

Introduction

Elder of the Church, your uncircumcised daughter
is pregnant and she will give birth to dogs.¹

During the last few months of 1929, thousands of African young men and women gathered on mission stations and school grounds in colonial central Kenya to perform a dance-song called the *Muthirigu*. This dance-song protested colonial interference in female “circumcision” or excision, a part of adolescent initiation.² It chastised white Protestant missionaries, British colonial officers, and local leaders who supported efforts to end the practice. The above *Muthirigu* verse mocked a black church elder by proclaiming that his uninitiated daughter was ill-mannered and incapable of giving birth to proper human beings. According to this central Kenyan perspective, girls who had reached puberty but were not initiated represented reproductive aberrations; they were physically able but not socially consecrated to conceive and give birth. Through performing the *Muthirigu* dance-song, young people defended excision as a reproductive necessity.

Missionaries, government officials, and their local allies perceived the *Muthirigu* dance-song as a direct threat to political stability. In early 1930 the colonial government banned it as seditious. Those caught performing the *Muthirigu* dance-song were ordered to pay heavy fines or serve jail terms of several months. These severe penalties quickly curtailed its performance. But by the time this ban came into effect, young men and women had already made their point. The vigor and scale of their performances had demonstrated to colonial officials the depth of local commitment to female excision. Officials realized the political difficulties, if not impossibilities, of enforcing a prohibition on the practice.

Within Kenyan history the *Muthirigu* dance-song and the 1928–31 “female circumcision controversy” of which it was part have been identified as crucial events in the development of nationalist politics. In fact, historians have viewed these events as the most significant period of anticolonial resis-

tance in central Kenya prior to the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s.³ The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), a black political organization demanding the return of Kikuyu land given to white settlers, played a key role in the controversy. Recognizing an opportunity to increase popular support for their organization, KCA leaders denounced all colonial interference with female excision. In turn, verses of the *Muthirigu* dance-song were devoted to praising KCA leaders, including Johnstone (later, Jomo) Kenyatta, the organization's representative in London and future first president of an independent Kenya. In addition to increasing support for the KCA, the "female circumcision controversy" prompted black teachers, parents, and students to leave Protestant mission stations and found their own churches and schools. The establishment of these independent churches and schools further demonstrated to government officials and missionaries the political difficulties of interfering with female excision.

The "female circumcision controversy" encompassed all of central Kenya, including Meru, an administrative district occupying the northeast reaches of the region. As in the other five districts of central Kenya, in Meru, missionary efforts to discourage female excision and rumors of an imminent government ban provoked local Christians to renounce their church memberships and young people to perform the *Muthirigu* dance-song. At the Methodist mission station near Meru town, church membership suddenly dropped from 70 members to 6, while at Chogoria, a Presbyterian station in the southern part of the district, membership plummeted from 120 to 16.⁴

Unlike in most other districts, however, colonial interference in female initiation in Meru did not end in 1930. Rather, in the years following the "female circumcision controversy", British officers in conjunction with government-appointed black headmen and police undertook a series of campaigns to enforce female excision at a younger age. These campaigns were a profound contradiction of the colonial government's stated opposition to the practice. While colonial officials in Nairobi and London continued to denounce female excision, their subordinates in Meru actually enforced it. As will be explored and explained in chapter 1, officials undertook these campaigns as a pro-natalist measure. They believed that by initiating girls at a younger age they would be able to combat local practices of abortion and prevent the demographic decline of the Meru people.

In situating this extraordinary history of colonial enforcement of female initiation as a starting point, this book seeks to deepen our understanding of the "female circumcision controversy" and others concerning black Kenyan women and their reproductive capacities. Previous scholarship has identified such controversies as key episodes in the development of anticolonial resis-

tance. Like so many other topics in twentieth-century African history, reproductive controversies have been folded into narratives of nationalist triumph. While such an approach rightfully insists on the political importance of such episodes, it reduces a complex array of political struggles and positions to the stark dichotomy of colonial oppression versus anticolonial resistance. Moreover, it fails to explain why reproduction was such a fraught realm of state intervention in colonial and, after 1963, postcolonial Kenya. This book, by contrast, analyzes specific reproductive interventions and debates to elucidate the shifting relations and ideologies of gender, generation, and governance that animated them. It asks a new set of questions. What motivated white missionaries' and colonial officers' uneven efforts to remake and control reproduction? Why did some black Kenyans participate in these interventions and debates while others defied or simply ignored them? And how did these reproductive events contribute to the reworking of political and moral order?

