. At Kabiruini independent school, old tensions over *mbari* politics led to violence in Mau Mau. As I described in Chapter Eight, Kabiruini school began as Francis Ruga's effort to guard his land from rapacious Presbyterian tenants. The school divided over the Beecher Report of 1951, with Ngatia wa Mweri, school chairman, adopting the report against the wishes of the school committee. In 1952 divisions over education and *mbari* politics set school supporters against one another in bloody conflict. Ngatia formed a Home Guard unit at the school, and joined the government's new African District Council in 1953, one of only a few chiefs and headmen considered sufficiently loyal to warrant British trust.²¹⁶ Even after they closed the bulk of KISA schools in Nyeri, the British allowed the Kabiruini school to remain open. It was a testament to Ngatia's success at playing with bureaucracy. Ngatia's Guard unit was the most active in Mathira, pursuing independent assaults on Mau Mau.²¹⁷ Ngatia's private war looks like an assault on the threatening solidarity of *ituika*. For many of his opponents in Mau Mau were themselves from Kabiruini: General China's family owned land just up the hill from the independent school.²¹⁸ General Kariba began his Mau Mau career by administering oaths in the region.²¹⁹ Both came from propertied families.²²⁰

²¹⁵KNA VP/9/9: Nyeri weekly intelligence report, 50/53.

²¹⁶KNA VP/1/17: DC Nyeri, notes, 1953.

²¹⁷KNA VP/1/16: Handing Over Report, DO Mathira, May 1954.

²¹⁸Oral interview: Joseph Muturi Wahome.

²¹⁹Paul Maina, *Six Mau Mau Generals*, 95; 111-12.

²²⁰KNA DC/Nyeri/1/2/2: Handing Over Report, Hughes to Delmege, 4 November 1958.

Both regularly traveled into Mathira. China called his camp, established in the Mt. Kenya forest in 1952, the *thingira ya iregi*, the house of the refusers.²²¹ The *iregi* were *ituika*'s ancestors: they had pulled off generational succession against elders' tyranny in the 19th century. Generational philosophy, inspired by a heroic history, did battle at Kabiruini with the pragmatic progress promised in *mbari* property.

Old Gikuyu debates fed Mau Mau's violence in Nyeri. But principled commitment to posterity protected families from the full force of battle. The Emergency was largely fought in the north, with most of its biggest battles taking shape in Mathira. Mathira people worked hard to protect fighters against British wrath. Even after Operation Anvil had eliminated Mau Mau's base of support in Nairobi, Mathira peasants continued to feed, hide and care for forest fighters.²²² As late as 1955, Mau Mau units continued to move openly through the division.²²³ The British thought Mathira people members of Mau Mau's "passive wing." But there was nothing passive about Mathira's courageous engagement with Mau Mau.

The Emergency was on all sides an active struggle over fertility, an effort to guard posterity from the destruction of British sorcery and marital strife. As I have shown, their competing hopes for fertile posterity led Gikuyu to make intellectual investments in their language. Forest fighters committed themselves to posterity in record books, memorializing their struggle and creating lineages of the word in which to invest their sweat. Supporters on the reserves hoped for fertility through guarded speech, protecting homes from listening ears by grinding up their words. Revivalists preached openly about sin in order to repair intimate strife between husbands and wives. Elders called young men to marital discipline through church law. Gikuyu committed themselves to posterity by arguing over words. The diversity of Gikuyu visions of the future fired up the

²²¹ Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 55.

²²² KNA VP/1/47: Central Province Emergency Committee, April 1956.

²²³ TT St. Paul's College file: Muhoro, Annual Report for 1955.

violence that consumed Mathira division late in 1953. But principled people on all sides of Mau Mau worked hard to limit the bloodshed. The Mathira war must be seen as a battle against violence, a terrible effort to protect households against the curse of death. Common commitment to a renewed future brought Gikuyu together, even as it drew them violently apart.

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Archives are referenced in the text as follows:

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- TT* Tumutumu Presbyterian church archives, held in the offices of Tumutumu church
- KNA* Kenya National Archives, Nairobi
- CPK* African Anglican Church archives, held in Imani House, Nairobi
- AIM* Africa Inland Mission archives, held in the Africa Inland Mission Kenya Branch archive, Hurlingham, Nairobi
- Mahiga* Archives of the Kikuyu Traders Association, the Kagere independent school, and the Kikuyu Central Association (Othaya branch), held by Mr. Kariuki Kiboi, Othaya town, Nyeri district

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