

The Church and the 1929 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) contestation in Kenya, with special reference to the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the Kikuyu community

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Abstract

Initiation rites are the lifeblood of most African communities. In East Africa, these rites are part of traditional beliefs and customs, and may include physical mutilation. In Kenya, particularly, the initiation rite was seen as a graduation ceremony and a means of enculturation, giving a sense of identity. The arrival of European missionaries in the early 20th century set the stage for contestation between Christianity, as understood by the European missionaries, and the African leaders over the rite of initiation. Female genital mutilation was at the core of this contestation. Missionaries perceived the practice as not only brutal and oppressive but also medically and hygienically undesirable. They considered it foreign to both their culture and to Christianity. It was barbaric and primitive, by their standards. They felt it was deserving of church discipline. In 1929, this rite was vigorously attacked by a number of influential European agencies, missionaries, pro-African bodies and government educational and medical authorities. An injunction was put out by the missionary churches preventing circumcised girls and their parents from attending church and school. The African leaders and cultural systems hit back strongly, especially against the church. In 1930, a strong challenge against the missionary position was launched by the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) in Nyeri. The result was the opening of independent schools and churches. These independent churches tolerated FGM and many other African cultural practices. Whereas the African Independent Churches (AICs) demanded religious freedom from what they perceived as cultural imperialism, however, they in turn denied freedom to children and women who had for years been suppressed by patriarchal ideals.

This article outlines the 1929 contestation in Kenya with regard to female genital mutilation, with special reference to the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the Kikuyu community. It endeavours to demonstrate that the point at issue between the Missionary Church and the African Independent Churches was religious freedom in the form of a customary rite. The article uses written sources to reconstruct the history of the 1929 FGM contestation in Kenya and attempts to assess its implications for the church and society in general. It argues that in this contestation, FGM was used only to score political and religious points and was not addressed per se.

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), or simply “the cut”, as it is colloquially referred to in East Africa, is the removal of either part of or the entire external female genitalia. FGM has been practised for centuries in parts of Africa, generally as one element of a rite of passage preparing young girls for womanhood and marriage.¹ It is often performed without anaesthetic under septic conditions, by lay practitioners with little or no knowledge of human anatomy or medicine. Despite the grave health risks involved, its practitioners look on it as an integral part of their cultural and ethnic identity. The most severe FGM practices are found in the horn of Africa, whereas the practice is almost unheard of in southern Africa.ⁱⁱ The practice was rarely spoken of in Africa and little known of it in the West until the second half of the 20th Century. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, African activists and medical practitioners brought the health consequences of female circumcision to the attention of international organisations such as the United Nations, and particularly the World Health Organization (WHO).

In Kenya, the practice became a major national concern in the late 1920s. Western missionaries sought the help of the colonial government to fight the rite. African societies rallied round efforts of their freedom movements to protect their culture from what they perceived to be Western imperialism.

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Consequently, African Independent Churches (AICs) were born as a form of religious resistance to missionary imperialism. This article outlines the early FGM contestation in Kenya, with special reference to the Scotland Presbyterian Mission among the Kikuyus of Kenya. It endeavours to demonstrate that the point at issue between the Missionary Church and the AICs was religious freedom in the form of a customary rite.

Literature and methodology

The subject of FGM has drawn the attention of many writers and researchers. There is a wealth of literature on FGM in Kenya. Jomo Kenyatta, the first Kenyan president and a freedom fighter, approached the subject from an **anthropological perspective**. In his *Facing Mount Kenya: the tribal life of the Gikuyu*, Kenyatta defended FGM as a form of nationalist resistance to European colonial domination.ⁱⁱⁱ In his view, those who attacked FGM, including missionaries, sentimental pro-African bodies, the colonial government and educational and medical authorities, had focused on the surgical operation only and missed “the understanding of a very important fact in the tribal psychology of the Gikuyu – namely that this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself”.^{iv} Whereas Kenyatta disliked “the cut” practice when he was under the missionary influence, he came to condone it following his accession to tribal spokesman and national leadership. The strongest criticism against Kenyatta is that in order to mobilise sufficient support to establish himself as the ruler in his own country, he resorted to rhetoric about “African socialism” relying on backward-looking “cultural traditions”.^v