POLITICS OF THE WOMB

To answer these questions, this book develops the analytical concept of the politics of the womb. My formulation of the politics of the womb draws inspiration from Jean-François Bayart's concept of the politics of the belly. In his far-reaching and influential interpretation of African politics, *The State in Africa*, Bayart takes the Cameroonian idiom, *la politique du ventre* (the politics of the belly), and deploys it as an analytic for understanding the political history of Africa.⁵ According to Bayart, the politics of the belly connotes several key realities. First, this bodily idiom speaks to the fact that in many African contexts hunger has been and continues to be a pervasive problem, while being well-fed or corpulent is considered a sign of wealth and power. Bayart argues that sub-Saharan Africans have often described politics through the imagery of how much and what different people eat. The politics of the belly points to the propensity of politicians to hoard and greedily consume resources in things and people. In addition to highlighting the significance of idioms of eating and the belly to African conceptions of power, Bayart's analysis insists on the importance of vertical relationships—those between social unequals such as parents and children or patrons and clients—to understanding African political history. It is these hierarchical relationships rather than ones based in lateral connections such as class solidarity, Bayart argues, that structure state politics.

Building on these insights, this book insists that struggles centered on

another, specifically gendered, part of the abdomen—the womb—have also been important to the political history of Africa. In fact, in older forms of Swahili, the lingua franca spoken throughout much of East and Central Africa, the same word—*tumbo*—referred to both the belly and the womb.⁶ Assuming a male belly as the universal belly, Bayart's analysis reveals how hierarchies of wealth and power are enacted and symbolized through eating and consumption. Alternatively, this study examines the particular capacities and powers attached to the female belly or the womb to demonstrate the centrality of reproductive struggles to African history.⁷

The politics of the womb makes three main contributions to African historiography. First, it elucidates how reproductive struggles have been a crucial part of intertwined efforts to gain material resources and fulfill moral ambitions. Material resources have encompassed things that satisfy bodily needs and desires, while moral ambitions have included efforts to act in ways valued by the living and the dead. Through examining the politics of the womb, we can see how questions of who should conceive and carry a pregnancy to term and who should assist in childbirth and childrearing have repeatedly been framed as pressing material and moral issues. Second, the politics of the womb highlights how reproductive concerns have structured old hierarchies based in gender, generation, and kinship, and contributed to the construction of new ones grounded in racial difference and "civilized" status. Relations of inequality have long entailed struggles over who should control women's sexuality and who should reap the rewards of and bear the responsibility for their fertility. The politics of the womb draws attention to elites' persistent efforts to regulate reproduction and the continual challenges that they faced from juniors and dependents, subjects and citizens. Finally, it reveals that the political history of Africa and elsewhere must be explored through relations that stretch from the local to the global. Reproduction, perhaps more so than any other realm of social life, demonstrates how the most intimate actions and desires are connected to debates and interventions that flow from community, colonial, and international regimes. By drawing these various regimes into a single frame of analysis, the politics of the womb elucidates how African political history must encompass the study of households, initiation, and marriage as well as overseas trade, imperialism, and international aid.

Focusing on twentieth-century Kenya, this book argues that reproduction became the subject of colonial and postcolonial debate and intervention because so many people viewed its regulation as fundamental to the construction of political and moral order, and proper gender and generational relations. During the female circumcision controversy, for instance, white

missionaries, British colonial officers, black leaders, and those who organized and underwent excision vehemently contested the best ways to prepare female bodies and minds for pregnancy and childbirth. Yet they all agreed that reproductive processes were essential to the well-being of individuals and communities and to the formation of respectful and respectable men and women. During such colonial and postcolonial controversies, women's status, their health, and intimate relations between men and women became subjects of widespread discussion and targets of new policies. Through these episodes, people also defined and contested men's and women's relative powers, and the just content and scope of state power. The politics of the womb provides a framework for elucidating the importance of reproductive struggles to African political history and exploring the mutually constitutive relationship between gender, generation, and governance in twentieth-century Kenya.

