WANJIKU'S JOURNEY TO WOMANHOOD

A HISTORICAL FICTION ABOUT A GIKUYU GIRL IN COLONIAL KENYA

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WANJIKU'S JOURNEY

PREFACE

'Irua was a way of doing what the ancestors had done. It was a way of staying part of them.' This is how Wangeci, a Gikuyu women born in 1930, describes why Irua is important to her. This quote is from *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910-1995* by Jean Davison. Davison's book recorded seven life histories from Gikuyu women in rural Mutira, Kenya. The Gikuyu are the largest ethnic group in Kenya making up approximately 20% of the contemporary population. Historically, the Gikuyu have lived in the highland area of south-central Kenya. As a group, they were the most dramatically affected by the white settlers in the colony of Kenya. Irua now is not a common ceremony practiced anymore. Times have changed, traditions and their meaning have changed. This historical fiction piece tells a story which takes place in the 1940s in Kenya under British colonial rule. Wanjiku is a Gikuyu girl living amid change and this is her story about experiencing Irua, its meaning and how she experienced the changing socio-political landscape. It focusses on Irua, the process of initiation into female adulthood, which in Gikuyu society includes female circumcision, sexual education and ceremonial rituals. Fictionalizing Wanjiku's journey allows for the historical narrative to be centered around and told from the voice of a girl as she becomes a woman.

Women's bodies have been subject to policies made by male authorities in Kenya during and after colonial rule. This statement also holds true for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well. This has caused the undermining of women's ability to regulate their own cultural practices and has virtually erased traditional forms of female leadership, such as the age-set system of mariika, for example. Formerly, the mariika was a foundational social structure in Gikuyu society that organized individuals into gendered assigned groups based on shared stages of life. Colonial ideas have impacted on women's reproductive rights and family structures, including the practice of Irua. Showcasing how women dealt with this change and disruption, will highlight the resistance and power women had in Kenyan history.

British colonial rule and African male authorities jointly shaped a political landscape in which women's bodies became a way of exerting control. As Lynn Thomas argues in her article "Imperial Concerns and 'Womens Affairs'" colonial officials in Meru (part of Gikuyu speaking area), Kenya sought to regulate clitoridectomy and eradicate abortion not only as moral or health concerns, but also to manage fertility, labor, and imperial reputation.[107] This colonial disruption undermined female authority, while having a direct impact on their bodies and agency.

Writing about the cultural and political mobilization centered on Irua , Gikuyu researcher and author Ngaruiya Njambi highlights the importance of understanding the long history and the meaning of the tradition when understanding Irua. Irua has been seen as oppressive to women by Western feminism; the narrative of seeing Irua rather as a form of empowerment and resistance has been overlooked. According to Njambi, 'It [the contemporary discussion of Irua] suffers from its over-generality and failure to see complexities of such practices in different places and times.'[108]

Similarly, Anna Adima's work on the 1929-30 female circumcision controversy in Kenya shows how even during national debates, the voices of the women most directly affected were

absent from both colonial and African male-led records.[109] This historical pattern of erasure has informed academic interpretations of Irua, reinforcing these narratives that are still present today. There is a historical lack of acknowledgement of Kenyan women's voices and their experiences. Highlighting the agency of women and their experience surrounding Irua is important to learn about and understand the importance of this cultural practice.

Scholars like Jazmine Derwin and Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira emphasize the continued need to center women's perspectives, not only to correct past absence, but to challenge present-day assumptions about African womanhood, tradition, and agency.[110] By fictionalizing a Gikuyu girl's experience in colonial Kenya, this story intervenes in those silences.

Historical fiction allows a scholar to create a deeper emotional and personal engagement with historical change. The internal conflicts of these women were not often documented in these historical sources. Historical fiction allows a scholar to bring this to the fore and encourages empathy from the audience. Historical fiction also allows topics such as Irua to be accessible to a broader audience, particularly those unfamiliar with the Gikuyu society and its traditions. This story touches on parts about Irua and the lives of Gikuyu women, while also acknowledging broader themes in Kenyan history- changes in education, religion, and the cultural and political sphere.

