

An Uncertain Age

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Introduction

ALONG THE COAST OF the British East Africa Protectorate, district commissioners left their posts in the heat and humidity of April 1914 to meet with local elders on an urgent matter.¹ Their task: to investigate when, or if ever, African boys and girls came of age. Their reason: to determine whether Christian missions had the right to keep underage Africans in their custody without parental consent. The issue had vexed British officials since the waning years of the nineteenth century. Christian missions had opened new, alternative spaces for the young. At first, a few sons and daughters converted, attended services, received an education, and worked on mission farms. Others arrived as recently freed slaves, picked up and dropped off by the British abolitionist impulse. And still others came out of desperation, made destitute by disease, drought, and famine. When parents demanded that their sons and daughters be returned home, difficult questions arose over the tangled authorities of families, missionaries, and the colonial state.

As the long rainy season began, district commissioners and African elders exchanged information about being young and growing old. They then submitted their reports to provincial commissioner Charles Hopley. Some commissioners argued that young East Africans were never free from the power of the old. To carve out a moment of independence, the colonial state would have to draw an arbitrary, entirely novel line, one with untold repercussions. Others claimed that for boys, parental control ceased when fathers helped them marry and settle down. Girls merely passed from the control of fathers to the control of husbands. A few officials felt no need to ask their African intermediaries at all. Imperial laws

like the Indian Penal Code already established an age at which nonwhites became adults: fourteen for boys and sixteen for girls. The British need only exert their rule of law.² After reading these reports, provincial commissioner Hobley concluded that “no hard and fast ruling should be made.”³ The administration must leverage its influence carefully. Hobley warned his commissioners against disrupting elder, male authority. They must uphold the power of fathers whenever demarcating the boundaries between obedient childhood and independent adulthood. And they must be ever mindful of the encroaching influences of missionaries and one another into the realm of elders.

The inquiry failed to unknot the issue of African coming-of-age. While the British determined that boys, unlike their sisters, eventually experienced some degree of independence, they remained unsure of how much. They knew that age was a powerful part of the everyday lives of East Africans, and they presumed patriarchs had strict authority over juniors. Yet the stability of age-relations and the influence of elders seemed worryingly tenuous. For the remainder of colonial rule, and long after, the state in Kenya exerted considerable energy to understand, and then access, the power it believed inherent in age-relations.

A century later, struggles over age and state authority continue in Kenya. In the first few months of 2008, waves of postelection violence rocked the country, leaving thousands dead and an estimated six hundred thousand internally displaced. The horror called to mind similar episodes in 1992 and 1997. Even after rival presidential candidates Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga shook hands over a power-sharing agreement beside a smiling Kofi Annan, unrest continued in the countryside. Smoldering evidence lay everywhere of the violence perpetrated by young men and orchestrated by political elites. Senior politicians activated age-relations and the lexicon of age to instigate ethnic conflict.

In the wake of this bloodshed, I conducted much of the research for this book. In nearly all of my more than eighty interviews with Gikuyu, Kipsigis, and Luo men, talk turned to politics and postelection mayhem: an interviewee pointing out the ashy remains of kiosks and schools near his home in Saunet, another giving refuge to a displaced family in Gilgil, and still another comforting his son, who had suffered a stroke after being beaten in Bondo. These discussions gave the men I met an opportunity to vent frustrations and share anxieties. They also made connections across time. Memories of coming of age in colonial Kenya became a way for these men to talk about how generations behave today. These senior men lamented the disrespect the young showed for them but admitted their

failure to dictate respectable norms. It had never been so, they claimed, in the “good old days.”

After these interviews, I returned to the archive, and through the British colonial record I inhabited those “good old days”: letters from fathers to district commissioners worrying about runaway sons, and warnings from chiefs about young people drinking, dancing, and singing lewd songs. The “good old” colonial days seemed a lot like the present. Decades separate the stories drawn from the archive and men’s memories, yet age remains a prism through which Kenyans look to the not-so-distant colonial past to pass judgment on the present and fret about the future.

An Uncertain Age tells many coming-of-age stories of men who grew up in Kenya from the beginning of British colonial rule in the 1890s until the end of Jomo Kenyatta’s presidency in the late 1970s. This is a book about boys and young men using the colonial encounter to enjoy their youthfulness, make themselves masculine, and eventually earn a sense of maturity. Age and gender drove their pursuit of new possibilities in areas such as migrant wage labor, town life, crime, anticolonial violence, and nation building. They relished being young and used these new paths to reimagine and assert their age and masculinity with one another and other generations.

Colonialism could also unmake men. British conquest had relied on the violence of British troops, the East African Rifles, and local auxiliaries like the Maasai, who saw profit in the livestock confiscated from fallen neighbors.⁴ Young men who joined the conquest as soldiers or porters imagined their work as part of their coming-of-age.⁵ Yet their violence crushed the manly aspirations of the countless young warriors they defeated. Among those communities that resisted, like the Gikuyu, Kipsigis, Nandi, and Gusii, conquest marked the decline of the young warrior. Although the consolidation of colonial rule and development of a settler economy offered future generations of young men new ways to earn an age, they were not always successful. The racial and economic inequalities of a settler society frustrated young men’s ambitions, especially during and after the depression. As they struggled with stagnating wages and rising costs of living, as well as dwindling jobs and places at school, they endured rather than enjoyed an increasingly prolonged liminal age between childhood and adulthood. Feeling trapped, men saw colonialism as an obstacle that must be removed if they were to ever achieve adulthood.

Across Kenya, households crackled with tension over these promising new paths and disappointing dead ends. Young men argued with one another, with their parents, and with the young women and age-mates they wished to impress. Did a wage—and the flashy clothing, bicycles, and

alcohol it purchased—make a migrant laborer worthy of a potential lover’s attention or an age-mate’s envy? Did a grasp of English and the ability to read the newspaper grant a schoolboy the right to demand from his father initiation into manhood? Were the gangs of boys forged on the mean streets of Nairobi as legitimate as the generations formed along the edge of a circumciser’s blade? Could a married man who fathered children still claim the rights and respect of an adult even if he was poor, landless, unemployed, or, worst of all, uncircumcised?

The outcomes of these arguments were as complex as the conflicting views that ignited them. Debate could lead to irreconcilable conflict between young men proud of their new ways to perform masculinity and elders disgusted with such displays of disrespect and delinquency. Attitudes could be swayed, though; fathers could forcefully encourage their sons to set aside wages to buy livestock; and sons could convince their fathers to pay for another semester of school fees—each with the understanding that these new avenues would benefit the household. Such arguments never cooled; they roiled on long after colonial rule ended.

As the din rose up and out of African households, newcomers to East Africa leaned in, listening intently. Colonial rule introduced new actors into the conversation such as employers, missionaries, schoolmasters, police officers, and magistrates. Age and masculinity mattered a great deal to them, too, and they brought their own notions to Kenya. Africans included them in their arguments, borrowing, rejecting, and reappropriating these globally circulating, though sometimes very familiar, ideas. These new actors also sought to control the behavior of young men, to make them hard-working employees, God-fearing parishioners, and law-abiding subjects. Along with African parents and elder kin, they formed an ever-expanding network of competing yet complementary adult authority figures. As freeing as so many young men might have found migrant labor or town life, they found themselves under more adult surveillance than ever before. And the most important and intrusive of all these newcomers was the colonial state.