Reproductive controversies are especially illuminating sites through which to analyze state power because they reveal how officials and politicians have simultaneously sought to juggle the material and moral obligations of rule. They also reveal how women's bodies and reputations have often provided the link between these two realms. As Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper have argued, studies of colonialism need to attend to the connections between colonial states' efforts to promote "specific relations of production and exchange" and the "cultural work" these states performed in gaining consent from metropolitan and local constituencies.⁸ Few colonial officers were ever simply interested in securing profits for imperial coffers or their compatriots. They sought to balance colonial demands for African land and labor against the need to maintain political control and to fulfill the "white man's burden" of civilizing the "barbaric" and improving women's status. Whether prompted by metropolitan critics, local exigencies, or their own consciences, colonial officials undertook moralizing projects. In rural Kenya, they staged campaigns against "repugnant" practices, including excision and abortion, established maternity clinics, and instituted laws to deter pregnancy prior to marriage. But rather than viewing such projects as detracting from the colonial objectives of extracting wealth and securing political control, officials often framed them as furthering such objectives. Pro-natalist initiatives such as anti-abortion campaigns and maternity clinics asserted the superiority of white ways and sought to foster the development of larger and stronger pools of black labor. Similarly, officials justified efforts to curb premarital pregnancies as shoring up the authority of African patriarchs upon whom they depended to keep unruly young men and women in check.

Through the politics of the womb, competing reproductive concerns and domains of power intersected and, eventually, became entangled. People, things, and ideas moved back and forth, between households and hospitals in rural areas; government offices and medical training centers in Nairobi; the Colonial Office and the House of Commons in London; and, later, between international aid offices and conferences in New York and Beijing. Attention to such connections necessarily engages what Steven Feierman and John M. Janzen have identified as a core challenge in the study of reproduction and health in Africa: tracing “the relationship between the most intimate sphere of people’s everyday lives and overarching political and economic power.”⁹ Unpacking the politics of the womb allows us to see how the colonial and postcolonial Kenyan state has consistently operated at the nexus of forces from below, above, inside, and outside the colony and nation. It also suggests that reproductive debates and interventions have been particularly tenacious in their ability to engage concerns emanating from various domains of power—local, colonial, national, and global—and strikingly different cultural frameworks. Few participants in twentieth-century Kenyan politics were ever able to neatly separate issues of land, labor, and political control from those of gender, sexuality, and reproduction. For colonial rulers and subjects as well as their postcolonial successors, managing the politics of the womb has been crucial to ensuring material prosperity and constructing moral persons and communities.

CRITICAL EVENTS

This book explores the politics of the womb by analyzing a series of “critical events.” As defined by Veena Das, critical events are those that rework “traditional categories,” prompting “new modes of action” to come into being. Moreover, they are events that leave their mark on a variety of institutions, including “family, community, bureaucracy, courts of law, the medical profession, the state, and multi-national corporations.”¹⁰ The following chapters analyze critical events that contributed to redefining reproduction in twentieth-century Kenya.

Chapter 1 examines efforts during the 1920s and 1930s to regulate the severity and alter the timing of female excision and to prevent abortion. Chapter 2 explores how colonial rulers and subjects linked female initiation to childbirth. While missionaries and colonial officers believed that excision led to complications in childbirth and hence promoted hospital births for some excised parturients, many central-Kenyan women viewed excision as

facilitating childbirth and were suspicious of those who assisted with hospital births. Chapter 3 examines the colonial government's wildly unsuccessful attempt to ban female excision during the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the development and use of laws relating to premarital pregnancy in the late colonial and early postcolonial periods.¹¹ These laws, which aimed to hold men responsible for the reproductive consequences of sexual encounters, were the subject of intense debates among government officials, nationalist politicians, women's and welfare organizations, and young people and their parents. While chapter 4 focuses on struggles over the customary law of pregnancy compensation in a rural area, chapter 5 examines national debates over the Affiliation Act, a statutory law that granted single women the right to sue for paternity. The Conclusion further considers the postcolonial politics of the womb by discussing ongoing struggles surrounding population control, family planning, HIV/AIDS, and "female genital mutilation."

These critical events were chosen because of the reproductive themes that they share. Nancy Rose Hunt has observed that while much scholarship on women and gender in African history has been framed through the Marxist-feminist analytic of production and reproduction, historians have generally shied away from exploring the conventional meaning of reproduction—procreation.¹² This book challenges that reluctance by taking female initiation, pregnancy, and childbirth as starting points. It explores how these procreative processes became the subject of political controversy in twentieth-century Kenya and, in turn, how these controversies shaped and were shaped by broader debates over how best to produce families, communities, states, and nations. Female initiation, pregnancy, and childbirth were such contentious matters because they were important to parents' and elders' efforts to create respectful and successful descendants and juniors, and the colonial and postcolonial state's efforts to cultivate loyal and productive subjects and citizens. The critical events examined in this book also share a tendency to conflate heterosexuality with reproduction. This conflation is at odds with much current thinking within the academy and beyond that insists that sex and reproduction be considered as distinct conceptual categories.¹³ While recognizing that these categories are not coterminous, this book explores how and why various people in colonial and postcolonial Kenya framed heterosexual relations as reproductive concerns.