The main source used to write this story is *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910-1995* by Jean Davison. This book is a collection of seven life histories of Gikuyu women between 1910 and 1955. By combining these firsthand accounts and using secondary sources about Gikuyu women and society, I have written the story about Wanjiku, a girl growing up in Mutira, and her story on how she experiences her journey to womanhood, including Irua.

This story is written in connection to María Lugones's concept of the coloniality of gender. This story highlights the agency of women and the definition of womanhood in (pre) colonial Africa. Lugones argues that colonialism fundamentally altered gender systems in colonized societies, imposing Eurocentric patriarchal structures that redefined gender roles and marginalized women.[111] These changes affected the ideas about womanhood in Gikuyu society. This story creates an understanding of colonial gender roles, susceptible to change through multiple influences. Indirect or direct causes created new understandings of Irua; a growing influence from Christianity, education and governmental policies.

A Historical Fiction about a Gikuyu girl in Colonial Kenya

The sun was setting, creating a warm glow over the landscape of Mutira. Wanjiku watched as her mother stirred *githeri* over the fire, the scent of maize and beans filling their hut. "Watch carefully, Wanjiku," her mother said, "when you are mature, you will need to know how to do this."[112] These words carried weight. Lately, her mother had been speaking differently to her, watching her more closely. The time for Irua was coming close, and Wanjiku could not ignore the change in her life that was about to come.

Born in 1930, Wanjiku had spent her childhood running freely through the coffee fields, playing with her friends, and listening to the stories of her grandmother. Now, at thirteen, she was about to grow up. Irua was not just a ritual, it was the door between childhood and womanhood. Her best friend, Nyawira eagerly anticipated the ceremony, speaking of it with excitement. "It will finally make us women," she would say, eyes gleaming. But Wanjiku hesitated. She wondered what Irua meant to her and felt scared about the unknown.

Wanjiku had watched the older girls undergo their initiation with both awe and fear. Some appeared proud, decorated with beads and new responsibilities. Others whispered of pain and fear. And then there were the girls who rejected

GLOSSARY

- **irua -The process of initiation into female adulthood. Including female circumcision, sexual education and ceremonial rituals**
- **mariika - the age set system was a foundational social structure in Gikuyu society that organized individuals into groups based on shared stages of life.**
- **mũthuru- a skirt with slits worn during by adult Gikuyu women**
- **mũhiki - newly married woman with one child**
- **mugiro, the impurity of childhood**
- **mathangu-fresh leaves spread carefully on the ground to catch the blood**

"IRUA WAS NOT JUST A RITUAL, IT WAS THE DOOR BETWEEN CHILDHOOD AND WOMANHOOD. "

Irua altogether. They were influenced by Christian missionaries who preached against the practice. The British colonial government and Christian missionaries, rejected Irua, calling it outdated and cruel.[113] Among them was Wambui, Wanjiku's cousin, who had run away to the mission school. The elders spoke of her with disapproval, but Wanjiku had understanding for Wambui, she was brave, but in a different way.

Wambui had told her, "The missionaries say we can follow Christ and still be Gikuyu."[114] Maybe that was true, and Wanjiku knew that many girls who went to church did not participate in Irua anymore, but Wanjiku could not see herself without having Irua as a part of her. Irua did feel like something that belonged to her. It was not something forced upon her. She did not want to do it because she had to; she wanted to do it because she had chosen it. She had felt some pressure from her family to do Irua, but Wanjiku did not see it as bad pressure. It was to keep this important tradition going.

Her mother and grandmother wanted her to feel the same pride in being a Gikuyu woman. Wanjiku's grandmother would never tell her much about what womanhood meant and life as a grown-up girl, but one thing she would always tell Wanjiku was the exact opposite of Wambui. 'Being Agĩkũyũ means having followed the steps of mbuci, matũ, and Irua.'[115] Wanjiku always looked up to her grandmother, she was a very wise woman. She could appreciate the connection her grandmother had with their community. On the other hand, she had learned about the different ideas about this tradition, which created space for Wanjiku to find her own meaning of this Gikuyu tradition.