This is also a book about the British colonial state’s own coming-of-age story—its search for legitimacy and authority. In Kenya, statecraft necessitated posing as an elder—producing what I call the elder state. Early in the colonial encounter, British officials came to view relationships among male generations as a potent source of power. To craft and exert their authority, the British became very willing, very active participants in age-relations. In doing so, the elder state institutionalized age and masculinity as inseparable components of statecraft. Making and unmaking mature men became a

means for the British to reconcile the incongruities of nurturing a settler economy while fulfilling the lofty goals of the civilizing mission. For instance, with the help of chiefs and local elders, the British tampered with male initiation practices, pushing boys into premature manhood and the migrant labor market. The elder state wielded male initiation to discipline young delinquents, circumcising prison inmates who exhibited mature, obedient behavior.

Like the relationships between fathers and sons, state making could be a messy affair. Colonial officials' decisions and actions were nearly always contingent on the demands and desires of Africans, both young and old, and other actors such as missionaries, settlers, Colonial Office officials in London, and international welfare organizations. Entangled with so many eager participants, each with their own perspectives, the elder state became a conduit for the exchange of local African and global Western ideas about age and manhood. Stretched in different directions, the elder state pursued contradictory strategies, ones that changed over time.

As the colonial project matured, so, too, did the role of the elder state. By the 1950s, British authority was at its most uncertain. Challenged by the violence of young men frustrated with their generational station, the elder state constructed a network of institutions to instill a subordinate, subservient masculinity and maturity in captured young rebels. As they prepared to leave an independent Kenya, the British lamented the failure of the elder state, only to see its pieces salvaged by the first generation of Kenyan leaders. The elder state did not merely survive decolonization; postcolonial politicians retooled it for nation building. It ensured that postcolonial politics spun on the axis of age and gender—a gerontocratic form of politics entrenching the power of a single elder generation of male politicians over their young constituents for the next half century.

Exploring the coming-of-age stories of African men and the colonial state offers several contributions to the historiographies of Kenya, Africa, and the British Empire. First, *An Uncertain Age* positions age at the heart of everyday life in twentieth-century Kenya.⁶ With a few exceptions, historians have fixed their gaze elsewhere, on other relationships and cleavages like ethnicity, class, and kinship. Unlike ethnicity and kinship, which the British categorized as traditionally African; or class, which they could claim as a modern aftershock of capitalism, age and age-relations were preoccupations shared by both Africans and the British. The colonial encounter involved intense, intimate arguments over age from which Africans and colonial officials crafted powerful practices and institutions that made age a mutually communicable form of authority.

Second, this book joins a growing number of histories of masculinity in Africa. Rallying around Luise White's call for more nuanced studies of men and masculinities, historians of Africa have begun to break down monolithic male identities like farmer, father, soldier, or student and then examine the rival masculinities with which men wrestled.⁷ Yet scholars of Kenya have largely ignored White's challenge. I show that age and gender are inseparable units of historical analysis. To study a young man's coming-of-age, historians must also examine the different ways he imagined and expressed his masculinity, and then battled one another, elders, and the state over acceptable, respectable expressions of manhood.

Third, the concept of the elder state offers historians a fresh perspective on statecraft in Africa, one that straddles the blurry line between the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Historians have long examined the ways class, race, ethnicity, religion, and education influenced state power. I join a growing number of scholars who argue that both age and gender also produced the state. The elder state reveals that even the youngest imperial subjects, mere boys and girls, could compel the state to consider and control them. As they did, the British found age and masculinity powerful cultural tools with which they communicated their power.

Fourth, this is a book about not just age, but also the making of an age: youth. Since the 1990s, scholars of postcolonial Africa have been fascinated by the creative and destructive power of the young. Whether vanguard or vandals, makers or breakers, the concept of youth has become an influential, very male, actor in Africa's successes and failures. While several historians have studied the politicization of youths by political parties and Big Men, few have excavated deeper to uncover the cultural, political, and economic processes that begot the so-called youth crises that postcolonial leaders tried to resolve or perpetuate. I trace the emergence of this uncertain age through the twentieth century, exploring how youth arose from the racial and economic inequalities of settler colonialism, the fusion of emergent Western ideas about age with those in East Africa, and the desperate designs of a state struggling for authority.

Finally, the work of historians of Kenya remains ensnared by studies of single ethnic groups and their distinct, disconnected histories. Gikuyu squatters, Gusii litigants, Kalenjin politicians, Kamba soldiers, Maasai moran, or Maragoli widows—this research has produced a history of Kenya as a sum of its ethnic parts, rather than a history of the whole.⁸ *An Uncertain Age* pushes scholars to reconsider their ethnicization of Kenya's past. Kenyans experienced colonial rule not in ethnic isolation but in constant contact with one

another. Every young man felt the tremors of colonial power and discussed it with his peers and elders. Age and gender offer historians an opportunity to think about a shared history of Kenya.

The chapters that follow explore the roles age and masculinity played in some of the field's largest, longest-standing historiographies: migrant labor and town life, crime and punishment, Mau Mau and British counter-insurgency, as well as decolonization and nationalism. Their importance to each of these historiographies is well worth books in their own right. By bringing them together, I hope *An Uncertain Age* shows historians how mindful African men and the state were of one another's coming-of-age stories and how this mindfulness influenced so many of the decisions and actions that made up the colonial encounter in Kenya.

ARGUING ABOUT AGE

Prior to colonial rule, age was a powerful force in the lives of Kenyan communities—perhaps more so than ethnicity.⁹ Early ethnographies do not reveal how far back into the past age-relations and their institutions endured.¹⁰ Yet they confirm for historians that on the eve of conquest, how men and women lived their lives, explained their place in society, and sought mobility through it were influenced by their sense of belonging to a given generation and their relationships with their age-mates, juniors, and seniors.¹¹ Age also stratified these communities. Much of the early anthropological and historical literature on age emphasizes the conflict among men over access to wealth.¹² In these studies, elder men competed with one another to control the reproductive power of wives and mothers as well as the productive power of young male warriors and clients. To regulate this competition, communities organized themselves by age, ascribing rights and obligations to different age-groups and creating ritual moments when those age-groups formed and gradually moved up into positions of authority. Boys spent their childhoods herding their fathers' livestock, playing games with age-mates, and learning to navigate the social world around them. Eventually they would be made men, typically through a series of initiation ceremonies. They enjoyed their days honing their warrior skills, raiding neighboring communities' livestock, dancing, and courting sweethearts. In time, warriors would settle down, marry, start families, and become elders in their own right.

Elder men laid claim to this process of making generations as well as norms expected of different ages. They imbued themselves with ritual knowledge, demanded respect from acquiescent juniors, and relished the

joys of elderhood. They created an awareness of time, a sense of order, and perceptions of masculinity and maturity within the community.¹³ Yet the power of elders was never absolute. Male age-relations in East Africa revolved around reciprocal obligations.¹⁴ An age, and the rights that came with it, had to be earned. Young men expected fathers to work hard for them, to accumulate the wealth needed for initiation and the bridewealth needed for marriage. Meanwhile, juniors had to prove themselves as well, showing respect for their elders and following the codes of conduct laid out to them during their initiations.

