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Savannah Scott

12/15/19

What is a Nation Seminar

The Practice of Clitoridectomies: Its Influence on the Gikuyu Tribe, Kenyan National Identity,
Cultural Nationalism, and British Powers.

Maturing from a young child to an adult is a special time for women; coming of age marks the transition of growth into a newly developed woman ready to begin the chapters of life and adulthood. In celebration, many cultures host ceremonies in honor of this transition. Among the Gikuyu, a tribe located in central Kenya, *irua* is the ceremony marking the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood; the rite consists of the circumcision of both sexes with a ceremony of blessings and traditional dances and songs.¹ The ceremony of *irua* is essential to the Gikuyu tribe as it symbolizes unity amongst the tribe, provides status of citizenship, marks the initiation into the tribal work force and administration, contains the history and legends of the Gikuyu people as the tribe has no written records and is "...whole teachings of tribal law, religion, and morality".² The cultural practice of clitoridectomy, female circumcision, within the Gikuyu tribe contributed to the cultural and national identity of Kenya.

Jomo Kenyatta, the president of the Kenyan African Union, served as a nationalist leader of Kenya. He fought for independence from Britain and advocated for autonomy and sovereignty over the Kenyan people. Kenyatta left behind a legacy as one of the most influential leaders in Kenyan history. Raised in humble beginnings amongst the Gikuyu tribe, Kenyatta asserts the Kenyan tribe flourished in pre-colonial Kenya. The Gikuyu, commonly referred to as the Kikuyu, is a tribal organization within central Kenya. While the historical origins of the Gikuyu tribe remain unknown, Kenyatta detailed how the mythical origins of the Gikuyu are passed down through the generations. Kenyatta narrates the founder of the tribe, Gikuyu, was called to visit Mount Kenya where his wife, Moombi, was sent from God; they had nine daughters who

¹Lynn M Thomas, "Imperial Concerns and Women's Affairs," in *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya* ed. Lynn Thomas (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 23.

² Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg 1938), 133.

intermarried and created the nine principal Gikuyu clans.³ Kenyatta emphasized the importance of education as the Gikuyu tribe does not possess any written records on its history or traditions.⁴ Because of this, he was taught the origin and cultural traditions of the Gikuyu as a child to later teach and pass on to future generations.

Kenyatta viewed land ownership as a vital asset to the economic, religious and social prosperity of the tribe as the growth and expansion of agriculture depended upon the land.⁵ Land was considered the foundation of the Gikuyu economy and provided the only effective and reliable production in Kenya .⁶ The Gikuyu tribe incorporated a system of land tenure ensuring every person and family had right of ownership to land. The ownership of land was symbolic of the bond between the family as the land was a family's direct source of income, field of labor, and way of living.⁷ The land provided basic necessities for living, such as a reliable and consistent source of food and income, provided residential space to build a home for a family and held religious significance for the tribe. By owning land, each family was considered an economic unit strengthened by the division of labor.⁸ The tribe has a natural division of labor categorized by sex, age, and status among the tribe to maximize profits from the land and agriculture.⁹

Due to the absence of written traditions and history, Kenyatta understood the importance of preserving traditional customs as they obtained historical and cultural significance to the development and prosperity of the tribe; specifically preserving the traditional practice of

³ Ibid, 4-7.

⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶ Ibid, 55.

⁷ Ibid, 310.

⁸ Ibid, 53.

⁹ Ibid, 312.

clitoridectomies. Clitoridectomies are female circumcisions where the clitoris is partially or completely removed. It was the only annual tradition that maintained information about the history of the Gikuyu tribe. After the clitoridectomy procedures were performed, age grades were provided to the women within the irua ceremony. The age grades were used as names to identify people and refer to historical events that occurred within that age grade.¹⁰ Age grades were essential to the Gikuyu societal structure and were only provided to women as a result of the clitoridectomy procedure.

In addition, clitoridectomies were an expression of religious practice in the Gikuyu tribe. Within a religious perspective, clitoridectomies served as a method of spiritually purifying women to prepare them for adulthood and marriage.¹¹ In the Gikuyu tribe, the act of purification through clitoridectomies had religious connections to the Virgin Mary within the New Testament.¹² The translation of a virgin into the Gikuyu language is defined as "...an unmarried girl who has been through the initiation ceremony...".¹³ This translation is used to refer to the Virgin Mary as she was the ideal standard of a Gikuyu woman. When challenged about their practice and devotion to clitoridectomies as a form of spiritual purification, Gikuyu women proclaimed, "They [Britain] want us to promise to have nothing to do with irua na aka (the irua of women)...yet the Book of God tells us that Mariamu, the mother of Jesus, was a mitiritu (i.e., a girl who has been both initiated and operated upon)".¹⁴ Kenyatta emphasized freedom of religious expression and practice because he believed the life as a Gikuyu is founded upon

¹⁰ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg 1938), 134.

