

Watu Wazima: A gender analysis of forced male circumcisions during Kenya's post-election violence.

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17 July 2009

Stories of men being forcibly circumcised and even castrated peppered news accounts of the madness that overtook Kenya in the aftermath of the December 2007 elections.¹ According to the Waki commission that investigated the Post Election Violence (PEV), by January 2008 the ethnic militia of the Kikuyu ethnic group, Mungiki, used blunt objects such as broken glass to forcibly circumcise at least eight men, some as young as eleven and five years old.² While exact numbers are hard to come by, one can deduce that tens of men endured genital mutilation during the first three months of 2008. Forced circumcisions were not new in Kenya. There had been previous reports of high school boys being forcibly circumcised at school and the now infamous Mungiki sect had made their mark on the Kenyan psyche by forcibly circumcising Kikuyu women. But this seemed the first time that forced circumcision was being used as a political tool. It was being deployed as a weapon of inter-ethnic war.

How can we understand the forced circumcisions in the context of gendered and ethnic politics in Kenya? Better yet, what would a gendered exploration of Kenya's PEV that placed these forced circumcisions at the center of analysis look like? This question does not pre-suppose that others have not offered a gendered analysis of those gory months in 2008. Indeed, many brilliant authors have written incisive reports focusing a keen eye on the varied forms of brutality that women especially endured.³

Still, I find that much of gender analysis today still leans too heavily towards a discussion of women's experiences. While a focus on women has yielded enormous insight into the ecology of gender, the way society's power is distributed among the genders, we stand to gain even more if we also pay attention to men's experiences. It is with this critique of the field that I offer what I hope is a different kind of gender analysis to Kenya's PEV. Mine is a gender analysis centered on men's experiences.

If we are to take seriously that gender is a social construct that assigns different power values to the masculine while usually devaluing the feminine then there are some very serious gender implications for what happened in Kenya on those fateful days in early 2008. I argue that a gendered analysis of Kenya's PEV that centers on men's experiences

¹ Kenyans for Peace through Truth and Justice urges full implementation of Waki Report. Press Statement. Nairobi, October 30, 2008. <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/elections/51717>

² "Police On the Spot Over the Number of Deaths in Nairobi", The Daily Nation, October 15 2008

³ Commission of Inquiry into the Post Election Violence (The Waki Commission); Submission by FIDA-K <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Kenya/GBV/Sexual%20%20GBV-%20Waki%20Commission.pdf>
Rape on the rise in post-election violence, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=76068>,
Oxford Transitional Justice Research Working Paper Series

reveals why all Kenyans, even men, should care about, and struggle for gender equality. Indeed, the Kenyan experience shows how, in a moment of political tension, anyone, even men, can be feminized, and once that is achieved, brutalization and violation is an easily justified next step.

December school holidays bring with them a wave of circumcision ceremonies across many of Kenya's ethnic communities. Young men mark the verge of adolescence with the cutting of their foreskin often in elaborate ceremonies. Often the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood begins with a sequestering where the initiates are taught 'how to be men' and climaxes with the ceremonial cutting. From the elaborate ceremonies in rural Kenya to the sterile surgical cuts in genteel urban Nairobi, circumcision is a Kenyan institution with those few communities that do not practice it excluded in certain ways. It is important to note that among the first wave of rioters during PEV in January were young Kalenjin men, who had just completed their initiation rites in circumcision camps in Eldoret that December. Infused with a newfound sense of male identity, these young men rampaged through the Rift Valley province attempting to cleanse it from 'outsiders' from other ethnic communities.⁴

Circumcision in Kenya is more than a cultural act. The practice has a long political history. A quick glance at Kenyan political history from colonialism onwards shows that circumcision, both male and female, has been wielded as a political tool during moments of intense conflict. Circumcision, especially female circumcision, was deployed as a weapon of anti-colonial struggle. The country's founding father, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, wrote about it in glowing terms, deriding those communities that did not make men of their boys. Meru women hid and circumcised each other when the practice was banned by the colonial British. President Moi's insistence on banning female circumcision only served to drive it further underground and throughout the cutting of genital flesh has served as an act of resistance.