But not everyone agreed on what it meant to be a good father or son. Historians of age, following the lead of gender historians, have begun to challenge the earlier scholarship that proposed a linear process of aging that privileged patriarchs. Seniority was not granted to anyone simply for growing old or playing by the rules.¹⁵ Arguing was an essential part of age-relations—part of the pursuit and performance of masculinity and maturity.¹⁶ Generations constantly debated one another about their biological, social, and economic positions within the community.¹⁷ If a boy showed no signs of maturity, then his father could postpone his initiation. Likewise, if fathers failed to initiate their sons, or if elders clung to the privileges of old age for too long, then younger generations could force the elders to meet their obligations.¹⁸ Arguments could be violent and short-lived, but they could also take time and operate within the acceptable, creative moral codes of the day. For instance, at the turn of the twentieth century, as thousands of Gikuyu died of famine and disease, a generation of well-to-do men pooled their resources to push ineffectual elders out of political authority, a ritualized process known as *ituika*, or the “breaking.” As Derek Peterson shows us, this generation retired ruling elders by buying them off with livestock. In doing so, they restored peace, stability, and hope to the Gikuyu community.¹⁹

Age-relations as well as their norms and institutions were flexible and creative, designed to weather demographic and climactic changes as well as to exploit new cultural and economic frontiers. Age could shift depending on the ideas and eloquence with which a generation argued, with whom a generation argued, and the wider socioeconomic and political settings in which the argument occurred.²⁰ As a result, as Nicolas Argenti argues, “seniority was not calculated simply on the basis of age but by means of a complex, multilayered assessment” of a range of criteria, including wealth in material goods, kinship, or knowledge.²¹

Colonialism intensified these arguments. It brought new forms of knowledge and wealth as well as alternative, obstacle-ridden routes along which

the young and the old explored their age and masculinity both within and outside household, kinship, and generation. It also introduced new players. Missionaries, employers, and British officials introduced their own ideas about age and claimed the role of adults. Recently, historians have shown how ideas about age were reconfigured as young people inhabited these new spaces and argued with these new actors. Some sons and daughters left home, joined Christian missions, and adhered to the authority of a heavenly father over a corporeal one.²² Their newfound faith and access to Western education set them apart from, and often against, their elders. Others left home in search of work and wages as soldiers, farmers, miners, or artisans. The camaraderie of the barracks, the organization of trade unions, and the struggles of town life all allowed the young to forge relationships outside their age-groups and kin groups.²³ They spent their wages on what they wanted, striking out on the path to maturity in their own unique ways—buying flashy clothes to attract sexual partners, attending beer halls and dances, or saving up to get married without their fathers' consent. Still others sought out social and economic worlds deemed distasteful by their families and colonial states. Boys joined criminal gangs, making up their own age-groups using black marketeering, violence, and street culture to express their manliness.²⁴ Girls joined the criminalized underworld, too, using street hawking and sex work to build successful households and families. They also refused to get married, continued their schooling, and demanded or rejected female circumcision.²⁵

These experiences brought the young not only new sources of wealth and authority but also inevitable conflict with their elders and age-mates.²⁶ As Gary Burgess argues, colonial rule gave the young “analytical distance to question the validity and universality of gerontocratic discourse.”²⁷ As they did, conflict often ensued. In turn-of-the-century Natal, young Zulu men embraced wage labor at a time of crippling war and epidemic disease. In time, as Benedict Carton argues, fathers and families back home became dependent on young men's wealth. Burdened by demanding fathers and colonial taxation, young men rose up against chiefs and fathers in the 1906 War of the Heads.²⁸ Meredith McKittrick shows how ecological and economic uncertainties in Ovamboland at around the same time also compelled the young to seek “refuge not within the familiar but within the exotic,” in this case Christianity and migrant wage labor.²⁹ Meanwhile, elders fumed over their sons' and daughters' cultural delinquency.

Yet many of those children poured their efforts into familial goals in familiar ways. Colonialism did not always trigger irresolvable conflict among seniors and juniors or weaken age-based institutions. Having experienced

the “exotic” worlds of migrant wage labor and Christianity, the “new men” of Ovamboland became more independent from their fathers and local kings than in decades past. But they still returned home, paid tribute, asked for advice, and courted kingly favor.³⁰ Interference from missionaries, chiefs, and British officials also inspired generations to work together to preserve ritual life. As Lynn Thomas has shown, when missions, the state, and Christian neighbors tried to block Meru girls’ paths to womanhood, they circumcised one another.³¹ As the price of bridewealth rose in Western Kenya, Brett Shadle argues, Gusii sons and fathers worked together to control rising bridewealth costs and prevent conflict over delayed marriage.³² Parents across Kenya found merit in their sons’ and daughters’ taking advantage of new possibilities or defending old practices. Wage-earning sons returned home ready to invest in livestock and educated daughters fetched better dowries, each serving their parents’ interests.³³ By the late colonial period, mothers and fathers who had been among the first or second generation to join a mission, attend a school, or tend a settler’s herd understood the choices their sons and daughters made.

In *An Uncertain Age*, I argue that dissent and cooperation do not neatly characterize the strategies and outcomes of Kenyan men’s arguments about age and masculinity. Throughout this book, many boys and young men pointedly interrogated and then flatly rejected the expectations of their elders and peers. There were worlds beyond kinship and generation that they wanted to explore and exploit—and it did not matter what their mothers or fathers might say to stop them. Yet even when they did contemplate the legitimacy of “gerontocratic discourse” by taking unusual or unsavory paths, the destinations young men mapped out in their minds could also be recognizable to those around them. They still wanted to enjoy their youthful years, prove their manly mettle, and earn the right to be initiated or married, as well as feel and be viewed by those around them as mature.

As colonial rule ground on, arguments about age intensified. From the 1930s onward, those once new possibilities through which earlier generations of young men had come of age began to lose their luster. The harder it became to find work, pay for school fees, and save wages, the more distant the prospects for enjoying oneself or settling down. On settler estates, African squatters endured draconian restrictions on the herds they kept and the work hours they logged. The reserves, especially in Central Kenya, simmered with frustration over chiefly misconduct, lack of education and employment, overcrowding, and soil erosion. Town life offered little respite as the costs of living soared while squalor spread.³⁴ For some young men, it was their fathers’ poverty that let them down. They lost confidence in their

fathers' ability to usher them into manhood through initiation, or into adulthood through marriage. For others, a father's prosperity bitterly reminded them that they had yet to succeed in their own right.