Analyzing these critical events required collecting and connecting a wide range of sources. The following chapters draw upon documentary sources gathered at archives and libraries in Kenya, Britain, and the United States.

Relevant holdings included government and missionary reports and correspondence, ethnographies, personal papers and letters, court records, parliamentary debates, and newspapers. The following chapters also draw upon interviews conducted with a few former colonial officers and missionaries in Britain and dozens of men and women in central Kenya.¹⁴ The combination of sources used in each chapter varies, reflecting the shifting types of evidence generated by each critical event. Whereas the first three chapters draw heavily on the published writings of government officials and missionaries, and interviews with older people in Meru, the latter two chapters make extensive use of the contending viewpoints presented in court records, legislative proceedings, and the press. The most compelling arguments of this book emerge from bringing a range of sources into dialogue to reveal the disjunctures, contradictions, and at times continuities between them. This approach recognizes the analytic challenges and potential political pitfalls of “speaking for” historical subjects living in worlds quite distinct from one’s own.¹⁵ But it is grounded in the supposition that historical scholarship derives much of its critical edge from reconstructing and juxtaposing the very different ways in which historical subjects have understood and engaged the events and processes that shaped their lives.

Much of the action in the following chapters takes place in Meru. Demarcated as an administrative district by colonial officials in 1910, it covered over 9,900 square kilometers, including the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, the equally verdant Nyambene hills, and the drier surrounding plains. By 1948, over 320,000 people lived in this area. The most recent census figures put the total population for the area, now subdivided into four districts (Meru Central, Meru North, Tharaka, and Nithi), at 1.4 million.¹⁶ Kikuyu intellectuals and politicians, including the late Jomo Kenyatta, have often considered Meru to be the northeastern reaches of Kikuyuland.¹⁷ People in Meru do share strong cultural and linguistic similarities, along with an uneven history of political alliance with Kikuyus as well as Embus, their neighbors to the south. They speak closely related Bantu languages, and in the precolonial period they lived in small, similarly organized agricultural communities that interacted with each other through trade and marriage as well as cattle raiding and warfare.¹⁸ Over the course of colonial rule, however, Meru intellectuals and leaders, together with British officials and missionaries, worked to establish Meru as a distinct language and “tribe.”¹⁹ As we shall see, these architects of Meru ethnicity placed varying practices of female initiation, courtship, and child custody alongside differences in language, historical origins, and political institutions when distinguishing Merus from Kikuyus.

Due to its great distance from Nairobi and any railway lines, Meru was the last section of the central highlands to come under colonial rule. The area's remoteness similarly discouraged all but a few white farmers from appropriating land and settling there. Early colonial officials viewed Meru as a source of male migrant labor for building roads and railway lines, and for working on settler farms elsewhere in central Kenya. Geographically marginal, Meru remained at the fringe of colonial economics and high politics. This peripheral status encouraged administrative officers to attempt interventions rarely contemplated elsewhere in central Kenya. During the 1930s Meru became the first district in which black Kenyans were permitted to cultivate coffee, as well as the site of unparalleled efforts to rework customary institutions like female initiation.²⁰

Attention to a single (albeit large) rural area enables a thorough exploration of reproductive politics at the local level. Meru became the geographical focus of this study because of its extraordinary and largely unexamined history of colonial interventions targeting excision and abortion. Meru proved to be a particularly productive site for exploring the politics of the womb because of its position within the colonial imagination, initially as an exceptionally remote and "backward" area and, later, as an area in which "traditional" institutions remained intact. Although some of the critical events explored in this book occurred only in Meru, the issues that animated these interventions and debates often existed elsewhere and always embodied more widely shared concerns about who should conceive, bear, and rear children.²¹ The following chapters reveal how the politics of the womb, even at the local level, involved complex meanings and intersecting hierarchies. As the twentieth century unfolded, these local reproductive meanings and hierarchies became increasingly entangled with those emanating from Nairobi, London, and New York.