¹¹ L.S.B Leakey, "The Kikuyu Problem of Initiation of Girls," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 61, no. 1 (1931): 279.

¹² *Ibid*, 278.

¹³ *Ibid*, 279.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 280.

religion and spiritual practice.¹⁵ Kenyatta proclaims how religion is integrated into the traditional life of the Gikuyu people and by inhibiting or prohibiting religious practices, including clitoridectomies, would ultimately be inhibiting the life amongst the Gikuyu people.¹⁶

Freedom of land ownership, religious expression and cultural practices contributed to the unity and prosperity of the political, economic, and social life of the Gikuyu people. However, in 1895 when Britain seized Kenya, the Gikuyu tribe lost all of these essential assets. The Gikuyu people lost ownership of their land. By losing their land, the economic life of the Gikuyu became impoverished and the Gikuyu people were left feeling "...the Europeans have robbed him of his culture".¹⁷

Agriculture is a crucial part of Kenya's economic, industrial and social growth as Kenya is primarily an agricultural country.¹⁸ When the British colonial powers used taxation and legislation to restrict the tribe's ability to utilize their agriculture to grow cash crops and collect resources, they disrupted and inhibited the profits of the Gikuyu tribe resulting in the loss of African economy.¹⁹ The British colonial economy of Kenya was founded upon the ideology of "... an African work for them [British colonial powers] instead of for himself...".²⁰ To ensure the most efficient and reliable production, the colonial powers would "...take away his [Gikuyu men's] land and leave him with no alternative".²¹ To meet the new economic demands, the Gikuyu people were forced into harsh divisions of labor where "...the proceeds never returned

¹⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg 1938), 309.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 316.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 318.

¹⁸ Bethwell Ogot and Robert Ochieng, *Decolonization & Independence in Kenya, 1940-93* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 87.

¹⁹ Pederson, 657.

²⁰ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg 1938), 318.

²¹ *Ibid*, 318.

for the development of the economy. Rather were used for the development of Britain: the colonial power”.²²

To advance British colonial power and demonstrate colonial control and authority, Britain began to regulate the practice of clitoridectomies.²³ The practice of clitoridectomies correlated to the population decrease amongst the Gikuyu tribe due to the severe scarring and infertility associated with the surgical procedure. Decreases in the population threatened the status and reputation of British imperial powers while population growth displayed “...a nation’s or empire’s vitality”.²⁴ By controlling the growth of the population, the British powers intended to increase the status and prosperity of the nation.

British powers used colonial rule to inhibit the practice of clitoridectomies and the irua ceremony in an attempt to increase the population growth of the Gikuyu tribe as well as the entire Kenyan population. Colonial policies began to enforce taxes upon the Gikuyu people forcing the tribes to sell their livestock in order to pay them; selling the livestock diverted the resources away from the irua ceremony.²⁵ Colonial policies forced the Gikuyu to build roads directing labor away from agricultural production which was a huge aspect of the irua ceremony and the prosperity of the Gikuyu tribes.²⁶ The colonial powers began to implement laws and policies to ban the major clitoridectomy operation as “...an effective means for disciplining unruly girls, mending masculine pride, and demonstrating colonial power” and to increase the growth of the population.²⁷ The major form of the clitoridectomy procedure involved the complete removal of the clitoris and

²² Ogot, 83.

²³ Thomas, 4801.

²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²⁵ Ibid, 36.

²⁶ Ogot, 318.

²⁷ Thomas, 48.

labia.²⁸ The ban was placed on the major procedure and not the minor procedure because, according to British powers, the minor form did not lead to severe scarring and infertility as the major procedure did.²⁹ The ban on the major procedure of clitoridectomies highlights the true agenda of the British powers and further emphasizes their desire for growth in the Kenyan population. The ban was not enforced by British imperial powers for the safety and wellbeing of the young women or both forms of the clitoridectomy would be prohibited. The ban was implemented to increase fertility and growth of the population.

Through British efforts to eradicate the practice of clitoridectomies, British officers and powers looked to establish themselves as recognized colonial authorities.³⁰ By positioning British officers as recognized authorities, they felt they had a right to intervene into the practice of clitoridectomies amongst the Kenyan tribes. Clitoridectomies were perceived as a “women’s affair” that fell under men’s authority; therefore, they believed they possessed the right to intervene and prohibit the Gikuyu women from practicing clitoridectomies.³¹

While colonial powers and missionaries labeled and promoted the practice of clitoridectomies as barbaric due to the biological aspects of the procedure, they possessed no regards for the impact clitoridectomies had on the development and culture of the Gikuyu tribe. The annual tradition gives authority to the Gikuyu women granting privileged rights within the tribe. In addition, British colonial powers advocated for the ban of clitoridectomies to politically, societally, and economically oppress the Kenyan people and force assimilation into European ideals and standards for national status and prosperity. Foreseeing the detrimental effects of

²⁸ Thomas, 25.