Coming-of-age stalled by the 1950s. Changes that might have once been imperceptible to young men were now painfully clear: many felt trapped in a prolonged age between childhood and adulthood. None of their strategies—going to school, picking tea, or fighting in a world war—provided them material wealth or moral standing. To escape, young men sought out alternative paths. They moved to towns in greater numbers to eke out a living as casual laborers and black marketeers. They joined the militant wings of political associations like the Kenya African Union and the Kikuyu Central Association. They also committed acts of organized violence, like *Dini ya Msambwa* and *Mau Mau*, against well-to-do neighbors, chiefs, and the state.³⁵

The *Mau Mau* war in particular arose out of a crisis of age and masculinity among the Gikuyu. Following Luise White and John Lonsdale, I show that for all its complexities, the organized violence of the early 1950s was young Gikuyu men's response to a crisis of maturity in the late colonial period.³⁶ They argued with one another and with elders over how to best resolve their ambiguous age. During the war, they used the symbols and vocabulary of initiation, seclusion, warriorhood, and age grading to oath new members, steel fearful comrades, and establish chains of command. As they prepared for battle in the forests of Central Kenya, they reimagined what their masculinity might look like in the future, just as they looked back to history to think about how young warriors should behave. Despite their military defeat and grueling detention, these young men spent the remainder of colonial rule joining the youth wings of political parties and campaigning for their candidates. As young men did in Ghana, Guinea, and Tanzania, Kenyans rallied around age-relations as a way to make claims on the largesse of political elites. They also agitated for often-conservative gendered nationalisms—usually at the expense of young women—to make places for themselves at the table of nation building.³⁷

To scholars of contemporary Africa, this uncertain age with which *Mau Mau* fighters or political activists struggled or appropriated might seem all too familiar; they would call it youth. A growing number of scholars have argued that youth, typically gendered male, is a liminal period of junior dependence, one marked by “waithood” or “involuntary delay” in becoming an adult.³⁸ Youth is described as a by-product of modernity's vicious contradictions: expanded access to and expectations of global ideas contrasted starkly by local economic constraints and political repression.³⁹ In their

waiting, some youth have become a destructive force of change, finding their masculinity as child soldiers or gangsters.⁴⁰ Others are a force of creativity and activism, finding ways around state surveillance through social media or empowering one another through fashion and music.⁴¹

Much of the literature assumes that youth is the result of “a long historical process, shaped by authoritarian colonialism, postcolonial state failure, and a generally problematic engagement with material modernity.”⁴² But far too little research has been done to excavate if and how youth emerged over the course of the twentieth century. Deborah Durham offers historians a road map, arguing that studies of youth must go beyond the relationships and negotiations of youth and include the deeper structures that produce these encounters.⁴³ This book does not offer scholars yet another definition of youth. Rather, it looks back on how this prolonged, liminal age came to be in Kenya, and how past practices of age and generational relations became moral representations to hold up against the present and imagine the future.⁴⁴

MAKING MEN

Manliness mattered as much as age in Kenya. At night, boys listened to the stories of their fathers and grandfathers, learning what it meant to be a man, debating those ideas the next morning out on the grazing fields. A boy, eager for initiation, had to prove to his father that he had the fortitude to face the circumcision knife. A young man practiced his dance moves and refined his oratory skills to catch his peers’ eyes and ears. Age and gender were inseparable to these young men, and historians must treat them as tightly knotted units of historical analysis.⁴⁵ To study the entwined coming-of-age stories of young men and the state, historians must also consider how growing up and making states were both gendered processes.

Until the 1970s, histories of Africa were histories of men. Afterward, a generation of historians brought the lives of African women to the forefront of the field. Scholars of Kenya are especially lucky to have a remarkable set of studies on the lives of schoolgirls, street hawkers, sex workers, widows, divorcées, wives, and mothers. This early work pushed historians to consider the decisions and actions of women, especially their labor, to be as important as class, race, and ethnicity.⁴⁶ In the years that followed, focus shifted to the changing practices and meanings of gender and the relationships of power among women and men.⁴⁷ Histories followed of women navigating the new possibilities of colonialism, like labor outside the household, education, urban migration, Christianity, and colonial courts, to carve out spaces of autonomy for themselves and their families.⁴⁸

Many of these same studies also reveal that African women struggled under an expanding “patchwork quilt of patriarchies”—fathers and husbands, chiefs, clerics and clergy, employers, and the state.⁴⁹ Over the course of the twentieth century, these patriarchs leaned on one another to control and marginalize women. They tried to drag women out of the public sphere of politics and streets of commerce and into the private sphere of households ruled by male breadwinners. There they were to labor as dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, and Christians, keeping their husbands and children content and out of trouble.⁵⁰ Dictating gendered roles to women and then punishing them when they broke gendered rules lay at the heart of colonial law and order.

Women were not the only ones who provoked moral panics and stampedes to correct their behavior—so, too, did young men. For a discipline originally built on the study of African men, we still know surprisingly little about how they understood their gender and sexuality, and how those ideas changed over time. In 1990, Luise White encouraged her colleagues to take the study of masculinity more seriously—and several scholars have answered her call.⁵¹ Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher define *masculinity* as “a cluster of norms, values, and behavioral patterns expressing explicitly and implicitly expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others.”⁵² Like age, masculinities are relational, and because gender interacts with so many other social structures like race, class, and ethnicity, multiple masculinities can exist within a community.⁵³ Not all masculinities are equal. Masculinities are all pulled, as R. W. Connell argues, into the orbit of a hegemonic masculinity. Dominant as its ideas and practices may be, this hegemonic masculinity wars with rivals through coercion and consensus, destroying some and co-opting others.⁵⁴ Even men whose masculinities encircle the outermost margins enjoy what Connell calls the “patriarchal dividend,” the privileged position all men share and uphold over women.⁵⁵ Gender scholars question whether Connell’s hegemonic masculinity existed in colonial Africa. “It is *not* always obvious,” Lindsay and Miescher write, “which notions of masculinity were dominant, or hegemonic.”⁵⁶ African men experienced a succession of competing and coexisting masculinities as they crisscrossed the “patchwork of patriarchies” sewn together by fathers, chiefs, missionaries, employers, and colonial officials.⁵⁷ They also had to adjust to the changing preferences of women and their demands on the kinds of men with whom they wanted to meet, make love, or start families.

For all their work on masculinities, historians of Africa have been less interested in the relationships between local and imperial masculinities than have their colleagues studying other colonial worlds like British India.⁵⁸

Africanists focus instead on local, African arguments about masculinity and the fractures and continuities those debates produced during colonial rule.⁵⁹ African masculinities defied definition by the colonizer, shifting rather than breaking under the weight of colonial racism and violence. Young men left home to work for wages or join mission stations; yet, as they did in Ovamboland, they still looked up to their fathers and kin as models of manliness.⁶⁰ Within young men's own households, steady paychecks from working on the Nigerian railways or in coal mines allowed them to claim breadwinner status, command the household, and demand family allowances from their employers.⁶¹ Even under the surveillance of the state and workplace, South African masculinities were quite literally driven underground, but they still challenged the apartheid regime.⁶²

In similar ways, this book explores the masculinities boys and young men felt, debated, and performed as they grew up in colonial Kenya. I explore the masculine norms boys were expected to adhere to in preparation for initiation as well as those taught to them by elders as they healed in seclusion. As initiation practices changed during colonial rule, I show how young men looked for new ways to prove their manly mettle and how their feelings and expressions of masculinity changed as a result. The travels and travails of migrant wage labor and town life offered young men new spaces, often outside family life, to reconsider the masculinities they observed in their fathers' households. As they reformulated what it meant to be male, they struggled to convince their elders back home that new styles of clothes and shoes and gang life were acceptable forms of manhood.⁶³ I also show how African men and women mulled over ideas about manhood in constant contact with non-Africans who weighed in, sometimes quite forcefully, with their own expectations and designs.⁶⁴ If, as Africanist gender scholars claim, colonial Africa was home to a constellation of dominant masculinities, then it is not enough to study African masculinities in relation to one another.⁶⁵ Relationships between African and colonial or imperial masculinities must matter just as much. Colonial actors might have had only the faintest influence, and their global ideologies might not have seemed so alien to Africans; yet, even in moments of recognition, of soft power, potent masculinities were made. One of the most forceful actors to intervene in African men's debates about gender was the colonial state.

