
Colonial Reason, Sensibility, and the Ethnographic Style

Colonialism is not a history that arrives on a ship, as Ortner puts it (1984), determining historical agency *sui generis*. Nor is cutting an initially immutable or stable practice that colonialism suddenly transformed. The history of practices of cutting is plural, discontinuous, and fragmented; it is a history of ongoing regulation, change, and intervention. Significant transformations have been documented by scholars analyzing the twentieth century. Migrant groups, such as the West African Zabarma, who migrated to the Sudan more than a century ago, have had to contend with social pressures to alter the kind of cutting they practice (Gruenbaum 2001); meanwhile some Sudanese adopted the British-propagated “intermediate operation,” which the Sudanese now refer to as “government circumcision” (Boddy 2007: 196); and in the Chad, girls from nonpracticing groups adopted cutting on their own, acting on desires to “experiment with modernity” (Leonard 2009: 93). However, practices of cutting, interventions aimed at eliminating them, and larger historical forces have been intertwined for much longer.

Take the passages from the hadith (the sayings of the prophet Muhammad) that are much talked about in scholarly and political debates: “Um Atiyyat al-Ansariyyah said: A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (*pbuh*) said to her: Do not cut too severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband.”¹ This saying is frequently cited in debates about whether Islam requires cutting (Fluehr-Lobban 2013: 97; Gruenbaum 1996) and in efforts to understand when and where cutting began; the passage is taken as evidence that Muslims practiced cutting in the seventh century and that it arrived in Africa from Saudi Arabia (see Gruenbaum 2001: 45).² I turn to this saying to highlight something of an entirely different order, which is that as early as the seventh century, cutting existed simultaneously with

attempts to regulate it. In this case a religious authority was trying to modify and reduce the extent of the cut. We should assume that this was neither the first nor the last time before colonialism that authoritative historical figures weighed in on whether or how cutting should be practiced. That little is known about how cutting was lived and regulated between the seventh and late nineteenth centuries is a reflection of disciplinary formations and omissions rather than the stability of an unregulated set of practices.

My turn to *colonial* history as the precursor of contemporary interventions is motivated by their intertwined logics and the durable traces colonialism left on the present.³ My aim is to analyze and expand existing understandings of what exactly these traces are. I will suggest that they are surprising and not at all as obvious as existing feminist and postcolonial scholarship suggests they are. My goal is to point to the limits of what has become a taken-for-granted analytics in prevalent critiques of neocolonialism and to suggest that they unwittingly extend colonial reason and sensibility into the present.

“Imperialism is a will to dominate that haunts us even today,” writes Nnaemeka (2005b: 7). That is true, but this definition sheds light on only the more obvious forms of imperialism in Western anticutting discourses and campaigns such as the Clitoraid campaign titled “Adopt a Clitoris” sponsored by the Raëlian Church. Clitoraid was raising funds for clitoris reconstruction surgeries at a “pleasure hospital” the Raëlians wanted to build in Burkina Faso by offering African women’s clitorises for metaphorical adoption (see preface).⁴ To critics of efforts to save Africa, be they scholars, activists, and/or subjects of feminist and humanitarian interventions, the campaign mobilized in the name of saving African women was obviously neocolonial. Critics started a countercampaign and questioned the exploitative and racist sensationalism that objectified and commodified African women’s genitals and offered them for figurative ownership. Kamau-Rutenberg’s emerged as one of the critical scholarly voices in the African and diasporic blogosphere and public culture that question the premises of humanitarian interventions and the terms under which Africa becomes an object of Western attention (Wainaina 2005; George 2013).⁵ The Raëlians’ adoption strategy was particularly jarring; although common in humanitarian organizations (Bornstein 2001), it crossed the threshold of acceptability when it was applied to the genitals of African women. Kamau-Rutenberg writes:

Nobody’s genitalia should be talked about in the way that Clitoraid is talking about African women’s genitalia. In fact, no part of anyone’s body should be up

for adoption in this way that reminds us too much of the slave trade (Oh no, I went there!). Seriously, what does it mean to “adopt a clitoris”? Does that mean you own said clitoris or are you just fostering it for a little bit? Do you get to name it? What are the implications for the person whose clitoris is being adopted?⁶

Both ownership and objectification of women’s (and men’s) genitals were precursors of colonialism in the era of scientific racism and constitutive of it. Colonial officials and ethnographers stationed in what is today northern Ghana did not write much about genitals, given their commonly expressed disdain for nudity, but the pictures they took and bodily drawings they made reveal their fascination with and objectification of local subjects. The governmental ethnographer Captain R. S. Rattray took pictures “showing the method of tying the penis” and a nude reclining woman (Hawkins 2002: 77, 247), while the National Archives in Accra are replete with drawings of bodily and facial scarification. And if we accept that colonial rule has itself been predicated on blackness as genitality, the colonial conquest had both land and genitals as its targets (Fanon 1967).⁷ There is much to be said for a symbolic analysis of the colonial order and its conceptualization of Africa as a virgin territory. Anne McClintock (1995) has shown that female genitals make their appearance in colonial maps. The same symbolism is mobilized in anticolonial movements, such as in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* (1965), which depicts the struggle over female circumcision between the Gikuyu and Scottish missionaries; on the book’s cover the shape of the ridge divided by the struggle is also vaginal.⁸

Ghanaian campaigns against cutting evince less obvious forms of imperial debris, and my intention is to examine their surfacing in governmental practices (see Taylor 2005). To do so I need to retool postcolonial feminist analysis and question the stability of the alliance of theory and a form of critique we might call critique from a distance. Anticutting campaigns are often understood through the critical lens of Gayatri Spivak’s famous indictment of the colonial paradigm of white men saving brown women from brown men. It is well known that in India and elsewhere, the British turned women’s liberation from tradition into an excuse for colonial rule (Mani 1998: 2), thus turning the “woman question” into a justification for their colonial civilizing mission (Chatterjee 1989). Scholars apply this critical lens to contemporary anticutting campaigns and understand them as neocolonial instantiations of the “white man’s burden medicalized” (Morsy 1991), as well as, in broader terms, the saving of African women from African men by Westerners—including by white and African American women (Nnaemeka 2005c). This

scholarship rightly points to the racialized neocolonialism inherent in Western feminist preoccupations with saving African women's genitals; campaigns are replete with patronizing, narrow concerns void of larger analyses of African gender relations and subjectivities, geopolitical inequalities, imperial formations, and feminism's own imbrications in them. As Nnaemeka writes, "The problem with this circumcision business is that many Westerners who plunge into it do so thoughtlessly" (2005a: 37). However, an unintended effect of this theorizing and its focus on Western discourses is that entire areas of critical inquiry have been cordoned off, leading to misconceptions of power relations that have structured both colonial and contemporary anti-cutting campaigns. Among other things, it prevents us from understanding that imperialism entailed opposition *from within*, such as the anti-interventionist logic of regional officers stationed in what is today northern Ghana, a logic that was shaped by a white man's burden to protect the natives from *other* white men and women.

The widespread reception of Spivak's critical phrase as a platform for feminist analysis gives an illusion of completeness of inquiry into histories of the postcolonial present. Certainly, white men and women were central to anti-cutting debates and interventions during colonialism: missionaries posted to Kenya tried to ban it (L. Thomas 2003; Kanogo 2005), British parliamentarians debated criminalization across the empire, and two British nurses trained Sudanese midwives in alternative forms of the operation (Boddy 2007). But the postcolonial present is more complicated, and the cast of characters has multiplied many times. In addition to imperial feminists, colonial officials and missionaries, and anthropologists, anti-cutting campaigns now include African feminists, both diasporic and continental; other activists who are women of color; and regional governmental reformers. As I stressed earlier, recent advocacy against cutting is also an African-European-American collaboration; the Swedish NGO worker Margareta Linnander cofounded the Inter-African Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC), and in Ghana, IAC members such as the wife of the Dutch ambassador lobbied for the Ghana Association for Women's Welfare (GAWW) to receive funding from the Dutch Embassy. The Ghanaian advocacy is also internally fractured, as middle- and upper-class Ghanaian women and men, often from the South, as well as northerners who have migrated south, have been the main advocates against cutting. Similarly, urban NGO workers are trying to save rural northern women from cutting, which also means from themselves.

