

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Forced male circumcision and the politics of foreskin in Kenya

Journal Item

How to cite:

Lamont, Mark (2018). Forced male circumcision and the politics of foreskin in Kenya. *African Studies*, 77(2) pp. 293–311.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 Taylor Francis



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/00020184.2018.1452850>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Forced male circumcision and the politics of foreskin in Kenya

Mark Lamont*

The Open University

Abstract: Do forced male circumcisions have political legitimacy in Kenya that they do not have internationally? This article asks what these acts of public violence tell us about the relationships between moral ethnicity and state formation in Kenya. It examines the place of intermarriage and migration as factors to consider in this violence. Forced male circumcision highlights certain ambivalence towards human rights in Kenya that should not be ignored by observers of African pluralism and constitutional reform. Amid a generalised crisis of masculinity, forced circumcisions raise important questions about human rights processes and different kinds of social authority. This focus on forced circumcision brings to the surface historically layered understandings of citizenship, masculinity, and gender violence.

Keywords: forced male circumcision; public violence; masculinity; moral ethnicity; human rights; politics of foreskin

Few spectacles in Kenya offer as visceral and humiliating a demonstration of the fragility of men's bodies as the forced circumcision of a grown man in full view of a gathering crowd. While the forcible, often violent circumcision of men takes place in diverse public settings like markets, as well as in institutions like prisons, it is a pattern of violence that tends to invite a range of interpretations marked by their sensationalism and cultural distance.

Our entry point into discussing this violence begins with the media, both home-grown and international, with attention placed on 'that great pageant of ethnicity and manhood' known throughout Kenya as the circumcision season, a time of overlapping communal ritual and public violence (Heald 1999: 146). Newspaper, television and social media packaged male circumcisions within familiar refrains of gender norms, failed manhood, and assertive ethnicity (Ocobock 2017: 328). As modern morality plays about the contested endurance of 'traditional' male authority, media representations of forced circumcisions reflect an ambivalence towards these acts as potential crimes, lending them a broad social legitimacy within Kenya that diminishes attempts by others to point to their more egregious and harmful effects.

Add to this the growing number of scholars who, in contrast, define forced circumcisions as male gender violence (MGV) and human rights abuses (Glass 2014). As Michael Glass argues, forced male circumcision only recently captured the international

* Email: marklamont2016@gmail.com

community's attention with the ethnicised and sexualised gender violence of Kenya's 2007 general elections (2014: 567).¹ Select writings on violent masculinities and MGCV during outbreaks of nation-wide conflict, such as the 'ethnic clashes' of 1991 to 1993 and the 2007/08 post-election violence (PEV), have also generated analysis of forced male circumcisions as sexualised violence (Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Kihato 2015).² These studies correctly emphasise how gender violence feeds and sustains political conflicts normatively thought of as being 'about' ethnicity (Kihato 2015: 19–23). Out of this concern for rights and social justice emerges a picture of forced male circumcision as a problem for international humanitarian law, recommending more stringent securitisation and application of the law (Auchter 2017). Such arguments tend to dominate how these acts of public violence are viewed by non-Kenyans, but do not inform global governance policies towards male circumcision more generally, particularly in the area of medical interventionism.³ As keen observers of Kenyan cultural politics had adduced, the propensity of the media to moralise, and for foreign scholars to problematize, means that the core issues at stake in this violence 'remains muted and glossed over' (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 8).

This article challenges and builds from these perspectives, arguing for greater complexity in understanding the social contexts of these forms of public violence. It makes the case that while forced male circumcision shocks culturally distant observers, and may be labelled as repugnant in some quarters, these acts of violence are recognisable, even ordinary practices in the politics of public order in Kenya.⁴ Forced circumcisions and the extent of bodily injury vary extensively from outright penile mutilations (as reported during the 2007/08 PEV) to operations conducted involuntarily in medical clinics (as reported during community-wide circumcisions). This form of public violence is also geographically concentrated in areas with high rates of intermarriage, fluid migration, and historically shifting ethnic and administrative boundaries. These are exemplified by the ethnically diverse towns of western Kenya, such as Bungoma and Moi's Bridge, as well as the densely populated shanty-towns of Kibera and Kawangwari in Nairobi. Moreover, forcible circumcisions have historical roots in urban settings, where pluralism rather than monolithic ethnicity is the abiding reality. In these settings internal cultural debates about the virtues of being circumcised, or not, seek to fit ideologies of 'culture' and belonging organised through circumcision into the more fluid and cosmopolitan realities of town life. As we will see later in this article, these cultural politics are often exploited by politicians to mobilise conscientiously tribalist projects.

The contexts where forced male circumcision are most likely to occur are where people come and go, and where marriages are often uncertain and temporary, and where the children of such marriages identify with multiple ethnicities and languages. Gendered inversions of the moral ambivalence of stranger wives and wayward women takes place in such contexts.⁵ Local families, age-mates, elders and wives look to circumcision to answer how ‘stranger’ husbands should behave and how ‘wayward’ boys should be disciplined. Seeking to add necessary context to perspectives that would reduce forced male circumcisions to notions of political terror, or explain them away as human rights abuses without a cultural basis, this article offers a framework of interpretation which casts forced male circumcisions as maintaining gendered and generational discipline in the home and street, especially with regards to masculine authority and moral accountability in highly flexible and pluralistic contexts. This is particularly the situation when husbands might come from groups thought of as ‘guests’ and ‘outsiders’ by the local residents.

But this does not mean that guests and outsiders who are stopped by a circumcision ‘taskforce’ to inspect their ‘road licence’ (fees) do not experience terror.⁶ Far from this claim, the article seeks to ask how such terrifying and painful experiences can be seen as ordinary, legitimate, even virtuous acts of violence by a range of participants, including social intimates like wives. Speaking in a language of taskforces and road licences is but one clue of the sources of legitimacy at work in forced circumcision, one pointing to the state’s ambivalence towards the violence of male circumcision. How can the discovery of a man’s intact foreskin turn him from insider to outsider? How does the forcible excision of this man’s foreskin redefine him and his wider identifications as a member of a family, gender, generation or ethnic group? One discerns another clue to the virtues said to come about through ‘facing the knife’ as a form of extra-judicial discipline central to the upholding of moral ethnicity. The legitimacy of such extra-judicial activity in the eyes of local men and women raises the question of state complicity, or perhaps better framed, a conflation of public and state ambivalence that normalises such practices and gives the groups promoting and carrying out these acts moral and social accountability (Carotenuto 2012).

It is the work of this article to make the bridge between internal cultural debates about morality and discipline through forcing circumcisions and the production of public and state ambivalence towards these acts of public violence. New pathways of legitimacy in forced circumcisions are emerging from surprising corners, for instance, in the co-opting of medical authority, poached from voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC), the ongoing roll-out of HIV-prevention campaigns in western Kenya. Discourses about the hygiene and

cleanliness of excised men enter into new medicalised spaces of morality that make the traditionally intimate spaces of the home very public concerns.