Nyambura J. Njoroge,^{vi} Musimbi Kanyoro^{vii} and Mary Nyangweso Wangila^{viii} take a **feminist-theological perspective** in analysing FGM. Speaking as Kenyan nationalists as well as African women theologians, they vigorously condemn the rite. In their view, it is not only fuelled by the predominant patriarchy in Kenyan societies but also by religion. They unanimously agree that any effort to liberate Kenyan women from this rite must take into serious consideration the “centrality of religion” as well as the socio-cultural aspects. Wangila’s latest book on the subject, *Female circumcision: the interplay of religion, culture, and gender in Kenya*, is based on recent interviews with women in Kenya. It is a recent witness to the fact that the rite has continued to thrive despite legal, confrontational, and humanitarian based approaches to combat it.^{ix}

Valuable study reports have been published by the United Nations and other humanitarian organisations on the subject of FGM in Kenya.^x These have tended to take the **human rights perspective**. There is, however, hardly any literature with a **church history perspective**. Although the church was the first body to bring this customary rite to the attention of the world in the country, church historians have not given FGM much attention.

A key voice and figure among early European missionaries to Kenya, especially in relation to FGM, is that of John William Arthur. Arthur was a medical missionary and Church of Scotland minister who served in British East Africa (Kenya) from 1907 to 1937. Arthur was appointed to the post of medical missionary at the Kikuyu Mission in 1906, arriving at the mission on 1 January 1907.^{xi} He opened the mission's first hospital and became involved in its evangelistic and educational enterprises. He began work on the first school on the Kikuyu Mission Station within six weeks of his arrival in Kenya. One of the many Africans influenced by Arthur and the mission was Jomo Kenyatta, who was a student at the mission station school.^{xii}

The events following the 1929 FGM controversy led to Arthur’s early departure from Kenya in 1938. During his later years, Arthur gave a number of interviews and papers on Kenya and East Africa, writing, for example, *East Africa in Transition* in 1942.^{xiii} He returned to Kenya briefly in 1948 for the jubilee celebrations of the Church of Scotland Mission. Edinburgh University Library holds the principal papers of John William Arthur (Gen. 762–765). According to Dr Brian McIntosh, in his doctoral thesis *The Scottish Mission in Kenya 1891-1923* (Edinburgh University, 1969), the Arthur papers were shorn of any document of a controversial or personal nature before they were deposited.^{xiv}

After Arthur’s death the Reverend Robert Macpherson, also a missionary in Kenya, reported that Arthur had left two large boxes of papers.^{xv} Macpherson separated these into personal and mission papers, and arranged the latter into four groups and listed them. A decision as to the eventual disposal of the documents was postponed. Very few of the items on Macpherson's list seem to be in the collection at Edinburgh University.^{xvi} It is likely that the original collection of papers, some of which related to the mission before the arrival of Arthur, including the Kibwezi phase, and to other missionaries such as David Clement Scott, was split either before or after its arrival at Edinburgh. However, some of Arthur's personal papers remained in the possession of his daughter in Kenya, who donated them to the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) in the late 1990s. It is thought that

some papers were given into the keeping of Dr John Gatu, former Secretary-General and Moderator of the PCEA.^{xvii} By and large, Arthur's major writings, especially those that which deal with the FGM contestation, are simply stored in Kenya.

This study is based on literal sources and assumes a **historical perspective**. It uses written materials on the Kenyan FGM practice, including missionary reports, in its endeavour to reconstruct a history of the FGM contestation in Kenya and the rise of AICs. Dialectical analysis is adopted in the discussions.