In this chapter I want to show that the presence of white people is an insufficient basis for analyzing imperial formations, and I will highlight instead the continuing reverberations of a colonial *logic*—in both interventions and critical opposition to them. I agree with Ann Stoler’s assessment that the field of contemporary postcolonial studies is “overconfident in its analytics and its conceptual vocabulary, too assured of what we presume to know about the principles and practices of empire that remain in the active register” (2008: 192). I strongly suspect that Spivak would agree that what she originally wrote about colonial rule in 1820s India cannot be uniformly applied to the 1930s Gold Coast or to postcolonial Ghana. I will provide some specific examples of continuities, building on Lata Mani’s work (1998), but my purpose is to question what we really know about colonial campaigns against cutting and their contemporary afterlives. Feminist criticism has rarely availed itself of existing historical analyses (L. Thomas 2003; Kanogo 2005; Boddy 2007), and this situation is compounded by the limits of analytical imagination. Too often scholars fail to differentiate between debates and practices, whether colonial or postcolonial. As Stoler writes,

Academic debates about the lessons of empire . . . have been contained and constrained by the framing of issues and arguments against which critique has been posed. In the rush to account for the nature of imperial practices today and their similarities or differences from earlier European and U.S. imperial interventions, a very particular vocabulary has seized hold of our intellectual and political space. (2008: 192)

How do we make space for new arrangements of anthropological and historical study and critical analysis? The charge is to revisit the question of how colonialism informs contemporary governance and political and analytical sensibilities. By portraying complexities of colonial rule, my purpose is to set the stage for analyzing enduring forms of power-knowledge and sensibility that live on in present governmental campaigns and scholarly analytics. This requires questioning the assumption that colonial political debates seamlessly led to or accurately reflected policies and practices of rule, as well as paying attention to the less perceptible residues of imperial formations that structure both anticutting interventions and the work of their opponents. I want to account for the forms of knowledge, affect, ordering of the world, and desires to change it that stretch from colonialism to the present. This chapter will first shed light on specific logics of colonial power in anticutting campaigns of the Gold Coast, as Ghana was then called, and point to their complex afterlives.

At the heart of British colonial debates about cutting was a tension between two opposing camps: the humanitarian-feminist camp, which wanted to criminalize cutting and thereby liberate African women from the custom perceived as detrimental to Africans' reproduction and population growth, and the administrative-ethnographic camp, which opposed imperial reformist zeal and argued that African women did not need that form of liberation. These camps were gendered, classed, and ordered by the hierarchies of imperial rule. The first included British parliamentarians, among them aristocratic and middle-class women and men based in London (Pedersen 1991), and the second included British male administrators posted to Africa such as those governing the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast; these men often had military backgrounds. They positioned themselves differently with respect to cutting, the woman question, and the very purpose of colonial governance.

The critical paradigm of white men saving brown women from brown men cannot explain why British women at the center of the empire wanted to save African women from African men and from themselves, whereas British men posted to the Gold Coast were trying to save local societies from the British women and men at the imperial center. The imperial will to dominate was opposed from within, using a specific logic. By labeling the first position feminist and the second ethnographic, I want to draw attention to the afterlives of this colonial situation in contemporary campaigns and scholarly analyses, both anthropological and feminist.

COLONIAL INQUIRIES: THE DESIRE FOR FACTS

The first colonial interventions to end cutting in what is today northern Ghana were not couched in such terms. In concert with the minimal, rather than the biopolitical or welfare, logics of colonial rule of this region, the British did not sponsor widespread campaigns against cutting. They, did, however, inquire into Ghanaian practices. The terrain of the colonial debate was knowledge about cutting and arguments about the feasibility of legislative and other efforts. The imperial quest for knowledge was thought of as a precursor of potential campaigns but ultimately constituted the extent of the campaign itself.

In the spring of 1930 British concern about what they termed "circumcision," reached the Gold Coast by way of a circular letter titled "Native Customs Calculated to Impair the Health and Progress of the less Civilised Population

in Certain parts of the Empire.” Preceded by missionary and governmental experiments with regulating circumcision in Kenya, these concerns had traveled to London before landing on the shores of the Gold Coast.⁹ In late 1929 London-based members of Parliament, including the “nation’s most strenuous defender of women’s rights,” Eleanor Rathbone, who was “determined to improve the status of women in the empire” (Pedersen 1991: 657), and a newly minted humanitarian, the Duchess of Atholl, formed the Committee for the Protection of Coloured Women in the Crown Colonies. At the time the governing Labour Party embraced the pursuit of native rights and racial equality, and these women demanded that the British government “be held responsible not merely for equal rights between races but also for guaranteeing equal rights between Black women and Black men and for ‘protecting’ women from ‘barbaric’ practices” (656). I must note how this endeavor was circumscribed, given that the campaigns for British and colonized women did not proceed along the same tracks: Rathbone and other members of Parliament advocated for social welfare such as family allowances in Britain but not for women in the colonies. Rather, Rathbone and her colleagues made African female circumcision a political priority and campaigned for its prohibition.

One essential point in understanding the colonial history of cutting is that the British government’s zeal to end it has been overestimated. Atholl and Rathbone’s campaign was not met with widespread enthusiasm by the political establishment, and their committee work and parliamentary speeches never turned into policies. Despite prolonged and passionate debates in Parliament and in the press about the harms of cutting, the colonial government took no concrete steps toward ending the practice. In Kenya, a settler colony that was one of the epicenters of anticutting interventions, the primary agitators for ending the practice were missionaries, not the colonial administration (Kanogo 2005; Pedersen 1991). And as Janice Boddy’s sole historical ethnography of colonial efforts to end and regulate cutting shows, the regional British administrators were ambivalent about intervention (2007). When two Scottish nurses in the Sudan, the sisters Wolff, started reformist campaigns at their midwifery school and tried to transform infibulation into clitoridectomy performed under hygienic conditions, they received little funding from colonial administrators (Boddy 2007: 186). The nurses were stigmatized for their lower-class origins and occupation and faced “bureaucratic indifference” as well as contempt from the male administrators (258). They were seen as at once performing the empire’s civilizing function and as being too close to everything that was impure and abject, given that midwifery touched upon the bodily and

gendered aspects of health, being, and morality that post-Victorians considered abhorrent and vile. Meanwhile the Sudanese midwives they trained received only modest stipends after “years of wearisome struggle” (225). Despite the professed interest of the British in coupling the civilizing mission with securing the reproduction of Sudan’s laboring classes, which the British believed was threatened by infibulation, the fundamental character of their rule did not change. They ruled “in the name of humanity, eugenics, and of the increase of the population,” but these were more subjects of ideological debate than governing practice.¹⁰ The woman question here was women’s and men’s talk, primarily among the colonizers. This discrepancy between colonial obsessions with cutting as an object of debate and concrete campaigns to end it is mimicked today by the contrast between the plethora of contemporary Western anti-FGM discourses and the far lesser investment of resources and money in anticutting campaigns, in particular those in Africa.

Nonetheless, in the 1930s Atholl persisted in making circumcision, which she came to label mutilation, an issue that the colonial administration could not ignore. The committee’s work instigated investigations into the extent of circumcision across the empire. In a letter to colonial officers the secretary of state denounced the ceremonies that “amount practically to mutilation and are in any case the cause of intense physical suffering, increased difficulty and danger in motherhood, and an appallingly high rate of infant mortality” and asked for information about the extent of the practice.¹¹ After receiving this inquiry, the director of medical and sanitary services and the acting colonial secretary, both stationed in Accra, demanded reports from officials in Tamale, the colonial capital of what the British termed the Northern Territories, which today comprise the three regions of northern Ghana. The Tamale-based administrator in turn requested information from the district chief executives and the few medical officers stationed across the region. In a flurry of exchanges during the next three years, these British men wrote reports about circumcision, debated whether to try to end it, and primarily argued against interventions by highlighting how *not* to go about them. As they exchanged letters from 1930 until 1933, their debate became more polarized. While the London-based administrators advocated for campaigns against cutting, regional officers took a relativistic position.

Their reports are instructive not only for what they say but also for their underlying taxonomies of governance and sensibility—the intersections of affect and politics that informed what kind of knowledge they deemed necessary. The colonial officers were given a few prompts for what they were to

address: “I am to ask you to submit a report on the *prevalence* of the practice of the circumcision of females on attaining the age of puberty in the Northern Territories, *its effect on the birth rate* and whether it involves *any cruelty and hardship* to the girls,” read a letter sent from Accra to Tamale.¹² While questions about prevalence and effect on the birthrate constitute a desire for medical and epidemiological facts related to reproductive governance of the population, the question of cruelty and hardship to the girls signals the humanitarian interest in the woman question. In their reports colonial officers went beyond these specific demands for knowledge and provided more detailed ethnographic descriptions.

*Saying More Than Required: Letters from
the Northern Territories*

A penchant for ethnography was inscribed in the very character of colonial rule and was given administrative credence with the formalization of indirect rule as a principle of governance. The 1930s saw the publication of an ethnographic account of the Northern Territories by the first professionally trained anthropologist, Captain R. S. Rattray, author of *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (1932). He was based primarily in Tumu in what is today the Upper West Region, and his work was soon followed by Meyer Fortes’s 1937 fieldwork in Tongo in the Upper East. But British officials and army officers stationed in the Northern Territories had been writing ethnographies since their arrival in the region at the turn of the century (Cardinall [1920] 2012; Northcott [1899] 2011). Colonial officers charged with answering questions about cutting tried to follow suit and provided more ethnographic detail than was deemed necessary or useful.