Gender historians have long paid particular attention to how colonial states influenced gender relations and how gender altered the trajectories of statecraft.⁶⁶ States are gendered institutions, and the colonial state was a very masculine one. Its sundry bureaucrats, protocols, cultures, and laws were all products of their own competing masculinities that changed over time.⁶⁷

These masculinities were made up of the prevailing metropolitan norms back home, the racial paternalism of the civilizing mission, and the lessons learned, or not, from colonial subjects. And these came to bear on African communities when they found themselves face-to-face with or working as agents of the state. Emily Osborn's study of household building in Guinea shows how the French ignored local connections between marriage and political authority and refused to marry Baté women and build households of their own. Instead, they hid their private lives from public view, denying themselves a powerful cultural component of statecraft.⁶⁸ Unlike their counterparts in Guinea, British officials in Kenya recognized the power of gender, making men and women to make the state.

Despite very rich, very separate scholarships on gender and statecraft, historians of Kenya have only occasionally connected the two. A few studies, most notably Lynn Thomas's *Politics of the Womb*, have shown how chiefs and British officials tried to use women's bodies and African gender ideologies to underwrite their authority.⁶⁹ In *An Uncertain Age*, I explore how British officials' own masculinities and the kinds of masculinity they wanted their young African subjects to inhabit guided their interventions. Moreover, inside government institutions such as approved schools, youth camps, and youth clubs, very intimate conversations took place between the state and young men about acceptable forms of manliness, sexuality, and maturity as well as the outlets through which to express those feelings: sports, hard work, education, and marriage. Colonial rule in Kenya is the story of how the British leveraged the success of their colonial enterprise on their appeal to and control over the masculinities of young Africans.

THE ELDER STATE

Scholars of Africa have long been interested in how colonial regimes exercised their power. Some cast the colonial state as powerful and authoritarian, transforming the everyday lives of traumatized Africans. The state is a crusher of rocks, a *bula matari*, as Crawford Young argues, relying on violence, private enterprise, and invested African intermediaries to extract raw materials. No less intrusive is Mahmood Mamdani's "Janus-faced, bifurcated" state, exerting two forms of power: civil laws governing urban citizens and customary laws controlling rural subjects. This decentralized despot locked some Africans away in ethnic reserves, controlled by intermediaries using customary law, and then placed them in tension with Africans living in urban spaces under a different legal logic.⁷⁰ Others, including Ann Stoler, Frederick Cooper, and Jeffrey Herbst, argue that colonial statecraft was a

more contingent process. “More arterial than capillary,” Cooper writes, state power did not circulate evenly to every corner of colonial society, and periodically it required a little defibrillation to keep it going. African communities living closest to the heart of state authority felt the steady, rapid pulse of rule. Further away, its effects could be but a murmur.⁷¹ This unevenness opened a range of possibilities for Africans and many others, such as Christian missionaries and European settlers, to affect the nature of colonialism. As a result, the state was “neither monolithic nor omnipotent.” It was tangled up in “competing agendas for using power, competing strategies for maintaining control, and doubts about the legitimacy of the venture”—debates that government officials had not simply with one another but with those over whom they meant to rule.⁷²

In Kenya, the colonial state wrestled with these issues in its own peculiar ways. Kenya was a settler colony teeming with a diverse, vociferous cast of characters who made claims on and against the state. British officials found themselves constantly reacting to the activism of ordinary Africans, chiefs, and educated elites, as well as European settlers, Christian missionaries, international welfare organizations, and metropolitan superiors in London. Each of these voices spoke of competing, contradictory visions of what life in a settler colony should be like. Under such intense scrutiny both within and outside the colony, the state internalized these contradictions. As Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale argue, to ensure the financial viability of the colony, the state nurtured the economic fortunes of settler families it had encouraged to emigrate. The state alienated vast tracks of the choicest land from African communities like the Maasai, Kipsigis, and Gikuyu, and then coerced them to leave their homes and work for wages. British officials also had to keep the promise, or at least the pretense, of the civilizing mission. Ever fearful of being seen as an accessory to settler exploitation and virulent racism, the state also adopted “the role of even-handed arbiter, of defender of the weaker, African, interest.”⁷³ With one hand, the state tried to extract African labor, violently if need be. With the other, it sought to shield them from the destabilizing effects of capitalism and Western culture.

For Berman and Lonsdale, considering the welfare of Africans merely made tolerable the dirty work of building an apparatus to coerce them out to work. Cooper has pointed out that their analysis of statecraft in Kenya focused more on securing “profits and peace” than “on the cultural work that colonial states do.”⁷⁴ Since first conceptualizing colonial rule as a state of struggle, historians of Kenya and elsewhere in Africa have turned to locating the much deeper cultural work that went on to cope with

the state's contending logics. One of the places historians looked for the state's cultural work was within the African institutions on which the British leaned most heavily to strengthen their authority. The British relied on the practice of indirect rule. Their men on the spot, known in Kenya as the provincial administration, worked with a cadre of chiefs and elders to collect taxes, enforce laws, discipline unruly behavior, and arbitrate local disputes. If African communities had no preexisting tradition of chieftaincy, as was the case in Kenya, then British officials appointed men they felt up to the task.⁷⁵ These intermediaries offered the British a way to overcome their financial limitations and exert influence beyond the barrel of a gun.⁷⁶ Together, provincial administrators and their African intermediaries created and oversaw local courts, and codified customary laws, such as marriage or land tenure rights, as well as hardened ethnic affiliations. These kinds of cultural work, Lynn Thomas argues, offered the colonial state ways to resolve the tensions between the crude necessities of coercive exploitation and ideological commitments to the civilizing mission.⁷⁷

Rather than instruments of colonial domination, these flexible African institutions became sites of intense argument.⁷⁸ Africans often reappropriated them in ways the British had not intended. Chiefs used newly created courts to reimagine marriage rights and household relationships, yet women and young men used them to challenge the authority of their husbands or elders, respectively.⁷⁹ Ethnic affiliations solidified after the state carved out African reserves to establish racial boundaries and demarcate chiefly jurisdiction. Yet Africans trying to inspire political unity and agitation hardened ethnicity to challenge state authority.⁸⁰

Age and gender also served the colonial state well. Almost immediately, the British set out to learn as much about African social and political life as possible. Through what Katherine Luongo has termed the “anthro-administrative complex,” officials and anthropologists, in dialogue with African intermediaries, created a corpus of often functionalist, incomplete knowledge of the ways age and gender guided everyday East African life.⁸¹ With this knowledge, the British tried to assert their authority by using and manipulating local practices of age and masculinity—a process that produced what I call the elder state.