The bolder argument in this article is that circumcision has been turned into a language of argument about a supra-ethnic masculinity. This language is instrumentalised by ethnic demagogues to intimidate and feminise the uncircumcised, a rhetorical campaign known as *the politics of foreskin* throughout Kenya (Moore 2016; Musila 2009). Tapping into the illocutionary force of words for the uncircumcised, such as *kĩhii* (Kikuyu) or *omusinde* (Luyia), the politics of foreskin in Kenya risks enflaming ethnic conflict and a number of local politicians have been accused of inciting hate by new regulatory bodies and watchdogs, such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). After presenting two interpretations of forced circumcisions in the Luyia-dominated towns of western Kenya, based on an analysis of the cultural politics of intermarriage, the article turns its attention to ‘hate speech’ and the politics of foreskin as a way of framing ethno-national politics from 2005 to 2017. It is particularly important to examine the various responses of the judiciary, the media, the non-governmental organisation (NGO)-sector, and rights activists to the rise of ‘foreskin chauvinists’ in the context of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (CoK).

These entwined focuses on forced genital cutting and the politics of foreskin aim to widen the dominant view that forced circumcisions are a ‘cultural compulsion that exists where the cut outnumber and intimidate the uncut’.⁷ There is an ethical need to understand this ‘cultural compulsion’ along a continuum of ethnogenesis and state formation, in which consideration of intermarriage and kinship are equally weighted with ethnicity and tribalism as interpretative frames. Doing so offers an anthropologically informed perspective that adds important depth to the media and academic tendencies highlighted above.

Stranger husbands

In August 2014, two Kenyan journalists, Dan Odula and Mathew Ndanyi, in separate news reports, struck a sensation on the Internet by writing about forced male circumcisions in western Kenya. From the little roadside town of Moi’s Bridge witnesses stepped forward to tell of a mass forcible circumcision campaign targeting ‘foreigners’ living there. Out of these media reports sprang a representation of tribe and violence that took the focus away from Kenyan elections, pointing to the tenacity of forced circumcision to stamp moral authority onto Luyia conventions of manhood and marriages. Scenes shot on smartphones and uploaded to YouTube grasped the excited purpose that seized throngs of singing and dancing men in Moi’s Bridge as they frog-marched captives towards the town’s medical clinics for

‘the cut’. There they were to be circumcised, in a modern and sanitary environment, but against their will. This visualisation of public violence clashed with the stock photos of Luyia (Bukusu) boys in full ritual regalia of some of the reports, working to underplay the violence against a kind of generic traditionalism. The news stories claimed that about 200 men fled the town as the Bukusu circumcision ceremonies were being carried out. Many men chose to hide in corn fields, or to seek refuge in the police station when crowds of Bukusu men went door-to-door throughout the town looking for ‘guests’ and ‘outsiders’ (otherwise known as *omusinde*, uncircumcised) with the aim to forcibly circumcise them. In the end, 12 men were cut against their will, mostly in medical clinics, but some were circumcised publicly in the street and marketplace. While no arrests were made, the police were mobilised to ‘keep the peace’, especially once Turkana men staged a protest armed with bows and arrows. Most of the men targeted by the Bukusu came from non-circumcising communities, who not only lived and worked in the town, but who were also married to Bukusu women.

The headlines highlighted the fear and division among ethnicities in western Kenya, only barely mentioning the limp state intervention in Moi’s Bridge when Bukusu circumcisions spilled over into days of violence: ‘Kenyan men in hiding fearing circumcision’;⁸ ‘Two Kenyan tribes divided by the festival of circumcision’;⁹ and ‘Police deployed to protect Luos, Tesos from forced circumcision’.¹⁰ The ‘festival of circumcision’ in question was the Bukusu *khukhwingila* (or *imbalu*), pan-Luhya initiation rites in which boys from the ages of about 12 to 16 years of age are circumcised (Heald 1989, 1999; Merritt 1976; De Wolf 1983).

In contrast with other Kenyan communities that circumcise, but otherwise keep their circumcisions a subdued, even private affair, the Bukusu promote their circumcision rituals as public events and are open to watchful, sometimes paying foreigners (Merritt 1976: 23). Using WhatsApp groups and promotional videos on the Internet, some Luyia communities even encourage cultural tourists to visit their villages during the circumcision season. While August brings journalists and curiosity-seekers to witness the pageantry and excitement of the Luyha circumcision season, sources on the Internet suggest there is a concomitant out-migration of men fleeing these urban centres. One source posted on YouTube showed footage of crowds of Bukusu men singing, blowing whistles, and dancing in the streets of Moi’s Bridge as they looked for members of other ethnic communities, mainly Turkana, Luo, and Teso who had, as one voiceover quipped, ‘allegedly evaded the cut for a while now’.¹¹ It is significant that these are communities that have historically not circumcised, although some are now doing so, in part, as participants in widescale VMMC campaigns, such as is

occurring among the Luo. While these news stories jumbled up and recycled the scant information that was available, all of them pointed to a familiar media packaging of forced male circumcisions: a dominant ‘cutting’ community targeting other minority ‘non-circumcising’ communities. As an Associated Press caption packaged it: ‘For the uncircumcised men from other tribes in the area, however, it is not time to party, it’s time to flee.’¹²

A YouTube clip about another forced circumcision of two ‘non-residents’ of Moi’s Bridge during the August initiations opens and ends with the following stark warnings:

The circumcision season is one among the Western Kenyan Luyia community, and it will not be an easy month for those communities who do not exercise circumcision. As is tradition, many will either have to take leave, or, stay on and risk taking a forceful cut ... The month of August in a given year is usually a circumcision season in Luyia land, and non-residents working in the area, or who have come visiting, are expected to have gone through the cut, or else, face the cut forcefully.¹³

Making the claim that the forcibly cut men were playing a ‘hide and seek game’ with the Bukusu until they were ‘pounced upon’, this video ends with a familiar cultural theme in Kenya: that these men, by being ‘ushered’ into manhood, come to ‘accept’ their newly compelled status. This moral legitimacy of forcible circumcision stands in stark contrast to opposing views that see this violence as a human rights abuse and an instance of sexual assault (Glass 2014: 570). However grave the loss of genital autonomy or one’s right to bodily integrity is to an individual who is circumcised against his will, the cultural politics of local communities needs to be taken seriously in assessments of this kind of public violence. This is part of what John Lonsdale (1994) considered ethnicity’s ‘quarrellsome’ internal debates, issues that are felt personally as matters of the most importance and feed into one’s sense of civic accountability and social obligation. Lonsdale’s idea of ‘moral ethnicity’ has been one of those watershed ideas that permits thinking in terms of what counts within a group, how they debate what is the right course of action, and where the stakes of one’s relationships with others is morally tested and approved. One of the most problematic aspects of ‘moral ethnicity’ occurs in contexts where one’s own identity and rights to belong are not easily determined, say, because of mixed marriages. Indeed, the cultural politics of mixed marriages have been particularly salient for understanding the complex pathways of gender, kinship, and ethnicity in contemporary Kenya. No less than the cultural debate that followed SM Otieno’s widow’s challenge to her husband’s Luo clansmen over how he was to be buried (Ojwang & Mugambi 1989; Cohen & Odhiambo 1992), forced male circumcisions

among the Luyia also points to a morally powerful language of argument, one that interpellates not only men, but importantly also women.