The acting commissioner of the Northern Province, stationed in Navrongo, wrote in a neutral, dispassionate, and levelheaded tone that performed objectivity and facticity. Rather than reporting about a specific act of cutting, he generalized about how the cutting is usually done, stating the following to the chief commissioner of the Northern Territories in Tamale on September 1, 1930:

Excision of Girls

With reference to your telephone message I have the honour to report as follows:

1. The excision is done publicly—the girls usually being about 14 years of age—sometimes up to 18 years of age.

2. It is done after the harvesting of the early millet—about July or August or about November when the main crop has been gathered.
3. Many girls like to be excised and go of their accord to the native Doctor—others are taken by their mothers. Mothers are jeered at if they have daughters who are not excised and girls who are not excised are said to be treated as males.
4. No reason for the operation other than that it is customary. It is said to have no effect on child birth, pregnancy or infant-mortality and does not affect desire for sexual intercourse.
If not excised girls are sometimes called “Dirty”.
5. In the operation 1–2 Fluid ounce of blood are lost.
6. Deaths from the operation reported are rare.
7. A large crowd attend the operation. Sometimes girls are excised in batches—sometimes singly.
8. It is a disgrace to scream from pain when or after being operated on. The old women present yell and shout in order to drown the cries of the girl.
9. Girls sometimes dance after the operation to show “sang froid”. Girls are quite naked when operated on. All beads and clothing being removed.
10. The operation appears to be practically universal among the bush people of the Northern Province. The exception being the TALANSIS who do not practice it.
11. Christians are not excised.
12. In the Wa District the age for excision said to be seven or eight years but statement lacks confirmation.
13. Doctor REID of Zuarungu is conducting an enquiry to ascertain certain fact in regard to child birth and infant-mortality. According to him a fair proportion of the women of these tribes are not excised.¹³

In this letter the acting commissioner offers a generalized, quasi-scientific, and objectivist account of cutting as a uniform operation. He deduced the rules of the practice about which he had read only a couple of reports, extrapolating general principles governing when, how, on whom, and why cutting was practiced. In contrast Dr. Reid, the medical officer stationed in Zuarungu, the colonial capital of what is today the Bolgatanga District, highlighted the ritualized qualities of the act of cutting.

Dr. Reid wrote the most detailed reports of all. One was an ethnographic description of two sets of publicly performed “operations,” as he called them, accompanied by photographs of one procedure taken by the agricultural

officer. The second was an epidemiological report based on his investigation of “100 consecutive women who attended the Zuarungu Hospital during the month of August and September, 1930.” Like other medical doctors posted to the Gold Coast who “dabbled in amateur anthropology,” as Akyeamong, Hill, and Kleinman put it somewhat derisively (2015: 4), Reid was drawn to ethnographic description and was particularly taken by the first, more ritualized, and skillful operation he witnessed, providing a three-page description. He began:

I had the opportunity on the 24th July, 1930, of witnessing the operation performed on three girls, ageing apparently 13 to 16 years, the eldest one being already married.

The operation took place at midday outside the wall of a compound, about 100 yards away from the main road passing through Zuarungu. There were present about 50 native onlookers of both sexes and of all ages, besides the operator and his half-dozen assistants.

The girls had not been prepared surgically in any way except that all clothing, rings, armllets, anklets, beads and other adornments were removed; they thus quite naked.

The operator (PAKUGUGA) was a man of about 30 years of age.¹⁴ He had learned the technique of the operation from his father and grandfather; thus the practise is familiar. His fees were 6d for single girls and 1/- for married women.

On the pages that follow, Reid describes with great precision the position of the men and women who held the girls, the circumciser’s moves, the treatment of the wound, the subsequent washing and dressing of the girls, the water and flour water given to them, as well as the bestowing of canes, which “the girl must carry . . . whenever she leaves the compound so that all people may know that she has just had the operation performed on her.” Given the level of detail with which Reid describes these actions, it appears that he was standing nearby, perhaps only a few feet from the circumciser and the cut girls. Like the medical officer at the African Hospital in Tamale, Reid had much to say about the procedure. Both expressed concerns about the nudity of the girls while simultaneously taking great pains to specify exactly what was done to their genitals. I do not repeat these statements here as I do not want to give the sexualized voyeurism another platform.

Reid’s ethnographic style itself performs a certain kind of epistemic and cultural work. Throughout his description Reid attends to the unfolding of the events and ascribes regularity to them:

First a man sat down on the ground. . . . One of the girls then sat down in front of him. . . . Each girl was then given some moist guinea-cornflour (ZONGKO) from a spoon, which she took between her teeth and then spat on to the ground, first outside her right foot, then outside her left foot, then between her feet, meanwhile holding her heels together.

By attending to qualities of order, precision, and esoteric knowledge and combining them with descriptions of the procedures that preceded and followed cutting—the preparation of the shea butter, the process of healing—Reid strives to give a ritualized account of a practice imbued with cultural symbolism.

In contrast he devotes only a single paragraph to the second cutting he witnessed, unimpressed as he was with the circumciser and with the event:

On the 10th of August, 1930, I witnessed the operation again. On this occasion the operation was performed, under a tree, on a single girl about 15 years of age. The girl was actually menstruating at the time. The operator was a man of about 50 years of age. He performed the operation in a most unskilled manner. He literally “hacked away” the tissues and did an unnecessary amount of ‘trimming’ while the raw surfaces were still bleeding.

This paragraph is all that Reid had to say about the second performance of cutting he witnessed. He did not write about the precise unfolding of the event, the presence or absence of helpers or onlookers, or the immediate aftermath of the event. Rather than reconciling the two different events by accounting for the fluid character of ritualized activity associated with cutting, he denounces the second as a poorly executed medical event, an unskilled operation.

Reid was no anthropologist, but his attention to the ideal-typic ritual inscribed with rules and regularity has been a hallmark of anthropological accounts (Kanogo 2005: 79; Pratt 1986). That he and others were compelled to respond in the ethnographic style, rather than to merely answer the questions posed to them, says something about their politics. The excess of cultural information and description of ritualized activity performed a certain kind of political position, one that endowed cutting with a cultural valence rather than depicting it as a cruel act devoid of meaning. The ethnographic style and the surplus of cultural description were put in service of showing that cutting was a legitimate cultural practice. At the same time Reid’s inclination to closely describe one event but not grant the other such cultural valence is also indicative of his ambivalence—stripped of ritualized activity, the operation appeared to him as brutal. Reid’s conclusions make it clear that he was torn about what he saw. The operation appeared both symbolically

rich and purposeless: he wrote that he was unable to find out “why this operation is done,” as “no one can give any reason whatever except to say that it has been performed for countless generations.” This apparent purposelessness led him to evaluate the operation in medical terms as mutilation: “Apparently girls allow themselves to be so mutilated . . . to avoid the sneers of old women.”

The centrality of colonial emphasis on “reasons” for cutting cannot be overestimated. Their absence—or, rather, the inability to discern them—led Reid and others to claim that cutting was purposeless and therefore mutilation. In the governmental framework that granted customs a limited and codified authority, understanding reasons for cutting was tantamount to granting it legitimacy. Reid and other men who wrote reports did not know enough to contextualize the regional practices of cutting and their meanings, and they would wait a full year before acquiring an interpretive framework.

*Understanding Reasons: The “Sensible Officials”
and the Work of Cultural Explanations*

When in June 1931 the secretary for the Native Affairs Office in Accra forwarded a pamphlet titled “Female Circumcision and Status of Women in Tanganyika Territory” to Tamale, the colonial officers posted to the Northern Territories breathed a sigh of relief. “A most interesting document,” remarked the chief commissioner in Tamale in handwritten notes on the cover sheet.¹⁵ “Read with much interest. Thank you, for letting me on such an eminently sensible [report?],” wrote the Navrongo commissioner. The Tanganyika pamphlet that provoked such enthusiasm provided the regional officials with contextualized cultural explanations and plausible reasons for cutting, albeit at the opposite end of the continent.

The pamphlet was written by P. E. Mitchell, Tanganyika’s secretary of native affairs, on the basis of “18 years of close contact with native society in Tanganyika” (7).¹⁶ Mitchell is known for his debate with Bronislaw Malinowski and long-standing objections to anthropological theorizing—Mitchell wanted anthropologists to merely answer questions of interest to colonial officials rather than ask their own. Yet Mitchell’s governance was imbued with the anthropological sensibility of the time—he learned Chichewa and Swahili in his early years of colonial service and later invited Malinowski’s student Gordon Brown to conduct research that sought to determine whether the people were “well governed and content” (quoted in Mills 2008: 53).