COMPETING REPRODUCTIVE CONCERNS

This book provides a history to contemporary interest in African reproduction. Over the past three decades, policymakers and politicians have repeatedly linked the health and prosperity of African peoples and nations to fertility and sexuality. Since the 1960s population specialists have offered dire predictions for African countries that fail to institute large-scale family planning programs aimed at curbing African women's high rates of fertility. The AIDS epidemic of the past twenty years and recent debates over practices of female genital cutting in Africa and among African immigrant communi-

ties abroad have only strengthened this international perspective tying Africa's future to issues of sexuality.

In focusing attention on these issues, social scientists, politicians, and the press have located the roots of many of Africa's postcolonial problems in "traditional" reproductive practices. This book casts these contemporary concerns and campaigns in critical perspective by revealing that such concerns are not new and that present-day reproductive practices cannot be simply understood as "natural" or "traditional" relics from an unchanging past. Rather, female initiation, pregnancy, and childbirth have long been important sites through which men and women of various ages and positions have constructed and contested power.

For a number of reasons, postcolonial Kenya has attracted a disproportionate share of international attention and resources directed at African reproductive practices. During the 1960s and 1970s demographers estimated that the average number of children born alive to a Kenyan woman over the course of her life was between 6.6 and 8.0. These high fertility rates, coupled with a relatively well-developed infrastructure, stable government, and a heavy dependence on foreign aid, made Kenya a favored target of population-control advocates. International demographers and funders were also probably attracted to Kenya by Nairobi's good weather, the widespread use of English, and the chance to go on "safari" while working in the country. During the 1990s, population experts and agencies refocused international attention on Kenya, touting the drop in national fertility rates to 4.7 live births per woman as a family planning success story.²² As the regional base for countless foreign journalists and international organizations, Kenya and its capital city of Nairobi also stood at center stage during the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. During the mid-1980s, stories of HIV infection among Nairobi's sex workers featured prominently in the international news coverage of AIDS in Africa.²³ Over the past decade, funds from the growing international anti-"female genital mutilation" (FGM) movement have been directed toward Kenya. With its numerous women's and health organizations, many with their roots in the family planning movement, Kenya continued in the late 1990s to be a comparatively attractive place for intervening and attempting to alter African reproductive practices.

Of course, the troubled history of Euro-American interest in and anxiety over African reproduction extends back beyond the twentieth century. Since as early as the sixteenth century, accounts of African men's virility and African women's licentiousness and fecundity had been a staple of European representations of African "barbarity." These images cast black women as less moral, and more sexually independent and reproductively

able, than white women. During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, Euro-American slave traders and slave owners raped African women and subjected them to work as mistresses and wet nurses.²⁴ While abolitionists protested such brutalization and exploitation of black women, they were unable to subvert Euro-American stereotypes of African women as over-sexed. Instead, abolitionist efforts to end the slave trade within Africa contributed to the construction of an alternative image of African women as victims of African men. Just as defenders of New World slavery perceived black men as a sexual threat to white women, opponents of the slave trade within Africa often portrayed African men as abusing African women. Building upon this abolitionist rhetoric, European powers justified imperialism throughout Africa in the late nineteenth century by claiming that the spread of Christianity and “civilization” would curb African “immorality” and eradicate practices that reduced African women to the status of slaves.²⁵ Through the duration of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, Euro-Americans constructed an image of African men as sexual predators and a paradoxical set of images of African women as licentious and reproductively able, as well as vulnerable and sexually oppressed.

With the onset of formal colonialism, these sexualized stereotypes about Africans shaped European strategies for ruling and reforming African societies. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imperialism coincided with European states’ heightened interest in regulating sexual behavior and promoting the growth and health of national populations. This period saw the rise of sexology and eugenics as scientific pursuits, the expansion of maternalist campaigns to improve children’s health and welfare, and heated debates over degeneracy and population decline.²⁶ Colonial rule in Asia and Africa fueled these reproductive concerns by situating the definition and maintenance of racial, cultural, and sexual boundaries as important state projects. Pro-natalist political agendas and racial purity initiatives circulated between colonies and metropolises via official, missionary, and reformist channels.²⁷ Through colonial concerns about race and sexuality, reproduction was cast as a crucial site of state intervention and popular debate.