One of the subtexts of the incidents at Moi's Bridge was the participation of local women in encouraging and supporting forced male circumcisions. Some of the women interviewed by journalists shared the view that circumcised men were 'cleaner' and that sexual relations with such men were more hygienic and better than their uncircumcised counterparts. *Daily Mail* correspondence on the incidents at Moi's Bridge claimed that men were forced into circumcision after their wives had revealed they wanted their husbands to undergo the operation, but they had not done so voluntarily.¹⁴ A Bukusu man was reported to say that because Turkana men were living among them and marrying their girls, the Bukusu 'wanted them to be clean'.¹⁵ These marks of moral hygiene apply to men who are considered 'guests' and 'outsiders' who are otherwise known as *omusinde* (uncircumcised). The ambivalence of guests' and outsiders' circumcision 'status' becomes more stretched and urgent when local women take these men as husbands or boyfriends. As one of the reports noted, 'Interestingly, one of the wives of the men who underwent the cut forcibly said she is happy that her husband is now a total man'.¹⁶ In one of the YouTube clips, a woman claimed she was very happy to see that uncircumcised men had been cut, that they were now *sawa* (alright, proper, correct).¹⁷ This context of intermarriage is key to understanding the historical continuities in the mobile and mixed communities of western Kenya, outlining not the distance of ethnic communities, but their proximity.

Marriage is, actually, very significant in the moral vocabulary of male circumcisions among the Luyia. According to Luyia political myths, the Bukusu claim that their adherence to circumcision came when an ancestor had wanted to marry a Sabaot (Kalenjin) woman. Intermarriage is at the core of the Luyia circumcision complex. As Julie MacArthur (2016) points out in a book on Luyia ethnogenesis, the attitudes towards male circumcision among the Luyia in the colonial period was one characterised by 'cultural interpenetration' produced by ordinary people as they moved and married across ethnic boundaries (2016: 137). Suzette Heald confers that circumcision practices vary considerably over time and across regions 'as people modify, elaborate and embroider upon their own particular ceremonials' (1999: 152). It is, therefore, an aspect of cultural practice that exhibits great innovation and is responsive to changes in cultural politics and moral ethnicity. Inter-marriage is one of the drivers of this innovation in circumcision practices, aesthetics, and ideology.

This cosmopolitan stance towards markers of ethnic identity produced in a fluid context of intermarriage was transformed by the boundary changes of 1962/63, leading to

violent clashes between the Kalenjin and Luyia, in some areas, and between Luo and Luyia in others (Lubanda & Omanga 2007). Forced circumcisions were part of the politicised, rhetorical hardening of once fluid intermarriage and navigable ethnic boundaries of the early 1960s. During this same period, a number of politicians from western Kenya condemned the forced circumcision of Luo men by Luyia in North Nyanza during periods of violence when administrative boundaries moved. They eventually came to recant these allegations once investigations suggested that these circumcisions involved mixed marriages of Wang'a women and Luo fathers. MacArthur argued that 'these were localized and limited conflicts over household virtue and intermarriage rather than any systematic population-building exercises within a Luyia ethnic project' (2016: 137).¹⁸

Ethnic violence at flashpoints along administrative borders in 1965, however, was an effect of administrative policies set into place by the Boundary Commission Report of 1962, as well as broader constitutional and political changes within the newly independent nation state. In Maseno town, the homes of many Luo were burned by Luyia, leading to Luo reprisals, including reversed situations of cultural compulsion where Luo-dominated tribal police had intervened in Luyia circumcision rituals, effectively breaking them up violently with initiates having 'been forced by some of the Luo not to be circumcised'.¹⁹ In August 1964, Luyia 'tribesmen' were accused of forcibly circumcising Luo in Ruwe, Tingare, and Musanda. Following police investigations it was claimed that the circumcisions had 'taken place with the consent of the boys themselves'.²⁰ In the parliamentary debates about these forced circumcisions the minister responsible for investigating the incidents suggested these locations were 'half Luo and half BaLuyia' and that there was a lot of intermarriage.²¹ When asked whether the minister (Dr Mungai) would agree that in these areas the circumcision ceremony is 'an effort to integrate the BaLuyias with the Luos?' he answered, 'The other way round would also be true'.²² These questions of consent, as well as the ambivalence concerning 'force' and the questioning of violence, raises questions about the place of intermarriage in the cultural politics of forced male circumcisions. It also raises the question of why state security personnel and government administrators have not generally perceived forced male circumcisions as violent crimes.

Throughout the Luyia homeland towns of western Kenya, men who are married to Luyia women strike particularly ambivalent figures in the eyes of their affines. Ensuring good conduct among these 'stranger' husbands may be challenging for his affines, who know that he has not been 'captured' by the customs of his wife's people, that he is not 'captured' by traditions such as ritual circumcision (Heald 1999: 153). In the first place, whether or not

they hail from communities that circumcise, or do not circumcise, a man from another community poses two difficulties. One is that, in the absence of the moral pressures placed upon him by his own kin, he is not subject to the kinds of discipline that local men would normally be subjected to, especially should he either flout the authority of the wider community or mistreat his wife and children. Another potential problem facing 'guests' and 'outsiders' with Luyia wives is the question of 'customary relativity' and the freedom to choose a 'culture' different from his affines when he makes decisions about his own children.²³ As Heald (1999) has illustrated for the Bagisu of Uganda, when a woman marries into a neighbouring family, she has the watchful security of her brothers and fathers, unlike 'stranger' wives who are relative foreigners and experience vulnerability. Stranger husbands are not so easily dominated, asserting some control over their isolation through the more generalised principles of male authority that comes with patrilineal claims over his children and, to a lesser extent, over his wife. Forced male circumcision is but one way in which tradition can 'capture' an outsider. The forceful cut catches men within the 'orbit' of Luyia moral ethnicity, compelling them by a public act of humiliation, discipline and violence to follow the course of their wives' kinship and culture (Heald 1999: 153).

The forced male circumcisions considered in this article compare closely to Matthew Carotenuto's (2012) historical study of the public stripping of wayward women in urban settings of colonial Kenya. These acts of vigilantism often eluded policing and prosecution and sometimes took place as state-sponsored anti-prostitution campaigns. The undressing and shaving of women accused of adultery or prostitution, for flouting moral conventions, is a kind of street-level violence that morally sanctions and legitimises violent responses to perceived cultural offenses (Carotenuto 2012). The emphasis on cultural or customary offenses is key here. Comparing these gendered forms of violence helps show how enforced nakedness, the 'cutting' of genitals or hair, and the public parading of the accused works to defend civic virtue and morality within the slighted community, while lending to vigilantism the stamp of legitimacy in maintaining the public order (Anderson 2002; Carotenuto 2012). Carotenuto argues that the public stripping of women in the colonial period raises the political issue of state and public ambivalence to extra-judicial violence in postcolonial Kenya (2012: 9). This article situates forced male circumcision within extra-judicial violence and argues that the ambivalence towards these incidents as violence, per se, is rooted in other cultural practices that discipline those who are accused of 'customary offenses outside the scope or protection of legal authorities' (Carotenuto 2012: 9).