Mitchell's pamphlet was received in the Northern Territories as a powerful retort to Atholl's committee. Mitchell advocated against legislative and other direct interventions against circumcision and proposed a path of "knowledge, sympathy, and . . . [word missing] patience towards Christianity and Europe" (7). Mitchell urged caution on efforts to eliminate circumcision, outlining not only the effects this would have on "tribal institutions" but also questioning whether "European society [was] ready and willing to absorb the African, when he became civilised in this sense" (1). For officials in the Northern Territories, the main import of his pamphlet was that it explained the purpose of cutting that had been elusive to them. "Clitoridectomy causes no mutilation," he wrote, and is a part of "deeper" "initiation ceremonies" that proceed in three stages: "The parting from the old, childish, valueless life, an intermediate period . . . , [and] the final ceremony of admission into the tribe" (2). Given the significance of cutting for tribal membership, he wrote, "It is thought by the natives to be indispensable, and that attacks on it are regarded by them as attacks on the whole of the initiation ceremonies" (3). These cornerstones of tribal social organization needed to be preserved, he said, because "to substitute an alien legal and social system . . . is a thing to be carefully avoided" as the "working system . . . has met the needs of the people" (3, 4). Any change should occur "with sympathetic help and guidance from his [the African's European] teachers" (4).

Mitchell also weighed in on the woman question, arguing against the position of British feminists and humanitarians. He refuted notions that an African woman "has no rights," writing "there is no scrap of truth" in that statement and giving examples of women-initiated litigation in native courts that was decided in the women's favor, the "tribal custom" that regulates the rights of women in polygamous marriages, and women's rights to farm yields (4). He also castigated missionaries who saw Africans as immoral because of their polygamous marriages and not infrequent divorces, writing, "it is necessary to dismiss from the mind the European idea of marriage as a sacrament, and as a sacrament binding two individual persons" (6). "Bantu women are generally happy," he wrote, and are better off than "the working-class women of England" (7). Notably, he knew that he was primarily addressing himself to a masculinist audience, concluding his discussion of women's rights and well-being with a different tone in the report's final sentences. African women needed less, rather than more, freedom, he wrote: "African women at the present day enjoy a degree of freedom which easily degenerates into license, and their need is for more, and not fewer, restraints" (7).

The precise contours of the “eminently sensible” approach that appealed to colonial officers posted to northern Ghana are worth careful scrutiny. Mitchell valued the “tribal system,” claimed knowledge of its workings, compared African women’s rights favorably to the English while advocating patriarchal control of women’s sexuality, and, in another sleight of hand, simultaneously posited African values as equal to European ones. At the same time he conceived of the British as teachers and insisted on the desirability of Christianization, which he equated with Europeanization. For colonial officials in the Northern Territories who were charged with administering indirect rule, the tenets of which were formulated by Lord Lugard based on his experiments with governing Nigeria, preserving the tribal system was sensible in more than one way: it was both appealing and pragmatic. Mitchell’s worldview overlapped with theirs, and his knowledge of the cultural context granted him expertise and authority. Their agreement was evident in the supporting remarks and notes written on the cover pages of the accompanying letters that praised Mitchell’s views. His contradictory attitudes toward African women resonated among the administrative class, as they were widely seen as “too free (i.e., morally lax) and not free (i.e., exploited)” (Hawkins 2002: 245). The men administering the Northern Territories saw African women’s sexuality as a threat to the social order and saw the region as a space where marriage laws and colonial governance could social engineer a patriarchal order that was elusive both in England and in the colonies.

Taxonomies of Governance

Although officers administering the Northern Territories did not have Mitchell’s knowledge of the ethnographic context in which they worked, they wrote in the ethnographic style. They specified the terminology for cutting in various languages, provided sociological and demographic data, cultural descriptions, and notes on power and authority in the ritual and about girls’ volition, and speculated about the effects of possible colonial interventions, arguing against them. Over time their goal became overtly political: taming London’s zeal for condemning and criminalizing cutting.

An analysis of their taxonomies and coordinates of knowledge is telling and significant. They mapped circumcision onto an interlocking grid of sociological and anthropological questions, categories, and sensibilities. This grid is important because it reveals the contours of a colonial reason whose legacies persist in contemporary problematizations of cutting, both anthropological and governmental.

The following is a summary of scores of archival documents; I have retained the original wording, spelling, and punctuation. The regional officials' reports constructed taxonomic knowledge of cutting along the following coordinates of questions and answers:

Which tribes practice circumcision? The answers were partial and contradictory. One document stated that the Dagomba and the Gonja do not practice it but that most others do. The Navrongo officer wrote that it was "practically universal among the bush people of the Northern Province. The exception being the Talansis."¹⁷ The officer in Bawku stated that the Kusasis and Mamprussis do not practice it, but that their neighbors the Yangas and Busangas are encouraging its adoption.¹⁸ The chief commissioner from Tamale, who summarized their accounts for Accra, generalized that cutting was rarely practiced in the southern part of the province, around Tamale, but was common farther north.

At what age is circumcision performed? Among the Dagarti, Grunshie, Issala, Wala, Libi, Wongara, Moshi, and Fulani, the officers said it was performed at four, seven, or fifteen days after birth; among the Kotokoli and Frafra, and across the Navrongo, Zuarungu, and Kusasi districts, at puberty, or when girls are "about 14 years of age."¹⁹ One letter added a preference for circumcision soon after birth, deeming it "less abhorrent" as "the infant is unaware of what is happening to it, the period of suffering is not prolonged, the ritual itself is subject to little publicity, and the danger of malformation and septicemia are considerably reduced."²⁰

Are boys circumcised? No.

Where is circumcision performed? In public, underneath trees, next to houses.

When is circumcision performed? If at puberty, after the harvest of the early millet; in Tamale, "in the dry season."²¹

Who performs circumcision? The responses were confident but not in agreement: "always women," "elders," "men."

What kind of ritual is the circumcision associated with? Ceremonial dancing, feast, nothing.

Are there any ill effects? Some treated this question as requiring an objective response. The Tamale-based medical officer answered no, while the acting commissioner of the Northern Province from Navrongo specified: "In the operation 1-2 Fluid ounce [*sic*] of blood are lost; deaths from the operation reported are rare."²² Others answered the question in relative terms, writing about how the health effects would be experienced and perceived

locally. The Tamale chief commissioner wrote: "The operation is considered to be painless and within 10 days there is no visible wound and the girl is not in any way inconvenienced."²³ The Kusasi District commissioner generalized this relativizing sentiment, writing: "I suggest many African customs would be detrimental to a European but are apparently not so to the African."²⁴

Who has the decision-making authority? The administrators emphasized that men were not in charge, writing that girls and young women themselves, as well as mothers, made decisions and wanted the ritual.

The purpose of the ritual and the associated beliefs and reasons commanded much attention and disagreement, as nearly all officials tried to offer cultural explanations. Some stuck closely to what they were told by their interlocutors, while others expounded their own interpretations.

Marriagability: "The virgins are then eligible for matrimony," wrote the African Hospital medical officer, as the clitoris obstructs parturition and circumcision facilitates labor.

Cleanliness, purity, custom: "It [the clitoris] is dirty," and circumcision "makes women less promiscuous," "our grandfathers did it," according to the Wa District commissioner, who added, "There is however something to do with SARAH, I think as far the Mahommedans are concerned."²⁵

Production of gender: "Girls who have not been excised are generally ridiculed by those who have with such a remark as 'why do you desire to be men.'²⁶

The notion of chastity provoked much disagreement. As quoted earlier, the acting commissioner of the Northern Province wrote that the purpose of cutting was not the reduction of sexual desire but custom, cleanliness, and courage.²⁷ Dr. Reid agreed, writing that "one has assumed that the purpose is to keep women faithful to their husbands, but this assumption is strongly denied." However, the Wa District commissioner held on to the notion of circumcision as curbing women's sexuality:

The object of the custom is chastity, the general notion being that desire in women must be curbed in order to lessen their leanings towards promiscuous connection. I have also heard it stated that non-removal of the clitoris would be a hindrance to, and lessen the satisfaction of the sexual act.²⁸

The reports offer glimpses of how the colonial officials arrived at the information they presented. For the most part the district chief executives got their information from the chiefs, whom they had installed and with whom they communicated regularly. The acting commissioner for the Northern Province declared himself indebted to the White Fathers' mission in Navrongo and to

Dr. Reid in Zuarungu. The chief commissioner for the Northern Territories was the only one who did not take men's words as representative and who talked to women, consulting with the *magagia* (today *magazia*), who are the leaders of women's groups. Analyzing the prohibition of sati (widow immolation), Lata Mani noted the absence of women as political agents: "The suffering widow remained fundamentally marginal to a debate that was ostensibly about whether she should live or die" (1998: 1). Women, she writes, were "the *ground* for a complex and competing set of struggles over Indian society and definitions of Hindu tradition" (2). In Ghana, women, too, were subjects of debate but were not afforded the status of political subjects. But men, too, spoke because they were impelled to do so and had to answer to the colonial officials, not because they had an actual say in the debate or its outcome.