Overview of FGM in Kenya

Anthropologists have categorised FGM practices into three types on the basis of the nature of the physical mutilation, namely sunna, excision and infibulation. Both sunna and excision^{xviii} are less severe and are common in east African and west African states. Infibulation, the most severe and extreme form of mutilation, is common in the horn of Africa and in Arabian countries. Statistics indicate that over 50 per cent of Kenyan communities practise either sunna or excision FGM. Ethnic groups that do not practise FGM include the Luo, Luhya, and Turkana. The practice is recorded as being at its highest in the country among the Meru and the Kalenjin communities. In 1982, President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi condemned FGM and called for prosecution of those who practised it. In 1990, legislation was passed banning FGM practices in the country. However, the legal approach seems not to have had any significant impact on the practice.^{xix}

The FGM controversy in Kenya has not been a legal battle so much as a religious one. Indeed, the controversy begun in the church and has continued to manifest itself as a religious contestation. Both the Methodist churches and the Scottish Presbyterian churches in Kenya in the 1920s attempted to stop FGM by excommunicating circumcised girls and parents who allowed the practice on their daughters. The membership of the Methodist Church of Meru dropped from seventy to only six within weeks of its instituting the excommunication rule.^{xx} As a result, the Methodist Church resorted to a modified "Christian circumcision". This entailed the physical operation without the "heathen ritual of feasting and ceremonies associated with the traditional circumcision".^{xxi}

The Anglican Church suffered the same consequences among the Kikuyu community. However, it was the Scottish Presbyterian Church that became a major casualty in the events that led to a split. The Roman Catholic Church remained silent. A member of the Roman Catholic Church is reported to have said: "The Roman Catholic Church does not mind whether girls are circumcised or not; Christians who circumcise girls are not excommunicated."^{xxii} The reason why the Catholic Church chose not to interfere might be closely connected to its experience in Ethiopia two centuries earlier. Efua Dorkenoo argues that something similar to the Scottish experience in Kenya had occurred when Catholic Missionaries in Ethiopia attempted to discourage FGM in the 17th century. On the brink of a membership boycott, the missionaries sought advice from Rome. The Holy See "officially supported genital mutilation after a medical mission was sent from Rome to Ethiopia to confirm whether Ethiopian women suffer from hypertrophy of the clitoris."^{xxiii} A key reason for the rise of the AICs was the dismissive and denigrating missionary attitudes towards African customs, particularly FGM and polygamy.^{xxiv}

The demands of missionaries in Kenya that practices such as polygamy and female circumcision be renounced caused great resentment. Cultural change was being forced down the throats of the African. The alliance between missionary churches and the colonial government further betrayed the trust that the local Christian believers had in their religious leaders. In response, African Christian converts begun the AICs, most of which have survived to date. These include the Thaaai Fraternity of Kenya, which was in 2001 outlawed in its most recent violent form known as the Mungiki; the Arathi, also known as Watu Wa Mungu (God's People); Anabii (Prophets); Ireмба; Akurinu; the African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPE); and the African Orthodox Church (AOC). Because the goal of these new churches was to Christianise Africans without Europeanising them, most AICs became more or less syncretistic. The rise of AICs gave impetus to the rise of two major freedom movements, the Kikuyu Central Association and the Mau Mau rebellion. Both sought to fight for the independence of the nation with the preservation of FGM.