Firstly, although media reports represented forced circumcisions as essentially an ethnic project, i.e. a dominant ‘cutting’ community targeting a vulnerable ‘non-cutting’ population, this glosses over the key issues of intermarriage and new idioms of sexual hygiene introduced by voluntary, safe circumcision programmes. Secondly, while the underlying focus might have been localised ‘communities of argument’ engaged in quarrelsome matters of domestic virtue and intermarriage, the involvement of the police and other security forces, the medical clinics where many of these forcible circumcisions took place, and the presence of Kenyan and international journalists points to the ways in which state discipline and medical governance come to shape this kind of public violence.

#gocutmyhusband: escapees as ageing fathers

An unknown number of men who were not circumcised when they were in their mid-to-late adolescence and are still not circumcised by the time they marry and become fathers are at risk of being forcibly circumcised.²⁴ Whatever the reasons for not being circumcised, their secret ‘detail’ causes these individuals considerable anxiety because they lack the embodied mark of legitimate sexuality and fatherhood. As we saw above, this anxiety also exists for uncircumcised men living within circumcising communities, although the element of secrecy is not an element in play since it is generally assumed that they are uncircumcised. For those who normally would have been cut, but have evaded this social obligation, they are seen as ‘wayward boys’ by many in the local community. When such secrets are found out, these men are frequently subjected to a forcible circumcision, usually in a ritually truncated and make-shift form. They are often evicted from their home and frog-marched to a market place by people they know and socialise with. There they are publicly humiliated by being undressed and paraded from shop to shop, where the crowd solicits contributions towards the costs of the cut, before being summarily brought before the circumciser, or nurse, who performs the operation. Men who endure these violent attacks on their person almost never go public with their story. Furthermore, the few cases that do draw the attention and involvement of the police, or other forms of state authority, almost never end in prosecutions or result in victim redress or compensation in the long run. The dearth of court cases in respect to forcible circumcision indicates public and state ambivalence, even tolerance of this form of public violence. MGV has only recently come to shake off its stigma in Kenya, with domestic violence against husbands being the main focus, but to date the question of violent masculinity and male circumcision evades sustained discussion in public forums and within

civil society contexts (Njoroge 2014). These forms of public violence towards circumcision escapees is largely seen as a legitimate use of force.

The figure of boys or men fleeing from ‘facing the knife’ is part of a deeply internalised language of argument throughout Kenya that is woven into some of the most contentious aspects of ethnicity: Who belongs? In a place like western Kenya where the large Luyia populations were considered internally as an ‘amalgam of sorts, a hybrid community’ (Were 1967: 60), male circumcision became the *sine qua non* of this ethnic identity within a context that was otherwise characterised by ‘plurality and dissent’ (MacArthur 2016: 13). By being part of this pluralism and dissent, those that evade the circumciser’s blade and escape from the ‘catch’ of obligatory culture are seen, morally speaking, as a threat to the tribal order and to male authority. Since circumcision offers no alternative but escape, dissent from the obligatory cutting of male genitals is expressed through flight to another community and the concealment of their circumcision status.

Flight from circumcision may be as long-lived a story as circumcision itself. This is what Heald suggests when she writes about the Bagisu of Uganda: ‘Gisu men have been fleeing circumcision for some time – perhaps always’ (1999: 159). Heald’s discussion of the morally ambivalent ‘escapee’ included older men who spent their adult lives away from their natal communities, only to return to face the circumciser’s knife and be re-socialised into relationships with their kinsmen. These men are turned from wayward boys to redeemed elders through submitting to circumcision. John Merritt’s ethnography of Bukusu circumcisions in the early 1970s notes that one of the men he observed ‘in seclusion’ was a 60-year old man who had spent his life as a migrant worker in farms of the Rift Valley (1976: 22). Even the corpses of these escapees, when they return to the home villages for burial are circumcised as a spiritual requirement for internment. Such escapees, whether elderly men or wayward boys, presented a significant moral problem in light of whether an individual has the right to opt out of one’s culture.

The cultural meaning of the escapee is further marked in the region’s music and folklore by a recognition of otherness and dissent at the heart of the circumcision complex. The recording of Luyia circumcision songs from the 1930s in Gunther Wagner’s *The Bantu of North Kavirondo* include a challenge song about the escapee: ‘the uncircumcised boy who fears may go to (belong) to the Luo’ (1949: 342). John Merritt’s ethnography among the Bukusu in the 1970s also recorded a similar circumcision song with the refrain, ‘May the fearful go to the Luo – who have no circumcision’ (1976: 73). To be called ‘Luo’ in the context of Luyia circumcision is a big put-down, John Merritt argued, and circumcision songs

gain their powerful and emotive force from the idea that running away from the circumciser and community is a real possibility (Merritt 1976: 40). Circumcision escapees are represented as exceptionally ambivalent figures among many of Kenya's ethnic communities, as deviants and rebels in some parts, although the dissent of such escapees also suggests that circumcision, as an ethnic project, will never quite achieve the hegemonic masculinity it seeks to promote. Some ethnic communities, such as the Meru, speak of whole age-sets that fled the cut, taking with them girls to marry, running as a cohort to 'become Turkana' as exiles from their homeland.²⁵ Whether these allegorise about the possibility of escape that exists for all generations, or speak to the complex processes of ethnogenesis formed through circumcision, migration, and intermarriage, such stories flag the problems escapees pose for ideals of civic virtue and, under Kenya's present constitution, the possibility for debating where human rights begin and cultural rights end.

In contrast, however, the prevailing discussion about forced circumcision in Kenya has not been about rights, per se, but rather about the relationship between men and women. In January 2015, a forced male circumcision captured Kenyans' imagination when a Bukusu wife outed her uncircumcised husband and it became the centre of a media storm. When the Kenya Television Network (KTN) aired a story about a forced male circumcision in the town of Bungoma, long-travelled and subterranean controversies over 'the cut' sprung to the surface, spilling out across this country's social media-landscape. Following this broadcast, Twitter hummed with debate about forced male circumcisions under the hash tag, #gocutmyhusband.

Taken by surprise in early January 2015, James Asega, a 39-year-old, twice married father of 11 was forcibly circumcised by his Bukusu peers after his wife, Asha Nalongo, revealed to her neighbours that he was uncircumcised. She told reporters she wanted him cut, an action she took 'to improve' their marriage. According to the televised report, she had offered him money to pay for a safe VMMC at a local clinic, but he had refused to submit to the operation. Although this news story carried with it the sensational mix of conjugal drama and tribal morality play that made it part parody, part soap-opera, the report also carried with it a lampoon of Kenyan manhood, complete with an a moralising 'feel good' ending: the 'wayward' Asega was rendered into the *pater familias* that his wife desired all along, a 'total man'.