My main purpose here is not to dispute colonial methods and conclusions or to arbitrate among them, as I am not interested in their truth value but in formations of power-knowledge, as well as the conditions of possibility, sentiments, and forms that animated them. Colonial officials agreed on some matters and disagreed on others. As we shall see, some answers they arrived at can be found in contemporary ethnographies and NGO discourses, but, more important, the questions they answered, and the taxonomies and sensibilities that structured their responses, all persist. Responding to London, regional officials sought to systematize knowledge about cutting, grounding their responses in cultural description, contextualized particulars, and shifts in perspective. The officers knew that the imperial quest for knowledge was itself the terrain of contestation about subsequent policies. Theirs was an effort to tame reformist passions for saving "coloured women in the Crown colonies" by way of carefully calibrated reporting in the ethnographic style.

*The Colonial State against Itself: Opposition to Prohibition
and Demands for Evidence*

Colonial officers stationed in the Northern Territories were opposed to London's interventionist zeal, and their opposition apparently was widely shared among the men administering sub-Saharan Africa. When the demands from London increased and called for campaigns against female circumcision and possible criminalization, the officers stressed the impracticality of such measures.

Regional officers argued that a legal prohibition was simply not feasible. Tribal markings would also need to be outlawed, and that was "impossible to

contemplate”—it would mean a “betrayal of the trust placed in Dr. Reid.” Also, the legislation could not be enforced; a preferable alternative would be a “propaganda campaign carried out by a Woman Medical Officer who could hold meetings attended by women only and explain to them the uselessness of such a practice.”²⁹ That *feasibility* emerged as the terrain of the debate was itself an imperial marker that bears the imprint of a debate concluded a full century earlier, when in 1829, sati was legally abolished in India after many years of deliberation. As Mani has shown, the concerns about criminalizing sati “had revolved primarily around the political feasibility of abolition rather than the ethics of its toleration” (1998: 15).

The lack of feasibility was a polyvalent discourse. The British did not dedicate human or economic resources to ending cutting, as their ruling apparatus in the Northern Territories was minimal, aimed at crisis management, security, and labor exploitation, not the administration of public health or welfare. The administrators never acknowledged this, writing instead that interventions would fail due to so-called ignorance: “In any case the Zuarungu practice seems brutal and purposeless and I think efforts should be made to discourage it as much as possible, although progress will probably be very slow owing to the ignorance and superstition of the masses.”³⁰ *Slow* was a code word for predictions that ending circumcision, however desirable, was not entirely feasible. The notion of infeasibility allowed the officers posted to the Northern Territories to temper London’s reformist passions but was also used to project colonial impotence onto northern subjects, who were figured as ignorant, superstitious, and resistant to change.

In late 1932 the demands from London changed. Rather than asking for information about circumcision or engaging in debate about the best methods of intervention, politicians wanted results. A letter asked for reports “on the steps taken . . . to induce the people of the Northern Province of the Protectorate to discontinue the practice of clitoridectomy and on the measure of success achieved.” It was specifically stated that a “bold statement that the Administrative and Medical Officers are doing all that is possible in the matter”³¹ would not suffice.

The district commissioners again boycotted the call for interventions by objecting to the notion that they could report specific results. One wrote that “it is yet too early to note any substantial measure of success” from “addressing meetings” or speaking to chiefs, but he stated that he placed his hope in “the gradual introduction of clothing, since nakedness is at the root of the matter.”³² As elsewhere in the empire, morality and its ostensible lack were

inscribed in bodily comportment (Boddy 2007). The Wa District commissioner wrote that “no decrease in the practice can be recorded.”³³ The Bawku District commissioner wrote that he had spoken to the chief, who had assured him of his opposition to the practice.³⁴

The British interest in circumcision waned in 1933, in the wake of the Great Depression, and did not wax again until the end of World War II, when circumcision was outlawed in British-administered colonial Sudan. In 1949 the secretary of state again made inquiries in the colonies, and the acting chief commissioner of the Northern Territories in Tamale was asked to respond. He replied by detailing that “certain tribes” practiced clitoridectomy, wrote that “older women” were responsible for its continuance, and advised against direct interventions: “Propaganda by government officials has had very little effect—if any—and my view is that the custom can be effectively countered only by the increasing education of girls. Penal legislation would serve only to drive the practice still further underground.”³⁵ Like his predecessors, this regional official opposed the prohibition of cutting on the ground that northerners would resist the law. He now had an additional platform to build on: colonial policy had changed and envisioned an expansion of educational opportunities in the Northern Territories, including girls as subjects worthy of education.

Anthropology, Inquiries, and Governance

Colonial inquiries and debates never led to anticutting policies, but we must understand that intervention was embedded in the very character of inquiry itself. If we substitute the term *investigation* for *inquiry*, the force associated with asking for information is more readily apparent. Ghanaians knew to evaluate the questions posed by colonial officials, understanding them as imperatives to end cutting. At least one chief told the district administrator: “This is a very old custom. We can’t prohibit it,” and, as I mentioned earlier, the Bawku District commissioner wrote that the chief had assured him of his opposition to the practice.³⁶ The oldest women remembered too. The first formal decree against cutting was issued after independence, by Nkrumah, but the women told me that the injunction to end cutting came “in the Gold Coast era,” from “white people.”

Anthropologists studying science and governance would readily recognize colonial research as co-constitutive of intervention (Fairhead and Leach 2003). I want to stress that anthropological research is equally constitutive of, and has been constituted by, governance of cutting from its beginnings. This

is most clearly evident in hindsight, as Kenyatta's ethnography was itself a political intervention with high stakes. In 1938, eight years after his political testimony before Atholl's committee in London, and after being trained as an anthropologist, Kenyatta published a chapter explaining *irua*, female circumcision, in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* ([1938] 1965). His logic paralleled P. E. Mitchell's, stressing the centrality of circumcision to tribal organization, but Kenyatta offered more forceful arguments for African control of African lives. Kenyatta provided a detailed ethnographic description of the ritual and its symbolic and material entailments, making an argument against the "urge for abolishing a people's social custom by force of law" (127). He elevated circumcision to "the most important custom among the Gikuyu" (128) and wanted his British readers to have "a clear picture of why and how this important socio-biological custom is performed" (129). To that end he wrote about the name of the custom, its function as a moral code and keeper of historical records, described in detail the unfolding of the ritual and attendant ceremonies, the healing process, and the rebirth of the initiates. He also contested claims about the ill effects of the practice on women's reproductive health.

Kenyatta introduced to professional anthropological language what was already the tenet of colonial governance, namely, to put cultural description and explanation of meanings to work as antidotes to imperial reformist zeal. However, Kenyatta also contested the moral and epistemological authority of the British, writing that "the African is [in] the best position to discuss and disclose the psychological background of tribal customs" (148). Despite his anticolonial arguments, Kenyatta used a structure of address that positioned the imperial center as authoritative. Much like the British officers ruling the Northern Territories, he addressed himself to British administrators and publics whose convictions he hoped to unsettle.

Proximity, Distance, and Sensibility

That colonialism was not a monolithic entity is by now well established (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Regional officials at the borders of the empire in the Northern Territories were at odds with the politicians and bureaucrats at its seat; so were, I will soon show, the French Catholic church and the British rulers. The oppositional logic of regional officers posted to what is today northern Ghana was shaped by a certain sympathetic affect and the white man's burden of protecting the natives from *other* white men and women. Administrators posted to the Northern Territories were hailed as

colonial servants and tasked with advancing the interests of the empire, but they saw themselves as equally serving Ghanaians. This is not to say that they saw Ghanaians as equals—their reports are infused with contempt, clinical detachment, and curious fascination; the differences they formulated were on a continuum that ranges from relativism to overt civilizational racism. But all are subtended by an interest in shielding Ghanaians from the inflammatory discourses and punitive rationality emanating from London. The force of the administrators' agreement with the report from Tanganyika that argued for preserving and valuing native social organization is particularly revealing of the colonial sentiments that shaped opposition to the imperial center's desires.

In contrast the officials writing from London with worries about the "intense physical suffering" of cut girls positioned themselves as motivated by feminist interests and humanitarian compassion. The imperial compassion toward the suffering of girls and women, as well as concerns about their reproductive potential, were both deeply felt and self-interested, as Boddy (2007) has shown, and inseparable from their concerns about reproducing the laboring classes in the colonies. British feminists defined African women's interests as they imagined them, projecting their own notions of freedom, oppression, agency, gender, sexuality, bodies, and pleasures onto African women. They imagined a direct line between the colonizer and the colonized but did not foster connections.

In contrast the regional officials constructed themselves as different kinds of moral subjects—those who mediated between rulers and the ruled. They saw themselves as protecting northern groups from imperial incursions, rather than protecting the empire from the ostensible moral depravities of native customs. As self-declared spokesmen for the interests of the colonial subjects, the protectionist (and, to be clear, patronizing) British men posted to the colonies wrote back to the imperial center and did so in the interest of preserving what they conceptualized as an indigenous way of life—one that, as I will demonstrate, they actually brought into being. Their positioning as British subjects whose own civilized status was not in question and as men who could equate tribal interests with those of local men meant that they took few social risks by being open to the potential meanings of circumcision for the organization of social life.