The Scottish versus the Kikuyu on the 1929 FGM controversy

In 1929, a heated controversy broke out between the administration of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission and the Kikuyu membership over "the cut". The Scottish missionaries tried to refuse admission to the church to girls and parents who participated in the exercise. In response, the Kikuyu tribalists set up the independent churches and schools. After the wife of one white missionary was

abducted and mutilated, the Church of Scotland called off the campaign to abolish the ritual. Jomo Kenyatta, the darling of Pan-Africanist liberals, endorsed it and had it performed on his own daughters in a hospital.^{xxv} In 1938, he wrote in *Facing Mount Kenya*: “No proper Kikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised – this operation is regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* for the whole teaching of tribal law, religion and morality.”^{xxvi}

John William Arthur: no church, no school for “the cut” people

Arthur succeeded Dr Henry E. Scott as head of the Kikuyu Mission in 1911 and served in that capacity until 1937. Arthur’s service comprised many accomplishments that earned him a great deal of popularity. During the First World War, Arthur fiercely opposed the conscription of African members of the mission by the British.^{xxvii} He worked with the colonial government, pressuring it from within towards reforms. He challenged the power of white settlers of Kenya on many occasions and defended Africans. For instance, he led the Alliance of Protestant Missions into protesting against white settlers’ abuse of Kenyans in the agricultural sector, and successfully convinced the colonial government not to permit forced labour on settler farms.^{xxviii} He defended African interests on the Legislative Council of Kenya, and between 1928 and 1929 on the Kenyan Executive Council. Unlike many white settlers, he believed that Kenyans (and indeed all Africans in British colonies) should be given access to primary, secondary and tertiary education. In the 1920s he was prominent in the leadership of a group of missionaries who succeeded in convincing the British government to open up education not only for Kenyans, but for Africans in all the colonies. Thus, in many ways, Arthur is one of the fathers of education in the country. By 1926, he was so popular among the Kikuyus that they nicknamed him *Rigitari* (“the happy warrior”).^{xxix}

However, Arthur’s popularity started to wane in 1929 when he sought to strengthen the mission’s resistance to the practice of FGM. This practice was an ancient tradition of the Kikuyu tribe, who constituted the majority membership of the Church of Scotland Mission in Kenya. Arthur was appalled by the needless suffering inflicted upon women by cliterodectomy, and was especially outraged by the common incidence of forced FGM upon girls. Being a medical missionary, he could not tolerate the rite and therefore went ahead in condemning it as inhuman and barbaric.^{xxx}

Arthur’s views were shared by many other missionaries in the country. The government and the settlers, although agreeing with him in principle, accused him of stirring up an unnecessary controversy amongst the Kikuyu.^{xxxi} Regardless of the government warnings, Arthur went ahead and imposed a church discipline upon those girls and parents who allowed FGM. The excommunication of those who allowed “the cut” so much disrupted the Presbyterian Churches that it was caricatured by Kikuyu elites as “Arthur’s eleventh commandment”.

The reaction was greater than Arthur had expected. The newly founded Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), which Arthur had previously supported and which was headed by Henry Thuku, denounced Arthur in retaliation. The Kikuyu membership became deeply discontented with the injunction and sought to defend their culture. Arthur and other Scottish missionaries went ahead and demanded that loyal members of the church denounce the KCA. Arthur had misjudged the temper of the Kikuyu membership. Many absconded from church meetings as membership dwindled drastically.

The most severe opposition to Arthur’s “eleventh commandment” came from his former student Jomo Kenyatta, who in January 1930 returned from his studies in the United Kingdom. Probably the most ill-judged weapon Arthur used, which became detrimental to his reputation, was his recommendation that Kenyatta and his fellow KCA members be disciplined by the colonial authorities.^{xxxii} The government ignored his statements and he resorted to resigning from his representation duties in the legislature. Arthur had misread both the political mood of the Kikuyus and the power of African cultural chauvinism. The KCA leaders, notably Jomo Kenyatta and Henry Thuku, took advantage of the situation and helped the African religious leaders to start African Independent Churches. The better part of the Scottish Presbyterian membership became the African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPC). This church championed African culture. It openly supported FGM and polygamy and listed these as integral parts of its faith and practice. The growth of this and other smaller AICs was overwhelmingly rapid.