Her father had never trusted the mission schools. "The missionaries try to stop traditions like this," he would say. "Any girl who puts on a dress and goes to school is no better than a prostitute."[116] Wanjiku had heard the stories and the warnings about what happened to girls who refused Irua. They whispered of a man, that was the first to deny the rite to his daughters, and how no man would take them as wives. "We went through Irua so we could marry," an elder had once said. "No man wanted an uncircumcised woman."[117]

Her mother tried to encourage her in a different way, pointing to the girls who had already gone through the rite. 'You see so-and-so? She is circumcised now. You are also going to get circumcised.'[118] These encouragements from her parents meant a lot to Wanjiku, but they were not what truly convinced her. It was not fear or pressure that made her want to go through with it - it was belonging.

The mariika, the age set system, was the foundation of their lives. Girls who underwent Irua together became bound as sisters. They had grown up learning together, laughing together, dreaming of the day they would step

into womanhood side by side. After the rite, they would take on responsibilities in the community, earn the right to marry, and have their voices heard among the women. Without it, a girl remained a child, forever keeping her childish manners. Wanjiku's mother would tell her that a girl that did not go through Irua would not leave her childhood acts and behaviors behind her. 'She grows with them, matures with them, and even marries with them.'[119]

Wanjiku had grown up knowing exactly where she belonged, her age group moving through life together. When she was younger, she always known her place. The older girls seemed like another world, walking with confidence while their beads were jingling as they passed. The younger children ran in wild games, too small to understand the importance of growing up. People of different mariika rarely spoke to one another except out of necessity. The elders reminded them that respect was found in distance. You did not laugh and joke with someone who had already gone through Irua—they had earned their place. Those who had undergone Irua did not waste time with those still considered children.[120]

The importance of being a part of your age group was what frightened Wanjiku the most. It was not the ceremony itself, not even the pain. It was the thought of being left behind, of standing outside the circle while her friends went forward without her. Those who refused Irua were mocked, left out of the gatherings of their mariika, and forced to find their own way alone.

The days passed, and the talks of Irua grew louder. It was coming closer. One evening, as she watched her mother carefully prepare dinner, she asked 'Did you ever wonder what it would be like... to not go through it?' Her wavering voice revealed that she was scared to ask the question.

Her mother paused, stopped stirring the pot. Then, with a small smile, she answered, 'I did not need to wonder. It was simply what was done.'[121] She looked at Wanjiku. 'But times are

"YOU DID NOT LAUGH AND JOKE WITH SOMEONE WHO HAD ALREADY GONE THROUGH IRUA—THEY HAD EARNED THEIR PLACE. THOSE WHO HAD UNDERGONE IRUA DID NOT WASTE TIME WITH THOSE STILL CONSIDERED CHILDREN."

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changing. You must choose for yourself, my child.' Wanjiku knew that her mother wanted her to do Irua, but hearing that her mother understood the changing ideas about Irua, made Wanjiku feel heard. Maybe, for the first time, she truly understood that Irua was not just about keeping the tradition or expectation. It was about stepping into the life she wanted, the life she chose. She wanted to become a woman, and she knew Irua will give her the empowerment to grow as the woman she wanted to become.

And so, when the time came, Wanjiku had gotten her ears pierced; Matũ and Mbuci. This meant that a girl would be ready for Irua soon. [122] Wanjiku did feel ready, she was getting mature.

As the season of initiation ceremonies approached, Wanjiku's mother and aunts began preparing for her transition. They wove new garments for her and taught her the songs she would sing. Her father, normally distant, acknowledged her more often, as if seeing her as someone new.

Wanjiku's grandmother was her greatest source of wisdom. One evening, as they sat by the fire, she told Wanjiku stories of her own initiation. "It was not just about the pain, child. It was about knowing who you are. We, the Gikuyu, have always marked this passage. To be a woman is to be strong, to carry the burden of the family and the land. But only you can decide if you are ready."

The night before her ceremony, Wanjiku lay awake. She thought of Wambui, of her grandmother, of the girls who walked proudly into womanhood and those who had walked away. The tradition was changing, but her connection to this change in her life felt strong.