Sympathetic affect was behind both imperial and oppositional logic. Atholl's patronizing, sensationalist sympathy toward the suffering of native women was coupled with the desire to mobilize the force of sovereign violence. It is thus reminiscent of contemporary mobilizations of feminist humanitar-

ian sentiments that legitimize war or proxy rule in the name of saving women (Grewal 1999, 2014). However, sympathetic affect also enabled a critique from within and the oppositional posture assumed by regional colonial officials. The officials posted to the Northern Territories used proximity, geographic and affective, and the ethnographic style to counter the enthusiasm for legal prohibition and to contest London-driven interventions. These regional officials exercised power that saw itself as primarily benign.

In the discussion that follows, I place this self-imaginary of colonial power in the same analytical frame as the historiography of labor exploitation and underdevelopment in northern Ghana to raise larger questions about the logics of colonial rule and its ongoing permutations. I want to show that the disposition of regional officials was subtended by an entire apparatus built on preserving tradition (Grischow 2006: 81) as a primary mode of governance. As indirect rule morphed into official policy, preserving a codified alterity became the dominant form of rule in the Northern Territories. Historians of northern Ghana have shown that this colonial logic served as a convenient backdrop for labor exploitation, whether intended or not. Keeping these two efforts to preserve tradition in the same frame—the overtly stated critique of imperial interventionism and the simultaneous tacit practice of exploitation backed by the imperial sword—sheds light on the long history of what Miriam Ticktin calls “armed love” (2011: 5), which gave shape to forms of knowledge, affect, and rule whose traces are still visible.

ARMED LOVE: HISTORIES OF RULE

Slavery: Setting the Arithmetic

The colonial conquest of what is today northern Ghana followed a century and a half of violence and dispossession brought on by intensified slave raiding. Although this region has been globally connected for centuries through trade and migration, it was the slave trade that integrated the region into the world-historical system that persists today. Northern Ghana became a source of slaves for the transatlantic slave trade in the seventeenth century and a predominant source of Ghanaian slaves in the nineteenth (Holsey 2008). “At the height of the slave trade,” writes Holsey, “European companies stationed on the coast of Ghana came to view the hinterland as a vast pool of potential slaves” while granting coastal residents immunity from enslavement (45). According to conservative estimates, 500,000 northern Ghanaians were

enslaved (Der 1998). That's an enormous number: at the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of the entire country was 1.5 million.

In the North the noncentralized groups from the savannah, formerly known as stateless, including those living in what is today the Upper East Region, were particularly vulnerable to slave raiding by surrounding states. They were raided by their established neighbor-states to the south, Gonja and Dagbon, which had to pay an annual tribute in slaves to the Asante: "Between the 1770s and the 1870s, Gonja and Dagbon each delivered somewhere between one thousand and two thousand slaves per year to their Asante overlords" (Allman and Parker 2005: 30). The noncentralized groups lacked the military means to defend themselves; although they were acclaimed as warriors famous for their poison arrows and were later recruited into the British imperial army (Osseo-Assare 2008), these groups lacked guns, horses, and other means of destruction. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, they were also regularly raided by their northern neighbors from the Sahel as well as by Zabarma warriors.

Although the transatlantic slave trade came to a fitful conclusion in the first half of the nineteenth century, the internal slave trade lived on, both in receiving countries such as the United States and in sending countries such as Ghana. In Ghana domestic slavery burgeoned after the demise of the Atlantic slave trade, only to be outlawed during colonial rule. By the 1880s about fifteen thousand people were traded annually in the Salaga market, which became the largest West African market in slaves (Dumett and Johnson 1988). But although the British legitimated colonial occupation by claiming that it was a means for ending the slave trade, the trade continued, and "there was no concerted effort to end it until after 1911" (Miers 2003: 36).

Northerners captured in the second half of the nineteenth century and taken to southern Ghana remained there, becoming incorporated into southern families but under the sign of a lack (Holley 2008). Unlike free people, slaves were incorporated into kinship as "captive kin" and continued to be marginalized (Miers and Kopytoff 1979: 26). Such was the extent of the trade in northern slaves that the term *odonko*, an Akan word that originally referred to a "bought person" (Holley 2008: 40), became synonymous with *northerner* and came to connote "servility, primitiveness and abject barbarity" (Parker 2006: 356). The history of disavowed kinship shapes Ghana's north-south relations today; the southern denial of northern interrelatedness is a legacy of slavery.

To legitimize the enslavement of northern groups, Europeans and coastal Fanti and Asante portrayed them as "uncivilized barbarians who were fit only

to be exploited as slaves” (Allman and Parker 2005: 31). Northerners were understood as abject cannibals and feral, animalistic subjects with a wild nature and a tiger-like physiognomy. The Asante king Asantehene adopted the colonial distinctions between humanity and animality, proclaiming in 1841 that the “small tribes in the interior fight with each other . . . are stupid, and little better than beasts” (Allman and Parker 2005: 31). Contemporary notions of the unruliness and backwardness of northern Ghana stem in part from this history (Holsey 2008: 46).³⁷ These representations are sustained by national discourses that depict the North as the *sole* source of slaves in Ghana and thus displace the brutality of slavery onto “savage” northern Ghana; as Holsey astutely argues, southern Ghanaians do so in order to protect themselves from stigmatization by the global order (Holsey 2008: 81).

At the same time that slavery discursively constructed northern Ghana as remote, slavery also materialized it as such. To protect themselves from raiders, some vulnerable groups relocated to the hills and other distant areas, thus “altering their relationship to the landscape” and “producing their remoteness” (Holsey 2008: 44; see also Ferme 2001). Historians suggest that contemporary inhabitants of the Upper East Region are a mixture of various refugee groups and others who migrated during the slave trade and its aftermath (Allman and Parker 2005: 31). My research has also found that some inhabitants of the Bolga and Bongo districts trace their genealogies to various movements in the nineteenth century, when they were subject to intensified raiding. The slave trade thus not only robbed this and other regions of their inhabitants but also altered where some people live, how they identify themselves, and who they affiliate with.

Colonial Rule: Minimal Investment and Extraction of Labor

Although the British were some of the foremost profiteers from slavery, after they formally abolished it, they justified colonial occupation by claiming that it was a means for ending the inter-African and Arab slave trades, mobilizing humanitarian concerns to that end. Fortes and Mayer uncritically endorsed this claim, writing that colonialism brought “peace and more security” to the Tallensi (1966: 5), thus disavowing the decades of war and displacement that resulted from British pacification (Allman and Parker 2005: 31).

Colonial rule did not bring freedom but instead an initial period of local warfare followed by military occupation, installment of indirect rule, and forced and coerced labor. The British annexed the areas north of Asante and

formally proclaimed the “Northern Territories” their protectorate in 1901. They had little interest in the region as such and did not foresee profiting from it financially (Sutton 1989). Rather, the British were guided by larger geopolitical interests—they wanted to secure a base in the middle of the French-dominated region of Africa to the north and west and the German colony of Togoland to the east (Benning 1975). To create the northern borders of the protectorate, colonial powers drew arbitrary lines of demarcation that cut across existing social, economic, and political affiliations—the border between contemporary Ghana and Burkina Faso is a nearly straight line that follows the eleventh parallel. But the new polity also crowded together former enemies; these groups viewed each other not as kin but as strangers and had belonged to the same polity only when subordinated.³⁸

The Northern Territories were not governed as part of the colony proper but as a hinterland, or, in official terms, a protectorate ruled by a distinct rationality of minimal investment. After the death of the administrator Henry Ponting Northcott, who had spent time in the North, no one was seen as capable of governing it. As Lentz writes, “Neither the Colonial Office nor the Governor of the Gold Coast had a clear idea of what to do with this new appendage of the Gold Coast Colony, except that its administration should cost as little as possible” (Lentz 2006: 33). This imperative meant that colonial governance in Ghana, and elsewhere in Africa, was bifurcated (Mamdani 1996). As Roger Thomas explains, “It commonly featured different administrative policies pursued toward different areas *within* a particular territory. In West Africa, the boundary was usually drawn between the coast, which had a long history of direct contact with Europe, and the hinterland areas” (1974: 427). Since the annexation of the Northern Territories resulted from the British desire for securing territory, not from an interest in administering it, the definition of the region as a protectorate (as opposed to the Gold Coast and Asante colonies) allowed the British to claim it without incurring greater governing responsibilities. Instead they “pursued a minimalist project” (Lentz 2006: 9).