Jomo Kenyatta: no cut, not Kikuyu

While he was studying in Kikuyu Mission Centre, the boy Kenyatta won the favour of Scottish missionaries. His competence in education and clarity of expression singled him out as a prime candidate for theological training: at least so thought Arthur, his principal. It is no surprise therefore that Arthur went out of his way to operate on Kenyatta in the mission hospital when his health was in

jeopardy. Nevertheless, Kenyatta turned down the offer to train as a priest and opted for the London School of Economics.^{xxxiii} However, Kenyatta was to assume the role of an African prophet in his pro-African nationalistic campaigns.

Sooner or later, most African elites, such as Jomo Kenyatta and Harry Thuku, who had been educated in missionary schools, started to ask questions that the missionaries did not want to answer. Kenyatta found in scriptures customs that were parallel to African rites which had been “blessed by God”. These included polygamy, FGM and ritual sacrifices. Kenyatta and other like-minded leaders concluded that the missionaries were biased, hypocritical and untrustworthy. They demanded schools and churches independent of missionary control.

In 1930, religious leaders as well as other activist Kikuyu leaders from the central province came up with the *Mithirigu*^{xxxiv} dance song, which mocked missionaries and colonialists opposed to FGM. They demanded their own churches and schools so that members could practise Christianity and educate their youth without worrying about who practised or did not practice polygamy or female circumcision. They formed the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA) as well as opening various AICs in Kikuyu, Embu and Meru. The government banned the *Mithirigu* dance in 1930, which by this time was being danced in deserted missionary church buildings.^{xxxv} The AICs were closely associated with KISA and had as a common denominator the freedom to practise polygamy and FGM.

Implications of the 1929 FGM controversy

One wonders whether it was the African culture or the Christian faith that was at stake in the controversy. The missionaries sought to defend the corruption of the Christian faith, whereas the African envisaged an attack on African culture and vowed to defend it. Apparently, both the missionaries and the African converts embraced Christianity. Looking back on the 90 years since this controversy begun in Kenya, not much has changed as far as the FGM practice is concerned, but the socio-cultural, political and even religious contexts have largely changed. A flashback into the past from the perspective of modern experiences can help us see the contestation and its consequences much more clearly.

Cultural imperialism

There is no doubt that Arthur had good intentions in attempting to curb FGM. However, he was a product of his own sociological paradigm which, as Wangila carefully puts it, “stemmed from the perceived goals of the missionary church of the time, that is, to save, educate, and civilise the ‘heathen’ and ‘uncivilized natives’ and to eliminate cultural practices and values that were superstitious, ‘barbaric’, and ineffective”.^{xxxvi} Many missionaries of the time went on to condemn such social and religious practices such as the dowry, polygamy, belief in witchcraft, belief in ancestral spirits, traditional dances, widow inheritance, sacrificial offerings, and FGM. These were seen as non-Christian. To people like Arthur, Philip and Hooper who worked among the Kikuyu, FGM was simply a disgusting ceremony, totally incompatible with Christianity. They looked at it “scientifically and were blinded to the social implication of their injunction”.^{xxxvii} Consequently, as Kenyatta painfully recounts, polygamous men had to give up all their wives except one in order to become Christians.^{xxxviii}

The manner in which missionaries handled African cultural practices, their invocation of the oppressive colonial government and also the perceived demand that African converts trade their culture for Christianity were particularly overbearing, given the political mood of the country. African elites turned to the Bible for answers. To their amazement, the *Ibuku ria Ngai* (the book of God) contained narratives which included such practices as circumcision and polygamy. Kenyatta explains the religious confusion that struck the African mindset, with no easy solution to the dilemma. He wrote:

On the contrary, he found that many of the respected characters in the Book of God, *Ibuku ria Ngai* (as the Bible is translated in Gikuyu), are those who have practiced polygamy. On this evidence the African asked for further enlightenment from his missionary teacher, but the missionary ignored all these queries, with the assumption that the African was only suited to receive what was chosen for his simple mind, and not ask questions.^{xxxix}

The Kikuyu concluded therefore that the missionaries had ulterior motives: that they used monogamy to reduce the number of blacks for political reasons. FGM was meant to disrupt the social norms of the African; and the missionary was nothing but “an agent of the settler”.^{xl} On these premises the AICs were born. They were not only religious movements but also politically motivated resistance bodies.

