

Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). vi+268. Softcover \$32.95.

One way to think about history is a never-ending conversation carried across academic generations as scholars revisit, revise, and recast historical arguments in the light of new evidence and new analytical frameworks. Despite the unceasing momentum of historical narratives and the changing tides of scholarship, it can still be useful to return to our touchstones, those historical works that help set the scaffolding for entire subjects. One such monograph is Tabitha Kanogo's *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Originally published in 2005, Kanogo's examination of women in Kenya remains as relevant today as it was when it was first published. She argues that the concept of womanhood itself changed as a result of its interactions with the colonial state and local authorities. Rather than a simplistic narrative of progress or oppression, Kanogo traces the push and pull of colonial projects on the lives of women. Sometimes these colonial projects promised liberation, sometimes they promised a return to 'traditional' patriarchal systems, but every time they had unintended consequences on women's lives.

Each chapter examines one such colonial project, usually related to women's economic, sexual, or cultural power, or more likely, her lack of power. The book is thus both chronological and thematic. She begins with the early days of the British colonial state, moving through to the eve of the Mau Mau rebellion. The stated goal of British indirect rule was to maintain stasis in their colonies; the argument went that African natives were not prepared to receive the full gifts of civilization, therefore any changes to indigenous cultures must happen very slowly, and with the participation of local elites. And yet an idea that seemed so clean on paper proved to be very messy in reality. Again and again, in *African Womanhood*, British officials attempt to understand and quantify local customs, but they can never quite decide which customs are to be reified and

which need to be left behind. Added to these difficulties are local native councils and mission stations, who have their own agendas to pursue. Women exist in the liminal space between the constructed past and potential future presented by these various authorities. They were rarely allowed to speak, instead over and over again colonial agents try to ‘help’ them, while local native councils try to ‘protect’ them, and missionaries try to ‘save’ them.

Kanogo’s task is thus a monumental one. How does one find the voices of women in arenas where they are repeatedly silenced? By reading against the grain of colonial and missional archives she can recover some notion of how women felt about issues like the female circumcision controversy. This issue highlights the contradictory nature of women and the colonial project. Local native councils attempted to enshrine clitoridectomy, while the colonial state tried to outlaw the procedure, and some mission stations tried to argue that the best path forward was to perform the ceremony on infants. Frequently Kanogo turns to women’s actions to help bridge the gap between women’s silence in the written record. We may not hear their voices, but we can see evidence of how they feel by what they do. In the pages of *African Womanhood* women run away from bad husbands, demand marriage to their romantic partner of choice, undergo circumcision, refuse circumcision, all within a context in which they are supposed to be quiet and obedient to the various authorities controlling their lives. Kanogo understands that these women may not be able to achieve full agency over their own lives, but *African Womanhood* is at its heart a story of women using the systems that are stacked against them to claw out some measure of safety and happiness for themselves and their children.

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