The governance of the Northern Territories was largely structured around labor expropriation, law and order, and territorial control, rather than investments in infrastructure, economy, public health, or education. As Hawkins puts it, the British were more interested in the welfare of cattle than of people (2002: 28). They treated the region as a labor reserve for southern gold mines, public works projects, and the colonial police and army. *Odonko* now became the term for northern laborers in the South (Dumett and Johnson 1988: 100)

who became central to the country's most important export economies, gold and cocoa. British officials demanded that northern chiefs—themselves installed by colonial administrators—procure labor for public works. The chiefs were initially suspicious that the men would be taken as slaves, but over time the chiefs themselves resorted to coercion of families; for a time colonial officials paid the chiefs for each man they sent south. Government officials also at times joined hands with private companies for purposes of what they euphemistically referred to as recruiting northern men to work in southern mines. Together with migrants from neighboring countries, northern men comprised 73 percent of the most vulnerable members of the mining labor force, namely, the underground miners (R. Thomas 1973: 80). Conditions were dangerous, workers were flogged and beaten, and many took sick and died. "The workers," writes Hawkins, "resented the deplorable conditions in the mines and the brutal treatment to which they were subjected" (2002: 65). Initially, desertion was a common problem for colonial officials and recruiters, as half the men captured in the Upper East fled on their way south. British policy debates testify to the coercive character of this labor regime: officials contemplated replicating South African policies, such as Pass Laws (R. Thomas 1973: 80), which were the precursors of the apartheid regime and were designed to confine the laborers and control their movement.

Foucault's analysis of governance in what he calls a "historical type of society" offers a surprisingly apt description of colonial rule of the Northern Territories and its peoples:

Perhaps this juridical form must be referred to a historical type of society in which power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction (*prélèvement*), a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods, and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it. (Foucault 1990: 136)

Foucault did not intend this description of the juridical form of power to have colonialism as its target; his target was a Western European past that he referred to as "the classical age," after which "the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power" (136). Yet, with the exception of the last clause in the paragraph quoted—"in order to suppress it"—Foucault's description maps onto colonial rule in the Northern Territories, reminding us of the bifurcations of rule in Western Europe and colonial hinterlands. The

colonial regime was not biopolitical, but neither was it deliberately “necropolitical” (Mbembe 1992): the British were not aiming to suppress the lives of Ghanaians—as was the case in slavery, killing was not a goal but a by-product (Hartman 2007). It is clear that colonial rule did not promote social welfare—the British benefited from migrant labor so long as it was readily available, and while workers’ deaths were incidental, so was their welfare.

Rethinking the application of Foucault’s definition of juridical power draws attention to the pitfalls of analyses that periodize power on a linear timeline, be they historical or contemporary. While David Scott argues that the colonial exercise of power was marked by a shift from “extractive-effects on colonial bodies” to “governing-effects on colonial conduct” (D. Scott 1995: 204), there is no singular or historically unified form of colonial governmentality. Colonial rule of the Northern Territories saw no such radical shift; rather, the governance of conduct was inscribed in policies aimed at safeguarding extraction.

Historians say that one cannot even speak of meaningful rule in the Northern Territories, as governance looked like crisis management (Allman and Parker 2005: 73). This region underwent a pernicious version of colonialism wherein the difference between the promise of citizenship and governance by subjection and minimal care was most pronounced. In practice this meant that colonial government invested little in the North. Although northerners were forced to pay taxes and serve in the army during both world wars, the region received minimal resources for roads, no railway, and little infrastructure for health care. Sporadic “schemes to promote cash crops and commercial animal husbandry were introduced in the north from time to time” (Sutton 1989: 642).³⁹

Not all colonial officials agreed with minimal investment. While the central colonial administration begrudged the North its governmental expenditures, administrators posted to the Northern Territories lobbied for greater resources for the region (Benning 1975). Sutton explains:

There was, however, a distinction between the attitudes of Gold Coast government and officials in the south, and those of local officials in the north. [The latter] were enthusiastic and encouraging about agricultural programs. Such local officials seem to have initiated many of the experimental schemes, badgering the central government for money and personnel. There was a continual conflict over the allocation of resources between officials in the north, who felt that the north must develop a local capital-generating economy . . . , and Colony officials, who saw the Gold Coast as a whole, with the north

forming only a minor part in economic terms, except for the supply of labor.
(1989: 642)

The Gold Coast officials' view of the Northern Territories as undeserving of resources prevailed. They justified this policy publicly by mobilizing patronizing discourses of preserving native traditions. Many scholars agree that British economic policy "starved the protectorate of investment" (Pellow 2011: 136) in the name of preserving tradition.⁴⁰ Another way of putting this is that colonial governance was organized around a particular form of indirect rule that was anti-interventionist *in name*. The British codified traditions they deemed useful to state interests and enacted economic and social policies aimed at halting social transformations that were antithetical to colonial ideology and interests.⁴¹ They thus remade the region as traditional in an effort to slow down social transformations that threatened colonial rule. They installed chiefs as custodians of land and fostered communal ownership under their authority; chiefs were to serve as intermediaries for the colonial administrators and the populace (Hawkins 2002: 123). Equally important, they built only a few schools and capped the numbers of students, initially promoting education only to sons of chiefs so as to train a new generation of English-speaking administrators and later restricting education to practical training and "what the market would bear" (R. Thomas 1974: 429). To keep caps on education, the British reined in the Catholic Church's sphere of influence, limiting the missionaries' projects and the number of schools and hospitals in the Northern Territories to a handful (Der 2001). Missionaries, who arrived in 1906, did not have much influence on colonial governance here and were not welcomed by the British because of the national and confessional differences between the colonial officials and the missionaries—while the British colonizers were mostly Anglicans, the missionaries were French and French Canadian Catholics.

The putatively anti-interventionist colonial rule allowed the British to shape the cartographies of social transformation. The installation and codification of chieftaincy and the drawing of borders and boundaries, both national and regional, modified the structures of authority over land, law, resources, and social relations. Centers of commerce, knowledge, and administration shifted as the British designated new district and regional capitals. They thus redefined who counted as a legitimate authority, who possessed rights to land and resources, and how these rights were to be exercised.

These colonial policies were bolstered by a newly romanticized image of the North. The British no longer conceived of northerners as abject savages but as tribes whose traditions were a virtue, a source of strength that enabled them to “[withstand] the break-up of culture, along with the social conflicts and psychic burdens of modern existence” (Kramer 1993: 44). The “sensible” colonial officials I mentioned earlier were charged with understanding tradition and using this knowledge to support their rule. Some took it upon themselves to write ethnographies of tribal customs, about which they were, on the whole, ambivalent: they reveled in certain cultural difference and ingenuity, from different forms of speech to healing methods, but were repulsed by nudity, frequent divorce, polygamy, and ancestor worship (Cardinall [1920] 2012; Northcott [1899] 2011). Their lens was trained on cultural difference, but, as Jean and John Comaroff write of missionaries as well, the British focused on what they conceived as “the lamentable distance from savagery and civilization” (1991: 174). Even the affirmative accounts, such as Cardinall’s praise for the region’s men who had fought for the British in World War I, entailed the trope of overcoming what he obliquely termed “the numbing influence of their old surroundings”:

These people of whom I write showed their indomitable courage during the recent war, immortalising their own name and that of their regiment in Togoland, the Cameroons, and East Africa. . . . It was their manliness, their intelligence, their desire to learn that made them seize the opportunity, urged them to discard wholesale all the numbing influence of their old surroundings and practices and established for ever the innate bravery of their race. ([1920]2012: ix)

Over time colonial administrators began to look at customs as a technology for preserving social order, and they reorganized their values and attitudes toward Africans accordingly. In his introduction to Cardinall’s book, C. H. Armitage, the chief commissioner of the Northern Territories, writes:

Even those African native customs that appear to us both degrading and repulsive have in them the germ of some mistaken duty to parents and superiors: of reverence to ancestors, or to an unknowing Being who exercises supreme power for good or ill over the lives and destinies of the devotees. (Cardinall [1920] 2012: iv)

By pointing out the function of native customs as supporting social and ancestral hierarchies, Armitage argues that although mistaken, customs should be

seen as the foundation for social order. Anthropologists of the time, from Fortes to Kenyatta, agreed but toned down the moralizing judgment.

THE AFTERLIVES: MATERIALITY, GOVERNANCE, SENSIBILITY

One might salute the colonial efforts to minimize European influence, as education and literacy in English, after all, served to colonize consciousness and minds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; wa Thiong'o 1994). However, an upshot of the colonial bifurcated governance was that by its end in 1957, northern Ghana had a total of nine schools in contrast to the more than three hundred in the South. The first secondary school in northern Ghana opened only in 1951 in Tamale (Pellow 2011: 136), and by independence in 1957 only one person from the region had a university degree (R. Thomas 1974: 427). By undereducating the North, the British cemented the region's status as a reserve of menial labor that became, and still largely is, the country's proletariat (Hart 1973).