The elder state was no “crusher of rocks,” no colossus. But British efforts to harness age became a formidable instrument of statecraft—more than the distant drumbeat of “arterial” power. First, the elder state strung the sinews of the colonial apparatus together, forcing officials with different outlooks on and mandates for rule to argue and work with one another. The elder state

emerged from the “constant rows” between the provincial administration, who oversaw day-to-day life in the African reserves; the departments, who managed law and order, economic planning, and welfare projects; as well as the judiciary and treasury, who enforced and funded the entire enterprise.⁸² In the interwar years, labor officers, who found evidence of child labor on settler estates, argued with district commissioners, who had lowered the age of male initiation, over the appropriate age at which boys could leave home to work. Meanwhile, municipal officials in Nairobi found themselves working with magistrates and the treasury to enforce vagrancy laws and fund repatriation orders for rounded-up street boys.

The elder state manifested itself in nearly every nook and cranny of the regime. Most histories of Kenya focus on a single part, or interaction between only a few parts, of the state. The provincial administration has come under frequent scrutiny because of how closely it worked with African communities. These studies locate the real work of making law and maintaining order in the arguments between local communities, chiefs, and, sometimes, British officials.⁸³ Disputes over land and customary practices like marriage and female circumcision were resolved in local African council meetings attended by chiefs or court battles adjudicated by elders. British officials occasionally arrived on the scene to huddle with chiefs or fume over failed policies. In these histories, if not for their monopoly on violence, the British seem almost incidental to indirect rule.

Second, as the elder state reverberated with tension, the administrative rank and file grew attuned to the voices of those outside the bureaucracy clamoring to be heard. Kenya was a crowded, cacophonous place. As officials moved in and out of colonial society, they encountered all manner of competing ideas about ruling Africa. In conversations with Maasai elders, a district officer might learn the details of how and when they decided to transition a new generation of boys into manhood. Around a settler’s dining room table, they might hear that the nimble fingers of African children were perfect for picking tea. Reading the newspaper, they might read a story about the importance of the Boy Scouts in the training of young British citizens.

Sometimes, these encounters inspired experimentally minded officials to test new technologies of rule, and they were often allowed to do so with a free hand.⁸⁴ They resourcefully borrowed and experimented with ideas and institutions practiced by the communities they sought to govern, by missionaries working just down the road, by British officials back home, and by other governments around the globe. In the 1930s, the governor sent S. H. La Fontaine, who had served in the provincial administration, to Britain to investigate the methods of juvenile incarceration and reform that could

be reproduced in the colony. Twenty years later, to rehabilitate young detainees during the Mau Mau war, community development officers used a blend of Christian baptism, cleansing ceremonies adapted from revivalists, and vocational training provided by former staff of the Church of Scotland Mission at Tumutumu.

More often than not, though, unresponsive officials were compelled to act. When it appeared the state had sacrificed the well-being of Africans to the benefit of settlers, a chorus of criticism pressed the state to respond with denials, committee investigations, reforms, and even development projects.⁸⁵ Such pressures were especially acute when young Africans were involved. When Archdeacon Owen found children digging roads near Kisumu in the 1920s, he brought his outrage to the British public and to bear on the colonial state.⁸⁶ And in the 1930s, and again in the 1950s, when Protestant missionaries decided to ban female circumcision and abortion, they pushed district officials and chiefs to support them.⁸⁷

Third, the elder state was doubly cognizant of age and masculinity—pressured by local arguments with Africans and globally circulating ideas back in Britain. The migration, labor, punishment, illiteracy, and health of young people were controversial in Kenya because they were also so contentious in Britain and much of the Western world. The Colonial Office and British parliamentarians, as well as religious and welfare organizations, were animated by the treatment of Her Majesty's youngest subjects, just as they were by the treatment of young Britons. How young Africans fared under colonial rule became a barometer for the success or failure of the civilizing mission and the superiority of metropolitan ideas and institutions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, European notions about age had undergone dramatic renovation. Social reformers, social scientists, and government officials began to carve out a new stage of the life cycle between childhood and adulthood, first among the well-to-do and later the working class.⁸⁸ Those boys and girls newly labeled as “youths” or “adolescents” became more dependent, losing their access to the economic and social worlds outside their households and coming under greater surveillance by parents, educators, and the state.⁸⁹ Once created, this new age came under close scholarly and political study. It also quickly became a repository for all manner of adult nightmares. Fears emerged that the young, especially boys, left to play in the streets of London, work in satanic mills, or languish in poorhouses suffered from moral and physical degeneration.⁹⁰ Worse still, the burgeoning field of child psychology promoted ideas that adolescence was a fragile time in the development of the human mind. The young were unstable, irrational, and malleable. When combined with destabilizing

influences like town life, poverty, and loose morals, the results for society could be disastrous.⁹¹ Governments and charitable institutions urgently defined, legislated, disciplined, and protected the young.⁹²

Yet the same characteristics that made the young so dangerous also gave them great potential—if only their energies could be controlled. In times of intense insecurity, the young could be called upon to defend the nation and empire. Britain's near defeat in the Boer War inspired Robert Baden-Powell to create the Boy Scouts, which he viewed as a way to harden and discipline the next generation, prevent another catastrophic military campaign, and preserve the empire.⁹³ During World War I, an entire generation of young men flocked to the trenches and their deaths to fulfill a romantic, masculine fervor.⁹⁴ Over the course of the early twentieth century, states across Europe organized youth movements with militarized, propagandist flare. A creeping conformity replaced the rebellious spirit that had once defined young Europeans. Adults had reimagined them as modern warriors defending the nation and its empire as opposed to rebels erecting mid-nineteenth-century barricades.⁹⁵ After World War II, the role of the state in the lives of young men and women deepened out of the desire to rejuvenate citizenship and nationhood in the wake of the war's devastation, the emergence of welfare states, and the threat of nuclear armageddon.⁹⁶

As elder states developed in Europe, they also formed along the colonial frontier. Metropolitan and colonial governments had worried over the welfare of European children and young people who had been spirited away to or born in settler colonies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, young English and Portuguese orphans and vagrants were seen as the very foundation of successful empires.⁹⁷ In turn, colonies became “not only a spleen, to drain the ill humours of the body, but a liver to breed good blood.”⁹⁸ Colonies cured the nation of its moral decay and created sturdy subjects. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the well-being and proper socialization of young British immigrants to Australia and South Africa, as well as Northern and Southern Rhodesia, became essential to strengthening the cultural ties that bound the British world system together.⁹⁹ Yet historians still know far too little about the lives of children and young people in colonized societies and their encounters with the state. In colonial Spanish America, the state defined and legislated childhood and familial relationships; and in doing so, positioned itself as a paternalistic “father king” to augur its racial domination over non-European subjects.¹⁰⁰ Centuries later, the British used prisons and schools in India and Nigeria to experiment with new disciplinary tools that tried to shape Indian and African children into twisted versions of a Western ideal.¹⁰¹ In the mid-twentieth century, the language of

development, citizenship, and youth spoken in Europe infused new institutions and new kinds of racialized, social controls in the colonies.¹⁰²

Last, the elder state in Kenya did not materialize fully formed, but emerged gradually over the course of colonial rule. Early on, from the turn of the century until the late 1940s, the British found that the authority they gained from participating in age-relations was a very messy affair. Ruled by the financial and logistical constraints of empire-on-the-cheap, they had to work with chiefs, elders, and young men to effect change. The elder state became a process of negotiation not just among officials in different posts within the administration but also with the competing, yet not always incompatible, desires and designs of African men.¹⁰³