This understanding was strongly supported by Kenyatta, “the political figure who most symbolized nationalism and resistance to imperialism”.^{xli} Zablon Nthanuri represents the feelings of a better part of the Kikuyu people at the time when he states that to them it was their culture and not Christianity that was at stake. What appeared to be “stubbornness or work of darkness to the missionaries was in fact a legitimate attempt to prevent the disintegration of their culture”.^{xlii} In other words, their culture was firmly held together by the very female circumcision foreigners sought to extinguish.

It is easy today to see obvious exaggerations in the two positions. Of course, FGM was an important aspect of the Kikuyu culture which the missionaries ignored or else excused too simplistically. As Mary Wambui concedes, “It was the graduation of the Kikuyu girl into womanhood.”^{xliii} However, time seems to have validated the missionaries’ criticism of the FGM act as inhuman and unhealthy. Medical reports are unanimous that the practice of FGM is unhealthy and in many cases disastrous, not to mention its ill effects on the sex life and childbearing of its victims. Besides, according to the Kenyan constitution, it is an illegal practice and an infringement on the human rights of women and unacceptable under all circumstances. However, legal approaches to the problem have only exacerbated the problem by sending the practice underground and away from the public eye.

Prisoners of a rite

Arguably, it is the use of FGM by freedom fighters in the advancement of their cause and the indifference of the churches on the matter that has led to a stronger communal resistance to external attempts to eradicate the practice. Several mainline churches almost closed down completely due to the FGM controversy of the 1920s and 1930s.^{xliv} Consequently, most churches, including Scottish Presbyterian and Methodist churches, revised their policy and resorted to silent compromise in order to keep their members. They failed to follow a decisive plan for eradicating the rite. Worse still is the silent diplomacy adopted by the Catholic Church on the matter. This led to more enslavement of the African girls into the rite. The practice is today more established than ever before. United Nations organisations and government efforts have had very little effect.^{xlv} One Maasai woman who is an executer of “the cut” on girls defended herself as follows:

How can you tell me it’s wrong? My mother did it to me, her mother did it to her. How can you tell me I shouldn’t have my daughter undergo FGM? Oh? Girls die of bleeding? Of infection? Show me one. This ritual is a rite of passage, a sacred tradition of our tribe.^{xlvi}

This woman represents the popular view among women and girls, especially in the villages. They feel that Christianity has blessed the rite all along and that the national heroes have championed it. Moreover, they regard it as essential to their feminine identity. Therefore, the 1920s controversy has worked negatively by enforcing the grip of the rite even further.

The church, as both the missionary organisations and the AIC, has failed to deal with FGM decisively. Whereas AICs are obviously misguided on the issue, the missionary churches realised its inhumanity, but for the sake of their own survival in the region accommodated it. This has made it even more difficult for activist groups and health agencies to combat the vice.

Arguably, the goal of the AICs was to Christianise Africans without Europeanising them.^{xlvii} To this effect, most AICs became more or less syncretistic. They simply combined ancestral worship with the worship of Christ. They added their newly learned “missionary rituals”, such as baptism and the Holy Communion, to the previous set of African traditional rituals and customs. In an interview, Wangui wa Muthoni, a member of the *Thaai* Church, argued vehemently that Jesus was also circumcised. “Jesus would have no problem with circumcising girls and boys because he was circumcised himself,” she explained.^{xlviii} Focusing on the Old Testament narratives of circumcision, polygamy, and sacrifice, she believes that these are acceptable aspects of an authentic Christian faith. Regarding the health risks of FGM practice, Muthoni had this to say:

We know how to do it. I have done it on many girls and all are well and good wives. Even men do not betroth girls without the cut because they are not complete.^{xlix}

Indeed, Muthoni’s view is informed by her faith as taught to her by the AIC. She does not take notice of the legal injunction against the practice because its enforcers are heathen and they have no understanding of the faith. By and large, Muthoni’s thoughts resonate well with those propagated by nationalist freedom fighters such as Kenyatta.¹ She sets aside her judgment and has obviously not

questioned her church as far as FGM is concerned. Her AIC has only reinforced the traditional belief that FGM is proper and befitting the Kikuyu girl. This is regardless of the obvious medical hazards associated with the rite.

National Security

Freedom was the central issue in the 1929 controversy. Religious freedom appeared to be at the core of this controversy. Kikuyu Christian converts wanted to express their newly found faith without any external pressure or conditions. However, the political context was also oppressive. The advancement of a case for religious freedom therefore turned out to be a cry for political freedom as well. Enforcing FGM became a weapon against the oppressor.^{li} Violence was used to enforce FGM on Africans as well as punishment on the Europeans. Consequently, several AICs that emerged manifested characteristics of militant freedom fighter movement. For instance, the *Thaai* sect, which started in 1931, forced FGM practice on all Kikuyus. It forcefully administered traditional beer and tobacco in an effort to reclaim cultural identity. This sect unleashed unparalleled fear in the society.

In 1980, the *Thaai* sect reemerged under a new name, *Mungiki*.^{lii} This sect was outlawed in the country in 2000 following its association with violence and many other criminal acts and atrocities. Its chief tenet, however, is the forceful execution of FGM and the return of society to the fundamentals of Kikuyu culture. Whereas the sect can be seen as a cry for social-economic reforms, it is largely a product of the FGM contestation of 1929. It claims allegiance to the freedom fighter movement of the 1950s called the Mau Mau. It was partly responsible for the 2008 post-election violence in the country which left over 1000 people dead and thousands more displaced. The sect has always been a threat to national security.^{liii}

Conclusion

By and large, the 1929 FGM controversy was primarily about religious freedom and not FGM per se. The Western missionaries were opposed to 'pagan' worship practices, whereas the locals wanted a religious space that recognised their cultural identity. This led to the schism of the Presbyterian Church and the formation of many AICs. Therefore FGM was used to make a case for religious freedom. Kenyatta and other freedom fighters used it to advance their cause for political freedom. As demonstrated earlier, Kenyatta was opposed to FGM during his early years of development. Together with Henry Thuku, he found the FGM controversy very useful for advancing the cause of political freedom.

The missionaries, on the other hand, did not have religious reasons to condemn FGM. Missionaries were convinced on medical grounds that the rite was evil. However, they resorted to religious means in attempting to eradicate the rite; this did not satisfy the African questions on the matter. Worse still, AICs used FGM to justify their breakaway. Whereas they actually sought a more culturally inclusive religious expression, they used FGM to endorse their dissatisfaction with the Westerner. Therefore, neither the missionary nor the African had FGM itself at heart during the controversy. As a result, FGM was not dealt with decisively. This exacerbated the situation in that the rite became more firmly entrenched. Its enslavement of woman and the girl child is still evident.

Female Genital Mutilation in Kenya needs to be addressed in its very essence, as an abusive rite that is medically undesirable. It is neither a religious issue nor a political issue. However, the church and the government have a great role to play in its eradication.

It is evident therefore that both Kenyatta and Arthur misled the Kikuyu community. On the one hand, Kenyatta turned FGM into a political tool for his own aggrandisement. On the other hand, Arthur used religion to enforce his medical ideals. The consequences have been severe, as this article has pointed out. The history of FGM in Kenya and particularly the controversy of 1929 are therefore fundamental to establishing a proper means of eradicating FGM among the Kikuyus and in the entire country.

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