In a media-saturated world, a Twitter hash tag like #gocutmyhusband might easily have slipped away unnoticed, if the story hadn't sensationally commanded Kenyans' attention to a crisis of men's authority. It captured one of Kenya's biggest elephants in the

room: the critical part that women (as wives and mothers) play in supporting male authority and in defining quarrels within masculinity. James Asega’s story was not unique, as Paul Ocobock (2017) points out in his book on the uncertainties of manhood in Kenya. Citing a number of other uncircumcised fathers who were forcibly circumcised after their wives ‘outed’ them to their peers and neighbours, Ocobock raises the problematic way in which the media attributes moral judgment upon these ‘ageing dissidents’ from the social obligations of male circumcision (2017: 327). Ocobock argues ‘the media packaged each forced circumcision as a way to discipline past cowardice, right listing gender and marital norms, reinforce dominant ideas and institutions of masculinity and ethnicity, and reassert the authority of seniors over junior bodies’ (2017: 328). Apart from the marketplaces where forced circumcisions often take place, Twitter and Facebook became proxy spaces for the ensuing debates between conservatives defending the ideas above and other ‘dissenting’ voices decrying such acts as violent human rights abuses.



Figure 1. Twitter, #gocutmyhusband.²⁶

This KTN story and its Twitter fallout demonstrate how contested male circumcision is in Kenya even though this appears only as a murmur, barely heard above the chatter of a crowd. The real story is one of dissent, as Ocobock points out, but the stage is not limited to Bungoma. With such stories circulating on television and social media, the context spills out across the whole nation state, where male circumcision is being reinvented as a marker of national masculine identity and not just a regional or ethnic masculinity. Like the technology that drives these kinds of debates, male circumcision itself is an area of significant cultural innovation and undergoes significant modifications over generational time (Heald 1999:

153). What makes #gocutmyhusband so telling about forced male circumcision in Kenya today is the way in which it reveals the underlying social relations and gender discipline that give rise to this recognisable form of violence.

After marital conflict and long discussions about how to set things right between them, Asha Nalongo 'outed' her husband, telling other Bukusu that he was uncircumcised. To say this about one's own husband in a community that obliges all its males to undergo a complex ritual process to transition them from boy to man, where the cut is the crux, is to communicate in a particular kind of illocutionary violence. Many have made the observation that to call a middle-aged father 'uncircumcised' is to weaponise words (Ocobock 2017). Adult men, especially those who are married and who have fathered children, are particularly vulnerable to being called uncircumcised, knowing full well that if their secret were to be leaked, they might be seized by intimates and strangers alike, and forcibly cut, in the most humiliating manner. For Asha Nalongo, the effect of her injurious speech was predictable in a country where the majority of ethnic communities oblige their boys to undergo male circumcision.

To call a grown man 'uncircumcised', especially a father, is a political act. To call a Luyia man *omusinde*, or a Kikuyu *kîhî*, is to speak violently and injuriously. As an illocutionary act within an ethnic group, or within an age-cohort, these words are inflammatory enough to incite anger and violence, but when a wife calls her own husband such a thing, she is making a claim upon a male authority greater than her husband's. To make public a man's secret bodily 'detail' is to declare the public's authority upon that body. As Yvan Droz reported for the Kikuyu of Laikipia, wives have been known to seek divorce from their uncircumcised husbands using their intact foreskins as legitimate grounds for dissolving their marriage (2000: 225). Calling a man 'uncircumcised' makes him into a certain kind of accountable subject, especially if he is an escapee, and such speech acts objectify political violence as an ethical necessity in the makings of conformable male subjects.

Heald argues that circumcision traditions 'perpetuate themselves by catching people within their orbit', an arena in which kinship, gender, age, and ethnicity become the basis of all provision and power (1999: 153; Moore 2016). The notion of capture is perhaps particularly relevant to understanding the logic behind many forcible circumcisions of men who had 'escaped' their obligation to submit to the community and were inevitably 'caught' when their need for the community's provision outweighed their personal agency and aspiration. The needs generated by the desire to marry, purchase or access land for farming,

or even to engage in commercial activities with kinsmen bring ‘wayward boys’ to acknowledge circumcision and are keen motivators in coming home to face the knife. As the CoK is redefining citizenship, the authority of masculine power to *decide* circumcision and to be *held accountable* for circumcision will come to be a burning political issue, not only in the print and broadcast media, inclusive of social media, but also in the bedroom, magistrates’ chambers, and the school dormitory. In many ethnic communities, calling someone an uncircumcised boy is a verbal attack and most recently, as we will see in the following section, the uncircumcised have been extended to whole ethnic communities in a number of political speeches.

This prime-time KTN report conveyed an unsettling picture of contemporary Kenya’s new constitutional dispensation. What are the implications of Asha Nalongo’s actions? Can speech used against one’s husband to discipline him be compared to political speeches about the incapacities of the uncircumcised to lead the nation state? What would be the connections between disciplinary violence in the streets and court-side battles over hate speech? Male circumcision is in the midst of these kinds of issues. For many Kenyan communities, male circumcision is the ‘metaphoric rendering of the power of this collective identity’, as Heald puts it, and the source of an alternative ethnic citizenship. In this context where the forcible circumcision of an individual is frequently held as a disciplinary act, the language of human rights has limited purchase and where the individual does not exist as an ‘abstraction, recognized as the holder of universal rights, but rather as a member of a family, a group, a single society’ (Droz 2000: 233). Circumcision opens access to other kinds of rights, for example, to legitimate sexuality and marriage, to land and other kinds of property rights, but it is also bound up in the clientelist networks that bridge the distinctions between moral ethnicity and political tribalism. Forced male circumcisions occur in this breach between the moral and the political, where material and symbolic exchanges are most evidently compromised, as in Asha Nalongo’s complaints about her husband. The rights obtained through circumcision are invested in the ways through which men are positioned as kinsmen, sons, husbands, and fathers to be both providers and protectors, but also those deserving of provision and protection (Heald 1999: 157–8). These kinds of rights do not sit in close conversation with human rights, as defined by the CoK and the Bill of Rights.

The #gocutmyhusband furore initiated serious debates through social media concerning the freedom to reject the ‘cut’, or, to exercise the right to bodily integrity. But beyond this immediate concern over the body, it also raises the moral question of whether a decision to refuse circumcision is a rejection of one’s primary ethnic identity. This question

of refusal has historical precedent, outlined in Ocobock's histories of alternate pathways to masculinity, such as in labour migration, street life, or Mau Mau prison camps. Picking up on the morality of refusal and dissent from practices like obligatory male circumcision, these media stories demonstrate the resilience of tradition and culture in the midst of rights-talk. In the case of James Asega's forcible circumcision, the Bukusu who carried out this act declared they would do it over and over again, irrespective of the letter of the law, in strict, uncompromised accordance to their tribal custom, even though in Kenya it is a criminal act to forcibly circumcise anyone, male or female.