In the first decades following the declaration of the East African Protectorate in 1895 (renamed Kenya Colony and Protectorate in 1920), British reproductive concerns focused on population decline and degeneration. Early officials defended British imperialism in East Africa by arguing that the Pax Britannica would enable African populations to increase by putting an end to the slave trade, “inter-tribal” warfare, and “barbaric” practices. Viewing population growth as a measure of peace and prosperity, these men portrayed the precolonial period as a time of demographic stagnation

and even decline, and situated population increase as one of the “philanthropic” objectives of British rule.²⁸ Such officials, not surprisingly, failed to mention how much of the death and destruction that they witnessed in turn-of-the-century East Africa was tied to colonialism. Colonial rule exacerbated mortality in the region by introducing new human and cattle diseases including smallpox, sleeping sickness, influenza, and rinderpest, and by causing Africans to suffer fatalities in anticolonial uprisings and through military service during World War I.²⁹

The Colonial Office’s decision in 1902 to encourage white immigration to the East African Protectorate cast colonial reproductive concerns in a new light. Motivated by a desire to develop commercial agriculture in the area and recoup some of the costs of building a railway from the coast to Uganda, the policy of white settlement raised a number of demographic issues. On the one hand, officials used arguments about African population decline to explain why the Protectorate needed white settlers and why there was land available for them. On the other, they recognized that the success of settler agriculture depended upon the existence, not to mention exploitation, of a substantial pool of black labor. These labor concerns came to dominate colonial discussions of population. As one colonial medical officer declared in 1925, “The man-power available for the development of the country is inadequate.”³⁰ Between 1905–06 and 1926, the white population increased from less than 2,000 to more than 12,000, leading to louder settler complaints about inadequate labor supplies and more coercive state policies aimed at compelling black Kenyans to work for white settlers.³¹

As the white population grew, so did a desire among some settlers and officials to clarify racial boundaries and prohibit social and sexual intercourse across them. In 1907 the Protectorate experienced its first “black peril” scare. Such periods of heightened fear over the possibility of black men raping white women occurred periodically in British settler colonies. The 1907 episode in Nairobi, prompted by the purported insulting of two white women by three African rickshaw drivers, culminated in the public flogging of the African men and the arming of settlers in anticipation of a rumored African uprising.³² Black peril scares enacted a colonial logic that situated black men as sexually aggressive and white women as the virtuous and vulnerable vessels of the ruling race.

Similar fears of miscegenation informed the organization of colonial households. Seeking to prevent intimate liaisons between white men and black women, most settlers preferred to employ African men rather than women as domestic servants. This preference was a direct response to the practice, common among the single men who pioneered British imperial-

ism, of taking local women as housekeepers and concubines. As the white population expanded to include women and families, such practices came under attack. In 1908 a white couple complained to the governor of the Protectorate about a colonial officer who kept three local girls, two of whom were around the age of twelve years, as concubines. Their complaints eventually caused the Colonial Office to issue a circular prohibiting such relations between officers and indigenous women in the East African Protectorate and throughout most of the British empire. This condemnation of a long-standing colonial practice reflected a newly emergent consensus in the Colonial Office that concubinage both jeopardized “the honour of the ruling race” and compromised imperialism’s commitment to elevating the status of colonized women.³³ The official prohibition on concubinage, like the black peril scares, worked to construct and maintain racial boundaries by defining appropriate sexual and social relations.

The colonial politics of the womb emerged in earnest during the 1920s. By this decade, Protestant missionaries had established black congregations in many parts of the colony and had learned enough about female initiation in central Kenya to begin calling for a government ban on excision. They argued that it debased women and produced scar tissue that led to complications and deaths in childbirth. At the same time, Protestant missionaries started to encourage some black women to give birth in hospitals. Such efforts were supported by metropolitan-based feminists and social reformers who viewed the improvement of women’s status and the promotion of better maternal practices as important to the moral mission of British imperialism.³⁴ British colonial officials, by contrast, were generally more skeptical of efforts to transform African social life. By the 1920s, however, their concerns about black labor and their desire to demonstrate some commitment to the moral obligations of colonial rule caused them to offer tentative support to mission campaigns aimed at combating female excision and encouraging hospital births. The colonial politics of the womb conflated concerns about improving women’s status with efforts to encourage population growth and expand the availability of cheap labor. It also conflated sexuality with reproduction. More so than either the black peril scares or efforts to stop concubinage, campaigns aimed at ending female excision and promoting hospital births left little room for considering sex as something distinct from procreation.