Then Mungiki came. They wore dreadlocks, invoked Mau Mau, inhaled tobacco snuff, and agitated for a return to what they saw as the pristine original state of Kikuyu natural identity. Kikuyu women became the targets. They were not to wear trousers and those who did were stripped naked and beaten publicly. Stories began emerging of Mungiki forcibly circumcising Kikuyu women.

Strangely, few spoke up. Some women's rights activists protested, but within the larger public sphere, in those early days, Mungiki was a Kikuyu problem and only a menace to Kikuyu women.

Then came those shocking days in early 2008 when Kenyans took to crude knives, seeking to make men of each other. Mungiki was at it again, only this time the Kikuyu militia were circumcising Luo men, accusing them, as Kenyatta had alluded long before, of being mere boys. Circumcision was supposed to render them men. These

⁴ "Writers' Stories Go to Commission on Violence", Inter Press Service, August 4, 2008

circumcisions, of course, were torturous acts of violence that often turned out to be castrations calculated to kill their hapless victims.

Why did these Kikuyu men deploy the rhetoric of circumcision? What social context rendered circumcision a resonant frame within which to articulate their actions as part of the ethnic warfare that was going on? It is here that gender analysis helps us understand that Mungiki were able to kill by circumcision by first feminizing their victims.

The construction of Luo men as feminine was a process that had begun long before in Kenya's ethnic politics. This construction ranged from Kenyatta's rhetoric in newly independent Kenya to the murmurs, whispered under Kikuyu breaths during the referendum on the Draft Constitution, that Kenya could not be led by *mtu mzima*. The Kiswahili term, meaning whole person or adult, was used euphemistically to refer to ODM's leader Raila Odinga. The term was used as a double entendre in deriding Odinga, who, by virtue of being Luo, was uncircumcised hence anatomically 'whole' while at the same time pointing to the contradiction that he could not be adult because he was uncircumcised.

Interestingly, rather than challenge the discursive privilege accorded to circumcision as a measure of manhood, Odinga has continued to insist that he is himself circumcised. He has also become one of the staunchest advocates of circumcision as a method of preventing HIV/AIDS transmission in line with recent scientific findings.

Once the construction of Luo men as feminine was firmly entrenched, there was almost no defense needed for brutalizing them. Gender theory and analysis has shown that feminization comes before brutalization. For so long Kenyan society has failed to protect its feminine dimension. Mungiki had brutalized Kikuyu women with forced circumcision with impunity for years. Society as a whole had never spoken up. Not even those Kikuyu men who were not Mungiki had seriously challenged Mungiki on the issue. The police barely acted on reports of women being forcibly circumcised. Emboldened, it was only a matter of time before Mungiki wielded this weapon of terror on other targets.

The forced circumcisions were not just acts of violence; they must be understood as occurring within the context of Luo feminization. This feminization fit within the context of a biased history that tells Kenya's story as that of brave Kikuyu warriors, the Mau Mau, who rescued the state from its colonial masters. From this biased Kikuyu perspective, Kenya's history has been told as a story of Kikuyus as more hardworking than all the rest. Other ethnic groups are constructed as weaker, belonging less, having less of a stake in: as feminine. The forced circumcisions represented Kikuyu men declaring that they wield a masculine power over the feminized Luo men whose flesh they mutilated.

When Mungiki started by forcibly circumcising Kikuyu women, men, especially Luo men, hardly thought they had a stake in the issue. Gender is about the ecology of power. The economy of gender functions in ways that devalue the feminine even as it simultaneously empowers the masculine. That was at the heart of the forced

circumcisions. The Kikuyu men were, at the moment of violence, rendering their Luo victims feminine. Unless we understand how this process works, how the feminine is automatically weaker and of less value, we remain a long way from achieving true gender equality. This is why, all Kenyans, even men, should care about issues of gender. These issues of the gendered ecology of power in Kenya's ethnic politics remain as urgent today as they were in 2008. Kenya's ethnic politics continues to feminize some ethnic communities while simultaneously casting others as more masculine. In the absence of justice for the victims and perpetrators of the violence, the same ecology of gender power not only remains but is getting further entrenched. The continued silence around the forced circumcisions and castrations speaks to our collective acceptance that the practice is a relevant weapon of ethnic war which bodes ill for the 2012 elections.

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