Forced circumcisions are important to examine because they rattle assumptions about the universality of human rights and their application to specific cultural practices. The CoK breaks new legal grounds on the issues of culture, as other articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, particularly when moral ideas like repugnance come to be interpreted in courts of law. The forcible and violent circumcision of men, against their will, and in public, is a raw reminder of the ubiquity of gender violence in Kenya, and serves as an indictment of this country's poor human rights record. But forced male circumcision can also inform us about struggles for human rights as political processes in themselves, forcing gaps to open up in our understandings of the shifting relationships between cultural practices, gender violence, and the expansion of liberal rights as enshrined, say, in the CoK and its Bill of Rights. Even when framed as 'culture', male circumcision raises some problematic questions about the provision of rights under the legal framework of the CoK, particularly with respect to the legislation robustly targeting 'repugnant cultural practices', namely feminine genital mutilation (FGM), and the acknowledgement of harm that can come from cultural practices.²⁷ At the same time, however, the CoK also makes provision for cultural rights, ostensibly to protect marginalised ethnic groups, but which are taken up defensively by large communities seeking to loosely define their dominance. This process of expanding rights shapes older discourses and debates about cultural practices in ways that reveal deeply held moral convictions among their adherents. In this sense, then, culture works in a similar way to Lonsdale's concept of moral ethnicity, upholding practices as virtuous that would otherwise be condemned by cultural outsiders, but operating in arenas of competition such that the 'cultural' can look very much like political tribalism.

In the following section, we examine this kind of violence in its wider context of Kenyan public culture. Although there are cases of forced circumcision reported every year, we turn to the driving ideological forces and political speeches behind these forms of public gender violence. In turning to the politics of foreskin, the points of connection between a

personal political subjectivity as a circumcised or uncircumcised individual and the general politics of identification flared up by tribalism are explored. This is where the internal debate and dissent of moral ethnicity spills out into the more banal contests of political tribalism, thriving as Lonsdale (1994) argues when the quarrelsome virtues of ethnicity are silenced by loud demagoguery.

Politics of foreskin

The 'cut' is a big thing in Kenya. Henrietta Moore recently characterised circumcision as drawing on 'powerful cultural attitudes that are reformulated anew in each generation' but ultimately shaped by how Kenyan masculinity is defined and mediated through land, provision, and power (2016: 58). *After you are cut*, this way of ethical thinking goes, *you are shown where to build and who to marry. You belong, you cannot really be thrown out. You have allies, especially those who were cut with you.* In those ethnic communities where circumcision is practised, deeply held attitudes towards maturity and male authority – ultimately an ethics about accountability and legitimacy among men – come to be framed by 'particular understandings of provision and protection allied to ideas about masculinity and its appropriate performance' (Moore 2016: 58–9). In Kenya, as conceptions of citizenship are shaped and contested by these understandings of men as providers and protectors, particularly father figures, the cut defines very particular cultural and political rights to authority. It also defines legitimate violence, in which the ritual of circumcision is vitally placed, carving out of young bodies the transcendent authority of the political group. This larger-than-life authority is sometimes called upon by elders, father figures, and throughout life, the age-cohort. Many of these father figures, which may include public actors like pastors, headmasters, local tycoons, military men, members of parliament and elders are conspicuous for their roles as gatekeepers and brokers of the social good. And the cut is framed as one of the gateways through which this social good can be achieved. This is the public face of male circumcision, but it also has a more intimate dimension.

It is a matter of cultural and, hence, moral importance that reaches well beyond the spectacle and dramaturgy of circumcision as witnessed on television and YouTube. With respect to the person being 'made' by circumcision, the cut establishes authority around the existentially core issues of manhood, morality, sex, and violence (see Heald 1999). These bodily matters of masculinity and circumcision spill out into ethical questions about access to land and the right to feel secure within one's own community, matters that are clearly implicated in both citizenship and wider rights-processes. In Kenya, the porous boundary

between the moral and political is extremely tricky to police, posing numerous jural and constitutional quandaries, including how to properly bring 'culture' into legislation. This places MGCV, such as these public excisions of foreskins, or even the post-circumcision hazing of boys into an ambivalent relationship to the rule of law. It is difficult to criminalise something that everybody is otherwise compelled to do.

The 'cut' also reaches deep into accounts of Kenyan identity, already one of the primary movers of political sentiment in this country. Every Kenyan is self-aware of the attitudes within their own ethnic community towards circumcision. A Luo is not without an informed opinion about the ethics of cutting off foreskins, aware of the tipping point between 'enjoying culture' and the incitement to hate. A Kikuyu is aware that Mungiki used both rape and forced circumcision to terrorise and intimidate persons from other ethnic communities in the name of the Kikuyu as an explicit weapon of political domination. This is why popular Kikuyu musicians, such as Kamande wa Kioi, John De' Mathew, and Muigai wa Njoroge were charged with hate speech under the National Cohesion and Integration Act in 2012.²⁸ Indeed, the foreskin has become one of the most marked symbols of political masculinity, indexing the cut as a sign of maturity and intelligence, defining even the capacity to govern the country, as averred by voters who would never cast their own vote for an uncircumcised contender.

It was out of this context of rising consciousness of incitement and the efficacy of hate speech that Kenyan bloggers and journalists coined the conceit 'politics of foreskin'. The politics of foreskin refers to that brand of hyper-masculinised, ethnic bigotry that claims that only a circumcised man can lead Kenya. This belief is so entrenched in the political imagination of many circumcising communities, like the Bukusu, discussed in this article, that the question of legitimate leadership is exclusively framed in terms of a man's circumcision status, that is, in the language of Kenyans, whether or not he is a 'total man'. It is this political statement about masculinity that makes circumcision a 'big' issue in Kenya today.

Conclusion

Male circumcision is one of the primary markers of masculine authority in the eastern African region (Heald 1999). From presidential campaigns to popular music, male circumcision stretches beyond the internal virtues of kinship and household and comes to play an important political role in the re-imagining of the nation state and citizenship more generally. Forced circumcisions are only part of this picture, but these forms of violence

cannot be understood outside of the national context, one in which foreskin is a very public bodily idiom and which is, politically speaking, the skin over the cracks of this country's identity politics. Indeed, rather than retreating into the tribal, male circumcision is very public and visible, moving towards greater acceptance through other powerful, non-ethnic pathways, such as the mobilisation of medical authority through public health campaigns encouraging 'safe', 'clean', and 'painless' medical circumcision. It also generates national debate through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, while considerable resources at the county assembly level are being deployed to support access to cheap, uniform, and regulated circumcision practices. A different kind of taskforce emerges when circumcision is bound to state formation, as is the case with county governments organise training workshops on hygiene and medical technology with traditional circumcisers

How did forced male circumcision and the politics of foreskin become visible in Kenya today? Moore's (2016) insight that we are dealing with a question of authority is particularly helpful, since she marries this idea to that of citizenship, providing that we view this from the perspective of mature men who control and negotiate relationships and access to land, provision and power.