These campaigns located intimate relations as key to the survival and prosperity of “tribes,” the Kenya colony, and the British empire. High-level officials argued that in some areas like Meru, “tribal customs and practices,” namely excision and abortion, were leading to “the progressive sterility of

the female population." The Director of Medical Services justified the provision of biomedical maternal and child health services to African women in terms of labor limitations: "We must reduce the present infantile mortality even if only because it represents a waste of labor."³⁵ Medical personnel further reasoned that the establishment of midwifery training programs in Kenya would contribute to the emergence of a class of enlightened black women. Prior to World War II, the resources devoted by the Kenya colonial government to improving maternal and child health rarely matched the rhetoric. Pro-natalist ideals and a desire to elevate women's status, however, did provide an important impetus for the colonial campaigns targeting female initiation and childbirth that did take place.

The colonial politics of the womb did not simply emerge from the importance assigned to such reproductive matters by white officials, settlers, and missionaries. Female initiation, pregnancy, and childbirth became contentious sites of colonial debate and intervention because they encompassed issues of long-standing concern for blacks in central Kenya. Archaeological and comparative linguistic evidence suggests that early Bantu-speaking agriculturists, like those who settled in central Kenya at the beginning of the second millennium A.D., viewed the proper regulation of procreation as crucial to constructing a moral society and controlling transformative power. A politics of the womb operated in precolonial times. For instance, reproductive idioms informed the language and organization of ironworking, a technology important to the success of agricultural communities. Bantu-speakers likened the transformation of ore into iron to procreation, and often adorned smelting furnaces with female sexual characteristics. Moreover, leaders' and healers' strategies for ensuring prosperity and well-being entailed promoting the fecundity of the land and the fertility of women.³⁶

Oral traditions told by the descendants of central Kenyan pioneers often describe the local social order as having emerged from the taming of reproductive and sexual chaos. One legend recounted in twentieth-century Meru speaks of a distant time when women chose their husbands, children belonged to mothers, bridewealth did not exist, and incest and divorce were rampant. This state of affairs, according to the legend, was only corrected through the introduction of female initiation and bridewealth, practices that disciplined women, made husbands into household heads, and strengthened marriage as an exchange between families.³⁷ Similar legends from other areas of central Kenya locate the origins of contemporary societies in an original act of incest or the overthrow of matriarchal authority.³⁸ These stories link social turmoil to unruly women and aberrant sexual acts, suggest-

ing that people in central Kenya have long associated social harmony and success with a patriarchal order that can effectively manage sexuality and reproduction.

Ethnographic evidence from the late nineteenth century onward further clarifies how central Kenyans tied health and prosperity to procreative relations. The formation and growth of households, lineages, and clans, the basic units of social organization in the region, centered on the axiom that “people are wealth” (*antu ni utonga*). In equating people with wealth, central Kenyans spoke of intertwined material and moral imperatives. As in much of precolonial Africa where land was plentiful and free, access to and control over knowledgeable dependents determined who prospered and who lived in poverty.³⁹ The richest people, usually men, were, as Charles Ambler has written, “those who could command the resources of labor necessary to open new fields for cultivation, watch over large herds, protect their settlements, and engage in trading, hunting, and raids.”⁴⁰ To secure dependents who could perform these tasks, people pursued a range of strategies. They hired laborers, adopted strangers, developed patron–client relationships, and, most commonly, they married and had children. In these patrilineal communities, rich men had many children and several wives with complementary talents and filiations, while women most often staked social claims through husbands and children.⁴¹ But properly conceived children were much more than valued resources in meeting subsistence needs and, potentially, creating wealth. They were a source of affective and spiritual ties across generations and between the living and the dead. Central Kenyans named children after their grandparents to pay respect and to forge linkages between generations. In Meru, for example, the most troublesome ancestors were those who had died without children.⁴² Children were the objects of attention and social energy because they enabled well-being in this life and the next.

Female initiation prepared girls for the important task of childbearing. Through its teachings and the physical rites of ear piercing, tattooing, and excision, female initiation transformed girls into women by instructing them how to behave as respectful wives and daughters-in-law. It also taught them fortitude in the face of pain and encouraged maturity and sexual control. By enabling proper sexual relations and granting reproductive entitlement, initiation, like British efforts to promote women’s status and foster population growth, conflated women’s sexuality with reproduction. As the *Muthirigu* verse quoted earlier put it, the unexcised could only conceive “dogs,” not persons.

Beyond disciplining female desire and making reproduction possible, fe-