At the turn of the century, officials working in the East Africa Protectorate brought with them a “self-confident Victorian mystique of progress.”¹⁰⁴ Many of these men were holdovers from the Imperial British East Africa Company, a short-lived, financially disastrous experiment. Adventurers and entrepreneurs fashioned into administrators, they believed that “competitive individualism represented the driving force of progress and the highest stage of social development.” And that spirit led, as Bruce Berman argues, to a period of “intrusive and innovative interventions.”¹⁰⁵ These earliest fragments of the elder state began to use age and gender to free young men and women from their familial relationships as well as shield them from abuse. Using the language of racial paternalism, the state fretted over the right of Christian converts to leave home, the safety of kidnapped pawns, and the freedom of girls forced into slavery.¹⁰⁶ Officials developed welfare-oriented policies and institutions specifically for young people that aimed to treat them differently than adults. In 1902, young men who loitered about the railway station at Nairobi were arrested and taken to mission stations for education. Five years later, the governor ordered the construction of a reformatory where the protectorate’s worst offenders would receive tough discipline and an education—in much the same way as their counterparts in Britain’s famous Feltham Prison. Throughout the same period, the high court outlined regulations for a less severe form of corporal punishment for young male Africans brought before magistrates.

These “innovative interventions” supposedly ended in the 1920s as a conservative pall settled over the state. A new generation of British officials arrived who valued stability, orderliness, and traditionalism.¹⁰⁷ Everywhere they saw the crippling effects of what they called detribalization: unruly young warriors raiding for cattle, young men and women dancing and drinking together, women demanding the right to divorce their abusive husbands, children swarming towns and train stations to pick pockets and pilfer.

They sought ways to prevent what they believed to be the breakdown of “traditional” African life. They tried to strengthen the precarious authority of chiefs and establish local tribunals so local elder men could resolve conflicts over land, marriage, and law and order. In spite of this more conservative outlook, the innovative spirit of the early years of colonial rule did not vanish.¹⁰⁸ Protestant churches continued to press provincial administrators to outlaw certain cultural practices they deemed barbaric, such as female circumcision and abortion. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s—at the very height of this supposed conservatism—provincial administrators worked with chiefs to speed up the timing and shorten the duration of male initiation to free young men to seek employment. They also circumvented the authority of fathers who resisted sending their sons out to work by facilitating the sons’ efforts to find recruiters. At the same time, prodded by the International Labor Organization and the Colonial Office, technocrats in the departments unveiled new age-specific legislation, including the Juveniles Ordinance and the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Ordinance, to—in theory—protect young people from broken, abusive homes and workplace exploitation.

Concern for the well-being and development of the young—drawn from a sense of paternalism and driven by missionaries, metropolitan officials, and Africans—fueled the elder state’s innovative work throughout the interwar years. Elsewhere in Africa, significant steps to build state power around age occurred decades later, well after the 1940s, when a developmentalist ethos emerged within the British Empire.¹⁰⁹ In Kenya, these efforts began long before; and when officials of the elder state felt the sudden rush of development funds after World War II, they relied on past networks of expertise, practices, and institutions.¹¹⁰ Yet the postwar period did have a dramatic effect on the ambitions of the elder state—it morally and financially invigorated officials.¹¹¹ In both the departments and the provincial administration, officials busied themselves addressing the social and economic ills they believed had hampered their work for years.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the elder state’s influence was amplified by this renewed faith in the transformative power of colonial welfare and development. When the elder state came face-to-face with Mau Mau, it seized on the violence to deepen its role in the lives of young men. For officials in the department of community development as well as several provincial administrators, Mau Mau had revealed in the starkest of terms that fathers, elders, and chiefs had failed to exert sufficient control over young men.¹¹² One solution to Mau Mau was for the elder state to boldly step further into Gikuyu age-relations and offer itself up as an alternative elder with a new,

more orderly path to manhood. The involvement of the elder state ensured that the detention and rehabilitation of young Gikuyu differed dramatically from the violence of adult detention.¹¹³ In the waning days of empire, the British built a massive network of institutions for young men in the hopes of resolving the issues that had brought Mau Mau to life. And when independence came in 1963, many ancillaries of the elder state believed they had failed. Rather, they had strengthened the institutions of age by making them a source of state power. The elder state elevated arguments that had once occurred in households and among generations to the broader field of politics. And the first generation of African politicians eagerly took up the elder state's mantle. Political elites like Jomo Kenyatta found the language and relationships of age and the late colonial institutions for young people useful tools to craft a national culture and legitimize their authority.

SOURCES AND METHODS

This book draws on a mixed methods approach, blending archival material, life histories, and quantitative analysis. Most of the documentary evidence in this book comes from the Kenya National Archive. In the archive, I cast a wide net, examining files from nearly every corner of the colonial state, from the provincial administration, to the attorney general's office, to the departments of community development, education, labor, and prisons—among many others. This archival breadth broadens the scope of the book beyond being simply a study of the actions of local African councils and district commissioners or anxieties of municipal authorities and welfare officials. It allows me to explore the many ways a diverse group of young African men encountered an equally diverse group of colonial officials. Juggling archival evidence from these disparate corners of the state shows just how pervasive age and gender were in the cacophonous process of state making in Kenya.

I also made use of the British National Archives as well as archives at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Rhodes House Library at Oxford University, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine—to name just a few. Late in my research, I consulted the newly released Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) files deposited in the British National Archives. While the FCO material promises new revelations on the brutalities of the 1950s, they do not dramatically alter what we already know about the period. The new FCO files tell us far more about the lengths the British went to burn or bury the paper trail—an effort to shape a particular kind of history.¹¹⁴ For this book, the FCO files deepened what I had already found in the Kenya National Archives and from speaking with former detainees.

Together, this documentary evidence forms the backbone of the stories that follow.

Working with documents that detail the interactions between young Africans and colonial officials comes with a particular set of challenges. The ideas and institutions of the elder state were often propaganda pieces, very public performances of British benevolence. Labor inspections of sisal factories, camps for young Mau Mau detainees, or youth clubs for poor, illiterate country boys all tried to temper criticisms by missionaries and social reformers. If the work of the myriad people and institutions that made up the elder state was mere performance, then to tell this story risks perpetuating the very self-serving, face-saving publicity the British hoped to project all those years ago and perpetuate through a tampered archive. Much of my work, then, has been to get backstage, away from the pageantry. And there, the sources reveal much more. I found that the elder state was often at odds with itself, unsure how to best handle young African men. Sometimes, I met true believers: British officials who genuinely took interest in the well-being of young Africans and the civilizing mission.¹¹⁵ Their work, often in collaboration with Africans themselves, resulted in policies and programs generated locally, from within the state, rather than as the result of unwelcome, external pressure. But the best way to tease out such troublesome sources was to corroborate them with the memories of Kenyan men who had encountered the elder state in their youth. Regardless of the propaganda inherent in so much of the elder state's work, it had real, lasting consequences for the young men it circumcised, caned, incarcerated, educated, or wounded in battle. Listening to their voices, rarely heard during the performance, as well as the murmurs of dissenting officials arguing backstage, allows us to see past the theatricality of the elder state and its archive.