As a specific form of gender violence, forced circumcision not only provokes debate and questions about civic virtue within the nation state, but also internally among ethnic communities. Scattered throughout Kenya are self-consciously cultural movements to restore the public initiations of boys, a practice that fell out of favour by the advent of 'safe' circumcision undertaken in clinics or hospital. One such incident, the public circumcision of 27 boys at Kasarani under the auspices of the Kikuyu Council of Elders (CoE) was carried out, with some urgency, according to spokesperson Wachira Kiago, who claimed 'we as elders are saving our community by publicly carrying out customs so the culture may not be lost'.²⁹ The devolved Nyeri assembly passed a motion that will provide boys free circumcision.³⁰ With such evidence among the Kikuyu of institutional support for male circumcision, from CoE to county assemblies producing policy and protocol on regulating the cut, the idea of the nation state being the guardian of individual human rights to bodily integrity needs to be cautiously revised. Indeed, the evidence may be pointing to a process where male circumcision is being universally promoted throughout the nation state in the name of medical authority, even among ethnic communities that have not traditionally practised it. Although there is insufficient space here to discuss it in any depth, the active promotion of VMMC by public health organisations like the WHO as a HIV-prevention campaign among the traditionally non-cutting Luo points to a growing push for circumcision

through overlapping kinds of social authority. When being true to your wife and fulfilling one's civic obligations to the lineage are conflated, these can be powerful incentives to seek circumcision. The 'politics of foreskin' sprung up among cultural critics not because these intellectuals predict an end to hegemonic masculinities, but rather because they see them changing under the weight of other changes in the CoK, in public health, and in moral ethnicity. As they were energised to write about politicians' hate speech and musicians' incitements over intact foreskins, the experiences of the PEV of early 2008 are still raw and the institutional memory of the politics of foreskin very long. As forced circumcisions were an integral part of the ethnicised and sexualised violence of 2007/08, bloggers' and journalists' exposure of the politics of foreskin touches a reality that is normally brushed to the side, namely, that all people in Kenya, male or female, young or old, local or stranger, are affected by the spectral qualities of circumcision as a mark of citizenship.

As Droz (2000) observed some time ago, the individual does not exist as an abstraction, recognised as the holder of universal rights, but rather as a member of a family and an identifiable group where the notion of equality and autonomy are not characteristics of existing social networks. In such contexts, one's foreskin matters in quite concrete ways, bound up in material and symbolic exchanges between participants in clientelist networks that exist because of inequality. Circumcision is one such exchange, such that the politics of foreskin comes into play when these networks allow people to face up to certain crises in the absence of the state's guaranteeing a minimum of physical social security to its citizens. The uncircumcised man is aware of this bodily politics, sometimes fearfully, but always through awareness of the rules of accountability they must demonstrate to the community in which they live.

Notes

<Typesetters insert here>

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge ESRC grant, ES/LO11603/1, 'Cultural Rights and Kenya's New Constitution' which funded this research.

Note on Contributor

Mark Lamont currently works for the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA). He was research associate with the ESRC-funded project 'Cultural rights and Kenya's new constitution' (2014–2017) at the Open University. Straddling anthropology and history at Goldsmiths, he was also engaged on an AHRC-funded project titled Death in Africa researching changing burial practices in Meru, Kenya and accidental deaths in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

References

- Ahlberg, B.M. & Njoroge, K.M. 2013. “‘Not men enough to rule!’: Politicization of ethnicities and forcible circumcision of Luo men during the postelection violence in Kenya’. *Ethnicity and Health* 18(5): 454–68.
- Anderson, D.M. 2002. ‘Vigilantes, violence and the politics of public order in Kenya’. *African Affairs* 101(405): 531–55.
- Auchter, J. 2017. ‘Forced male circumcision: Gender-based violence in Kenya’. *International Affairs* 93(6): 1339–56.
- Carotenuto, M. 2012. ‘Repatriation in colonial Kenya: African institutions and gendered violence’. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 45(1): 9–28.
- Cohen, D.W. & Odhiambo, E.S.A. 1992. *Burying SM (Cloth): The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa*. James Currey: Heinemann Educational Books.
- De Wolf, J.J. 1983. ‘Circumcision and initiation in western Kenya and eastern Uganda: Historical reconstructions and ethnographic evidence’. *Anthropos* 78(3/4): 369–410.
- Droz, Y. 2000. ‘Circoncision feminine et masculine en pays kikuyu: Rite d’institution, division sociale et droits de l’homme’. *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 158: 215–40.
- Glass, M. 2014. ‘Forced circumcision of men’. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40(8): 567–71.
- Heald, S. 1989. *Controlling Anger: The Sociology of Gisu Violence*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Heald, S. 1999. *Manhood and Morality: Sex, Violence, and Ritual in Gisu Society*. London: Routledge.
- Hodgson, D.L. 1996. ‘Wayward wives, misfit mothers, and disobedient daughters: “Wicked” women and the reconfiguration of gender in Africa’. *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 30(1): 1–9.
- Johnson, K. 2015. ‘To cut and run: Donor approaches to male circumcision in southern Africa’. *African Studies Quarterly* 15(4): 59–82.
- Johnson, K. 2017. ‘Cutting to the chase: Donor expediency drives the campaign for safe male circumcision in Botswana’. *The Journal of Southern African Studies* 43(2): 267–81.
- Kihato, C.W. 2015. “‘Go back and tell them who the real men are!’ Gendering our understanding of Kibera’s post-election violence’. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 9(1): 13.
- Lonsdale, J. 1994. ‘Moral ethnicity and political tribalism’, in P. Kaarsholm & J. Hultin (eds), *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Roskilde: Roskilde University.
- Lubanda, E.N. & Omanga, D.M. 2007. ‘Ethnic indigene and nation building in Kenya: A critical survey of the 1962–1963 Kalenjin-Luhya boundary clashes in Aldai and its implications for the “new nation”’. Conference workshop, Department of History, Archaeology and Political Studies, University of Nairobi.
- MacArthur, J. 2016. *Cartography and the Political Imagination: Mapping Community in Colonial Kenya*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Merritt, J.H. 1976. ‘A study of change in circumcision rituals among the Abaluyia of Bungoma and Kakamega districts of western Kenya since 1910 AD’. PhD dissertation, University of Nairobi.
- Moore, H. 2016. ‘Democracy and the ethical imagination’, in J. Cook, N.J. Long & H. Moore (eds), *The State We’re In: Reflecting on Democracy’s Troubles*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Muhoma, C. & Nyairo, J. 2011. ‘Inscribing memory, healing a nation: Post-election violence and the search for truth and justice in Kenya Burning’. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5(3): 411–26.
- Musila, G.A. 2009. ‘Phallogracies and gynocratic transgressions: Gender, state power and Kenyan public life’. *Africa Insight* 39(1): 39–57.
- Njoroge, K. 2014. ‘Male circumcision and the shaping of masculinities in Muranga, Kenya: Implications for public health’. PhD thesis, University of Northumbria.
- Ocobock, P. 2017. *An Uncertain Age: The Politics of Manhood in Kenya*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Ojwang, J.B. & Mugambi, J.K. 1989. *The SM Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.
- Vincent, L. 2008. ‘Cutting tradition: The political regulation of traditional circumcision rites in South Africa’s liberal democratic order’. *The Journal of Southern African Studies* 34(1): 77–91.
- Wagner, G. 1949. *The Bantu of North Kavirondo*. London: International African Institute.
- Were, G.S. 1967. *A History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya: c. 1500–1930*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.

¹ Forced male circumcisions in global conflict areas have been reported and monitored, especially with regards to infra-communal violence in South Africa, ethnic violence in Kenya, and sectarian violence in Iraq, Syria, and Indonesia (see Glass 2014).