²⁹ Ibid 26.

³⁰ Ibid 49.

³¹ Ibid 49

political oppression, Kenyatta warned that politically suppressing the people will “have a very opposite...desired effect,” as people would attach “accentuated importance to the maintenance of this custom”.³² Just as Kenyatta predicted, the Kenyan nationalists and imperialists utilized the clitoridectomy controversy to promote their own personal beliefs and agendas.³³ For instance, the Mau Mau, a rebellious nationalist movement in Kenya, utilized the clitoridectomy controversy as ammunition to incite a civil war against British colonial rule.³⁴

While the Mau Mau incited violence and resented the Kenya African Union, both nationalist groups desired the same outcome: independence and sovereignty from British powers. Emancipation from oppressive British rule is the primary objective of Kenyan nationalist movements and groups. Within Jomo Kenyatta’s speech, *The Kenya African Union is not the Mau Mau*, he emphasizes the need of liberation from British powers and influences.

Jomo Kenyatta delivered his speech, *The Kenya African Union is not the Mau Mau* at the Kenya African Union Meeting in Nyeri in July 1952. Kenyatta’s speech centers around the inequities of African representation within the government, the economic and political effects of British colonialism, and the need for unity and a distinguished national identity. Kenyatta’s speech additionally implies a connection between the Kenyan national identity and the preservation of traditional customs as the practice of clitoridectomies was essential to the development and culture of Kenya.

Within his speech, Kenyatta stresses the need for sovereignty amongst the Kenyan people. He draws upon the absence of political expression and influence from the Kenyan people in the democratic government. By proclaiming, “ We [Kenyans] are the only race in Kenya which does

³² Pederson, 677.

³³ Ogot, 71.

³⁴ Ibid, 89.

not elect its own representatives in the Legislature and we are going to set about to rectify this situation. We feel we are dominated by a handful of others who refuse to be just”, Kenyatta expresses his detestation towards the prevalence and influence of British colonial powers in the Kenyan government and advocates for the increase of Kenyan representation in the conducting of politics.³⁵ The inclusion of Kenyan representation in the government would additionally aid in preserving its traditions. The significant cultural value of the traditions, such as the preservation of the entire origin and cultural history of the Gikuyu tribe within the practice of clitoridectomies, would be emphasized and properly evaluated prior to the implementing of regulations and bans against its practice.

Kenyatta expresses the cultural and societal significance of claiming ownership of land as he states, “God said this is our land. Land in which we are to flourish as a people...We want our cattle to get fat on our land so that our children grow up in prosperity... He who has ears should now hear that K.A.U. claims this land as its own gift from God...”.³⁶ Kenyatta addresses how the identity, status, and duties of an individual or family is determined through the ownership of land. Claiming land represents authority over the governing and proceedings conducted on the land; this authority passes down generations gaining more affluence and abundance as the years go on.

Kenyatta exhibits how the British colonial powers taking their land is equivalent to taking the Kenyan’s homes, source of food, income, labor, and national identity. Kenyatta details the harsh labor conditions of the Kenyan people and advocates for equality within the work force and pay;

³⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, “Jomo Kenyatta: The Kenya Africa Union is not the Mau Mau 1952,” *Internet History Sourcebooks*, April 12, 2019. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1952kenyatta-kau1.asp>.

³⁶ Ibid.

“We want to prosper as a nation, and as a nation we demand equality, that is equal pay for equal work”.³⁷ Kenyatta criticizes the disparities between the intensity of work and the amount of income between an African worker and a European worker. Kenyatta explicitly advocates for sovereignty, Kenyan representation in government, equal pay, and land ownership within his speech to achieve one ultimate goal: build the Kenyan national identity. Clitoridectomies were essential to Kenyan nationalism and national identity as the practice, in itself, was a nationalist symbol. The practice represented the traditional Kenyan tribal culture, communicated the history and cultures of the tribes, formed the societal structure of entire villages and tribes, matured young girls into godly women, and were the identity of the Kenyan people. Due to British colonialism and imperialism, the Kenyan national identity was lost. By preserving clitoridectomies, the nationalist symbol of Kenya, the country will begin to regain their national identity.

The perseverance of the practice of clitoridectomies is essential to the preservation of the national identity and culture of Kenya and its tribes. Culture assimilation, detribalization and colonial control from British powers resulted in the elimination of the tribe’s traditional life and customs. Access to education, labor and income equality, sovereignty within the government, and equal distribution of resources were abruptly taken from Kenya and the Gikuyu tribe leaving behind only the sacred ritual of clitoridectomies and male circumcision. This elimination of the Kenyan tribe’s traditional way of life is the primary reason behind clitoridectomies’ significance to the Kenyan tribes; it is the only lasting connection to their traditions and history.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pederson, 659.

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