Given the dearth of historical records, it is impossible to trace precise, much less linear, connections from the longer history of slavery to colonialism and to the present. However, the lives of northern Ghanaians can also be said to be "imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 2007: 6). Here, the afterlife of bifurcated colonial governance also entails "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death . . . and impoverishment" (6). Except for a small class of northern elites and middle-class people like Mrs. Mahama, the director of GAWW, northerners migrate to the South, where they are employed primarily as low-cost labor and are subject to narratives of abjection and hierarchies of social and political citizenship. The story of slavery and colonialism, here and elsewhere, is also a story of disavowed kinship that structures Ghana's north-south relations and denies northerners their national identity in both symbolic and material ways. Yet no singular "political arithmetic" establishes the hierarchy whereby northern Ghanaians are devalued or suffer from what Hartman calls "incidental death . . . when life has no normative value" (2007: 31). In fact, as I will show in the chapters that follow, governmental projects try to *prevent* such incidental deaths while at the same justifying them.

The creation of the colonial protectorate that engendered the Northern Territories as a unified geographical unit in need of a distinct form of

governance also lives on. Although northern Ghanaians do not necessarily share cultural or historical affinities, they share a century of experience of governance, by which I mean policies and their accompanying cultural underpinnings. Contemporary development policies, government and donor plans, and NGO projects consider the three northern regions in a single breath, and migrants living in the South often define themselves and are defined as northerners. These taxonomies are imbued with the legacy of being marked as the nation's Other and undeserving of the benefits of citizenship. Anthropology has not done justice to the lived and embodied effects of the category "the North." Although anthropologists have written about this region since the 1930s, the disciplinary unit of analysis has not been northern Ghana as such. Instead anthropologists have seen the ethnic group as a relevant unit of analysis, although its significance as an indigenous category is both questioned and legitimated (Fortes and Mayer 1966; Lentz and Nugent 2000). Both concepts, the ethnic group and the North, were shaped by colonial governmentality, but only the former has an anthropological imprimatur. I suggest that, like the notion of chiefs, the notion of Ghana's North is a colonial construct that has become a historical reality and is here to stay. This is particularly visible in anticutting discourses and campaigns that have the North and northerners as their subjects, although only half the people living in the region practiced cutting historically.

Power-Knowledge and Sensibility

The afterlife of the colonial paradigm is evident in the work of contemporary modernizers and their critics, as I will show in the chapters that follow. At times dramatic and at times subtle, imperial processes "saturate the subsoil of people's lives" (Stoler 2008: 192). The self-declared sensible responses of the colonial administrators, the NGOs' sensitizing campaigns (to educate those considered ignorant), and ethnographic sensibility all are structured by assemblages of affect, proximity, knowledge, subjectivity, and reason. By tracing what constitutes sensibility in domains of rule as well as in analysis and critique, and by analyzing the relationship between sensibility and affective distance, I will explore the political potential of taking the cultivation of the senses seriously, not only as an object of analysis but also as an anthropological and feminist praxis.

The colonial grid of knowledge, sentiment, positioning, and deliberation continues to structure how female genital cutting is made legible and how it

becomes an object of regulation. Building on James Ferguson's suggestion that development is anthropology's twin and as such has helped to constitute the discipline (1997), I suggest that contemporary governmental concerns about cutting are better represented as a triad of colonial, activist, and anthropological reason with overlapping questions, taxonomies, and sensibilities. The questions the British colonial apparatus debated in the 1930s about the who, where, when, and why of cutting and about the woman question—the African woman's control of her sexuality and her social status—continue to be asked today, both by NGOs trying to end cutting and by scholars trying to understand it. Answers to these questions are demanded, insistently and passionately. We shall see that NGOs and scholars alike spend much time on inquiries regarding the prevalence of and reasons for cutting. The context in which these purported facts are discussed is crucial to the character of governmental rule: while cultural description serves as an oppositional discourse for anthropologists, GAWW and others who govern hold discussion upon discussion and workshop after workshop about the *reasons* for cutting, only to declare them irrational, patriarchal, and uncivilized. The ethnographic style of the regional officers and their interests in taming imperial spirits therefore bear less resemblance to contemporary interventionists than to anthropologists and Africanists.

Pitting education against legislation continues to serve as the context for debate about the appropriate character of interventions, as does the notion of the “underground” persistence of circumcision. But while regional colonial officials used this notion to forestall legislative zeal, in contemporary Ghana GAWW and others ascribe facticity to the “underground” and use it for opposite ends, to advocate for greater surveillance and punishment. This and other governance discourses are at times uncritically adopted and affirmed by anthropologists. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, for example, writes that the 1946 colonial law against female circumcision in the Sudan “had the effect of simply writing its practice underground” (2013: 96), thus conflating the continuation of the practice with its supposedly underground performance—a claim contradicted by scholars who discuss having been invited to witness circumcision (Gruenbaum 2001; Hale 1994).

Knowledge, sensibility, and positioning are still structured along colonial lines of investment. Mary Louise Pratt writes that anthropology inherited its tropes from the imperialism and colonialism against which it has defined itself (1986). But anthropology borrows more than tropes and categories from the colonial paradigm: it also borrows its questions and audiences, and it

constructs its sensibility in the same manner as colonial officials posted to the occupied territories. This afterlife is worth thinking about critically and generatively. London-based feminists and humanitarians foregrounded African women's interests, as the British women understood them from a distance. Regional governors and district chief executives in the Gold Coast emphasized the social functions of circumcision and anticipated negative outcomes of imperial reforms. They wrote from proximity to the social groups in question but often reduced these groups' interests to (projected) men's interests. Ghanaian women did not get to represent themselves or be represented.

Anthropologists who offer cultural description in service of relativism share the ethnographic style of regional colonial administrators. Rather than simply dismissing that imperial debris, I am interested in its "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2013) in this form of rhetorical structure of arguments against colonial interventions. What colonial officials deemed sensible accounts were born out of proximity and openness but also the inequality resulting from occupation. That those in power would presume and demand intimate knowledge of the Other is itself an exercise of power, yet the resulting knowledge repositioned regional administrators away from the imperial center and in opposition to its will to dominate. I want to suggest that anthropology has inherited this entire matrix. Many writing about cutting align themselves with the interests of Africans but are interpellated by the imperial centers and answer to them. This is why I attempt to write otherwise and to allow questions about cutting to emerge from African engagements with its endings, conceptualized as effects of a world-historical project.

The struggle between the British feminist politicians and the regional colonial officials in the 1930s is emblematic—though by no means a mirror image—of the contemporary disjuncture between anthropology and feminism. The most obvious heirs of Atholl and Rathbone are contemporary Western campaigners and global feminists, and they have been recognized as such and subject to much criticism. I am interested in another, less obvious colonial afterlife that I suggest is evident in contemporary feminist theory and left-of-center scholarship critical of global feminism. This scholarship would not recognize itself as an heir of colonial feminism, but I suggest that it has inherited two of its features, namely, the construction of feminist analysis and politics from a social and affective distance and the certainty of the parameters of feminist critique. Feminist theorists place distance in the service of critique of governance, not interventionist social engineering, but it still has its costs. Critique from a distance reifies its object and imagines it

as far more stable than any given social constellation could possibly be. Feminist theory from a distance, be it geographic, class based, or affective, also fosters too much agreement among the speakers. I suggest that for both analytical and political purposes, we need dissensus, not consensus (see Rancière 2010; Povinelli 2015).

I therefore ask which distributions of proximity and sensibility are fruitful analytico-politically, and I suggest that they can be found in a third position, at the interstices of anthropology and feminist analysis rather than theory or critique from a distance. Feminist ethnographers are positioned as close to people whose lives are at stake, and they pay particular attention to the concerns of these people, as they themselves formulate them. As I will show, in my case this includes cut women and advocates against cutting, as well as others involved in and affected by anticutting campaigns. Moving beyond the notion of the “Exotic Other Female” (Engle 1991: 1526) means recognizing that a cut woman—often imagined in the singular, as a uniform subject—is not “one” and not radically different: a woman who holds on to cutting. Rather, differently positioned women take a variety of political positions toward cutting/ anticutting campaigns, and the larger governance of their lives.

I want to suggest that feminist anthropology comes *near* without speaking or feeling *for* the ethnographic subjects. It does not presume either identification or fundamental alterity, nor does it erase difference in subjectivity and positioning. In doing so, it is able to attend to subtle protests and political potentialities that are immanent in any given exercise of power. Illuminating them is my ultimate goal in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, this analytical project is not a political coup. That women are no longer simply the muted ground of a discourse (Mani 1998: 2) but are speaking subjects means that their political marginalization is reconfigured, not resolved. Cut women and activists have been talked *about* and silenced, but today they are also impelled to speak by anthropologists like me, as well as by NGOs that use participatory methods in their campaign and governments of the global North that co-opt the voices and figures of “native informants.” Thus listening, recognition, voice, and speech entail both governmental operations and possibilities for uncovering some of their damage.

In Accra, They Say

This is not a cultural practice!

This is not an indigenous practice; it's the foreigners who do it.

Watch out and make sure they don't cut off yours!

There are no campaigns against FGM in Ghana.

You want to learn about the this thing—female genital mutilation. Ha, ha, ha. How is your research going? Ha, ha, ha.