² Reports on the forced circumcision of men during violence in Kibera and other shanty-town areas of Nairobi show an extreme definition of this term. The injuries that many men sustained during this violence were far more extensive than other instances followed in this article. In the Waki Commission, investigating these

injuries, one doctor described such an injury as a ‘pilary amputation’ where the penis was actually cut off (Waki, et al, ‘Report of the commission of inquiry into post-election violence’, 2008: 258, quoted in Kihato 2015: 21). Also see ‘Watu wazima: A gender analysis of forced male circumcisions during Kenya’s post-election violence’, W. Kamau-Rutenberg, *African Arguments* 17 July 2009

<http://africanarguments.org/2009/07/17/watu-wazima-a-gender-analysis-of-forced-male-circumcisions-during-kenyas-post-election-violence/> (accessed 23 March 2017).

³ The massive and growing public health literature on the scale-up of medicalised male circumcisions in preventing further HIV-infection in sub-Saharan Africa is the primary evidence of ‘global governance policies’ influencing male circumcision. VMMC campaigns are beginning to be studied by critical scholars outside of public health (Johnson 2015, 2017; Vincent 2008).

⁴ David Anderson’s (2002) analysis of rival vigilante groups in Nairobi, the Taliban and Mungiki, shows the complex points of collusion between criminality and political clientelism in the makings of Kenyan political order. In the 2008 PEV, Mungiki were implicated in a number of extremely injurious forced circumcisions that were reported to the police and human rights observers, see Kamau-Rutenberg (see note 2 above: 1).

⁵ Colonial moral categories like ‘wayward women’ have been the subject of a number of historical works on gender relations in Kenya (Hodgson 1996; Carotenuto 2012). They are applicable to understanding forced male circumcision as a form of violent discipline of men, although this is not the only viable interpretation.

⁶ I am drawing on two ethnographically rich treatments of this language of governmentality in regulating the non-circumcised in circumcising communities. In Heald’s (1999) decades-long ethnographic work among the Bagisu of Uganda, a population with cultural affinity to the Kenyan supra-ethnicity, the Luyia, she points out the organisational politics of groups of men who are tasked with reigning in escapees and compelling them to undergo circumcision. Alternatively, Kezia Njoroge’s (2014) PhD thesis on masculinity and male circumcision in Muranga, Kenya, speaks of ‘road licences’ as the way that initiates are regulated by their peers and by older persons. Njoroge’s ethnography captures the subjectivity of pain, identity, protection, and sexuality bound up in Kikuyu experiences of circumcision/initiation.

⁷ ‘Male circumcision, violence, and sexual health’, M. Walsh, *East African Notes and Records* 22 May 2011 <<http://notesandrecords.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/male-circumcision-violence-and-sexual.html>> (accessed 28 January 2018).

⁸ *BBC News* 11 August 2014 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28746101>> (accessed 11 January 2018).

⁹ T. Odula, *The Independent* 12 August 2014 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/two-kenyan-tribes-divided-by-the-festival-of-circumcision-9664967.html>> (accessed 11 January 2018).

¹⁰ M. Ndanyi, *The Star* 13 August 2014 (accessed 11 January 2018).

¹¹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu6gSvLmsPM>>.

¹² ‘2 men forcibly circumcised at Moi’s Bridge, Trans Nzoia County’, uploaded by *K24TV*, 2 August 2014; ‘Many Kenyan men flee to avoid forced circumcisions’, *The Associated Press* 11 August 2014 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2721722/Many-Kenyan-men-flee-avoid-forced-circumcisions.html>> (accessed 13 January 2018).

¹³ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu6gSvLmsPM>> (accessed 12 January 2018).

¹⁴ ‘A dozen men are ambushed, stripped naked and forced to undergo circumcisions in Kenya after their wives complained that they were not as good in bed as circumcised men’, J. Rush, *Daily Mail* 4 August 2014 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2715741/A-dozen-men-ambushed-stripped-naked-undergo-circumcisions-Kenya-wives-complained-not-good-bed-circumcised-men.html>> (accessed 13 January 2018).

¹⁵ ‘Two Kenyan tribes divided by the festival of circumcision’, T. Odula, *The Independent* 12 August 2014 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/two-kenyan-tribes-divided-by-the-festival-of-circumcision-9664967.html>>.

¹⁶ ‘Kenya: Police deployed to Moi’s Bridge to protect Luos, Tesos from forced circumcision’, M. Ndanyi, *The Star* 13 August 2014 <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2014/08/13/police-deployed-to-mois-bridge-to-protect-luos-tesos-from-forced_c986746>.

¹⁷ See note 13 above.

¹⁸ MacArthur adopts the convention Luyia, as opposed to Luhya, which is used in other scholarship, the Kenyan media and some official documents.

¹⁹ Kenya National Assembly Records (NAR), ‘Motion, constitutional amendment, Maseno regional boundaries’, 14 September – 22 October 1965: 835–6.

²⁰ Kenya NAR, ‘Oral answers, question no. 555, Circumcision by force’, 2 October – 1 December 1964: 3262.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The term ‘customary relativity’ is MacArthur’s (2016: 136) and stands for the flexible attitude towards cultural practices, like male circumcision, when intermarriage creates important options in social and cultural life.

²⁴ Over the course of 25 years, and on various stints in Meru County (1992, 1998, 2001–2003, 2007, 2008, 2017), I was considered an ‘uncircumcised’ outsider and faced the ‘anxiety’ that is posed by the threat of forced circumcision. While this is clearly an important reflexive political consideration for this analysis, lack of space prohibits a fuller discussion.

²⁵ The age-set (*nthukî*) that became Turkana was a myth I heard severally when conducting research in Meru (1998, 2001–2003, 2007, 2008). I purposely requested to hear this narrative, but also heard it crop up in discussions about changes to circumcision, particularly the medicaliation that was regulated by the *Njuri Nceke* (Meru Council of Elders) following outbreaks of HIV and Hepatitis-C in the late 1990s.

²⁶ 18 January 2015 <<https://twitter.com/hashtag/gocutmyhusband>> (accessed 25 April 2017).

²⁷ There is a current court case in which a female physician is defending her right to ‘enjoy culture’ on willing, adult women wishing to undergo female genital cutting. ‘Kenyan doctor goes to court to legalize female genital mutilation’, N. Bhalla, *Reuters* 19 January 2018 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-women-fgm/kenyan-doctor-goes-to-court-to-legalize-female-genital-mutilation-idUSKBN1F8296>> (accessed 21 January 2018).

²⁸ With the proliferation of vernacular political songs in Kenya, the charges against Kikuyu *Mugithi* musicians was not very surprising. There is a long tradition of censorship and criminal charges against popular musicians. What was different, however, was the new legal term of ‘hate speech’ and ‘incitement’ attached to aggressive ethnic bigotry.

²⁹ ‘27 boys circumcised in public to save culture’, S. Njenga, *The Star* 2 December 2015 <http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2015/12/02/27-boys-circumcised-in-public-to-save-culture_c1252410> (accessed 7 April 2017).

³⁰ ‘Nyeri assembly passes free circumcision bill’, W. Kanyi, *The Star* 26 March 2016 <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/03/26/nyeri-assembly-passes-free-circumcision-bill_c1320096> (accessed 19 December 2017).