The morning of Irua arrived with a warm sun. Wanjiku woke to the sound of women singing outside. Her mother entered the hut, carrying a bundle of fresh garments. "It is time," she whispered, her voice steady.

Wanjiku felt a thrill run through her. This was the day she had long watched others experience, it was the day she would become a woman in the eyes of the community. She stepped outside, where a group of girls, including Nyawira, stood waiting. They were dressed in beads that draped across their bare shoulders, and short skirts of reeds and beads (thira) hung from their waists.[123] The beads across Wanjiku's chest glimmered in the early morning light. The slow-moving water at the river's edge now had reflections of the red, white,

and deep cobalt blue colors from the skirt.

Wanjiku felt much love for her friend. Nyawira had always been looking forward to this moment, and being able to do it together was special. For years they had talked about this moment. They finally would become mature women and be loved like them. Nyawira was excited to wear beads, have her sheet smeared with oil, acquire a mũthuru (a skirt with slits) and finally be able to go to dances.[124] Wanjiku was more excited to finally understand what her mother and grandmother had been talking about and feel the connection to her community deepen.

The women led them toward the river, their singing growing louder with each step. Wanjiku's skirt swayed gently with each step, the tiny bells at her waist chiming softly. She liked the sound. It reminded her she was being seen. At the water's edge, the newly married women, mũhiki, each with one child, took charge of the initiates. She was being cleansed, washed of mugiro, the impurity of childhood. The river's icy water shocked her skin as the women bathed her, their hands firm, yet gentle.[125]

Once clean, she was lifted onto the back of one of the women, carried away from the river so her feet would not touch the ground. Wanjiku felt weightless in that moment, like she was hovering between two worlds-the girl she had been, and the woman she was about to become.

Back in the clearing, the other girls were already preparing for the final stage. Wanjiku's circumcision mother, the eldest of their mothers, laid out mathangu-fresh leaves spread carefully on the ground to catch the blood.[126] Around them, the entire village had gathered, young and old, forming a tight circle. The hum of excitement and tension filled the air.

"Look away," her supporter whispered. "Do not let fear take you."[127]

Wanjiku tilted her head up, staring at the sky as she had been told. She focused on the soft clouds drifting above, trying to feel nothing. Even the wind seemed to still. The trees, usually flowing freely, stood motionless.

"GIRLS WHO UNDERWENT IRUA TOGETHER BECAME BOUND AS SISTERS."

The sharp pain came suddenly, but she clenched her jaw. Around her, some girls whimpered, some screamed, and as the tradition dictated, they would be mocked for their weakness. But Wanjiku would not cry. The weight of so many eyes pressed down on her; men, women, boys, and girls, all watching. She forced herself to stand, while her legs were shaking.

The girls who had endured the ceremony without crying were praised and carried home with honor. Those who had shown weakness would be given leftovers in the days to come, a quiet shame that would follow them.[128]

Back home, Wanjiku lay on a soft mat, exhaustion consumed her. Her circumcision mother fed her small spoonfuls of warm porridge and ngima ya mũhia, as if she were a child once more.[129]

Outside, the village feasted, roasting meat, a delicacy reserved for only the most special occasions. The sounds of singing and laughter filled the evening, but Wanjiku barely heard them. Though her body was in pain, she felt something new within her: pride. She was at the start of something new. Tomorrow, she would wear her beads, her skin smeared with oil. She would walk with the respect of a woman, and no boy would dare joke with her now.[130]

When Wanjiku recovered after a few weeks she had become part of something greater than herself, just as her ancestors had done before her. She felt brave and empowered. She felt different, like a grown-up woman now, ready for dances.[131]

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130 Davison, Voices from Mutira, 119. From the life history of Watoro.
'After it was over, I felt grown up and walked around proudly. When a girl got her ears pierced, then was circumcised, she was looked upon as a grown-up and was treated like one. Circumcised girls were very respected. No young boys would dare to joke about with her or abuse her, for the boy's father would beat him.'
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