I conducted eighty interviews, nearly all of them in 2008, with men who came of age during colonial rule. Several Kenyan researchers helped me recruit these men and then facilitated and translated our conversations. John Gitau Kariuki, an experienced researcher who has worked with Robert Blunt and Daniel Branch, among many others, assisted me with my work in Central and Rift Valley Provinces. In Nyanza Province, I worked with the indomitable Henry Kissinger Adera, who had previously worked with Matthew Carotenuto and Derek Peterson. He recruited Luo and Kipsigis participants. Before each interview, we asked all our participants to use the language with which they felt most comfortable, and while most chose to speak in their first language, a few opted to speak Kiswahili or English.

We began our interviews only after I had completed most of my archival work. I had waited because I wanted to recruit men with firsthand

experiences of the issues and institutions I found most compelling in the documentary evidence. Once I realized how important spaces like the Kabete Approved School and the Wamumu Youth Camp had been to British efforts to shape African age and masculinity, I sought out men who had been incarcerated there. When I learned of the colonial state's preoccupation with the recruitment of young people in and migration out of Western Kenya, I conducted interviews with Luo and Kipsigis men who had left home in search of wages and a little adventure. Waiting in this way afforded me opportunities to speak with men such as Simon Kariuki, Alan Kanyingi, Thomas Tamutwa, and many others who could speak with authority about the thrill of buying clothes with their first paycheck or the agony of being caned by a prison official. In a few instances, I was able to interview men whom I had first encountered in the archival material. Take, for example, Simon Kariuki: I had read of him several times in letters among officials in the department of community development as well as a memoir of a former official, Geoffrey Griffin. Sitting with Simon in his small apartment in the three-story building he owns in Ongata-Rongai, we teased out the tensions between his memories today and colonial records filed away over sixty years earlier. Opportunities such as these revealed to me just how closely life histories and the documentary evidence aligned with one another. When I shared with men what the archive had to say about them, it gave them a chance to challenge and correct their recorded pasts.

Yet challenges shaped my research as much as these opportunities. The fading memories of the very old limited my work just as the vivid accounts of men like Simon Kariuki enriched it. I struggled to recruit men of advanced age who might tell me something of their lives in the 1920s and 1930s. When I did, I often found them too old or infirm to participate in an interview. First person life histories of men and women who lived through the early years of colonial rule are increasingly closed off to my generation of scholars. Nearly all of my interviews were with men who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s. The stories that follow are those of only a few generations; and within these generations, of a privileged few who thrived and survived. From these life histories alone, I cannot adequately track how ideas and practices surrounding age and masculinity changed over the course of the colonial period. Although I routinely asked the participants to tell me about how their forefathers came of age, I often found them using their fathers' and grandfathers' lives as a way of legitimizing their own struggles for manhood and maturity. In the end, I have relied on the archival record to show how different generations of men thought about age and masculinity over the course of the twentieth century.

I conducted these life histories in the immediate aftermath of the brutal postelection violence of 2007–2008 that left hundreds dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. The violence cast a long shadow over my conversations. I did not interview anyone who had been displaced by the violence. For some men, speaking about their pasts was a welcome distraction from the crisis. For others, age became a way of contextualizing and making sense of the violence. Numerous interviewees spoke of Kenya’s most pressing problems in terms of generation, not ethnicity. Our discussions ended in refrains about the disrespect generations now had for one another, of rudderless young men run amok, and of corrupt elder politicians desperate to hold on to power.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge I faced was being mindful of the age-relations and generational politics at play during my interviews. I quickly realized that elder men felt deeply uncomfortable speaking with me until they had a better sense of my own maturity. Often after spotting my wedding ring, they nodded approvingly and explained that I could clearly understand such things. Likewise, elder men did not want to discuss the intimate details of their initiations in front of young interpreters. Take for instance a very awkward group interview I conducted in Saunet. I had agreed to work with a young Kipsigis student from the area named Sammie Kiprof Cheruiyot. During our first interview with a local elder and his age-mates, they made it clear that they could not be entirely forthcoming. He was too young, they argued, to learn such things. Sammie was also hesitant to ask his seniors probing, personal questions.

From then on, I recruited and interviewed Kipsigis men with Henry Adera, a Luo who lived nearby in Awendo. Elder Kipsigis men found it much easier to discuss their experiences with two seemingly mature outsiders than with young members of their own community. A few times, Kipsigis men would gently rib Henry that they could share their initiation stories with him because Luos did not circumcise their sons. In my conversations with Gikuyu men in Central Kenya and the Rift Valley, I had the good fortune of being joined by John Gitau Kariuki, whose own maturity facilitated my conversations with elder men. In fact, Gitau eagerly established his own generational bona fides before each interview, a strategy that put elder men at ease with talking about sometimes very difficult, intimate subjects. Such generational tensions underscore the centrality of age in Kenya and the importance of this book. They also give me pause, as they should other researchers, when relying on young, educated men and women to help us conduct research with their elders. Moreover, these still-visible frictions

should call on historians to reevaluate and think more critically about earlier ethnographies by anthropologists, who often used underage interpreters to probe elders about things they had no right knowing. It begs the question of whether what we know from these early studies requires a more critical analysis of the age-relations embedded in their results.

The final method I employed in writing this book was analysis of three databases that I compiled using materials from the Kenya and British national archives. The first database consists of 10,410 cases of court-ordered corporal punishment of young men from 1928 to 1955. The second contains 7,423 cases of young offenders from 1938 to 1950 who were punished in a variety of ways, not just by corporal punishment. All these cases had been recorded into annual registers by officials in Nairobi and then sent to the Colonial Office for review. Unfortunately, the registers are incomplete. I could not locate those for the years during World War II, though it is possible that officials in Kenya did not submit them. Although incomplete, the cases provide historians with a great deal of information: among other things, an offender's age and ethnic background, the crime for which he was charged, and the location of the court where he stood trial, as well as the kind of punishment he received and its severity. I have used this wealth of information to provide rough sketches of those young men the colonial state found most threatening. The data provide historians with as much information about who these young men were as about why the British felt compelled to discipline them.

The third database is made up of 381 case files of inquiries made by the probation service into the lives of young male offenders committed to approved schools between 1947 and 1954. These reports are incredibly rich. I used these investigations by probation officers, who were often Africans, to glimpse the everyday lives and histories of Kenya's most serious young male offenders. Probation officers interviewed offenders, visited family homesteads, spoke with parents, and debated forms of punishment with one another and magistrates. The details are sometimes extraordinary—parents asking the state to incarcerate sons; offenders describing their first job, favorite subject in school, or life on the streets; and, most intriguing of all, probation officers' own biases and the characteristics they sought to aid in their decisions of whether boys should be institutionalized by the state. Together, my reading of the documentary evidence, conversations with Kenyan men, and analysis of these three data sets offer a rich, complex, and compelling history of young men's coming-of-age and their encounter with the state.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

An Uncertain Age begins when a boy's manhood begins: his initiation. In chapter 1, I explore the ways British provincial administrators and chiefs altered male initiation practices and the effects of these changes on young men's coming-of-age. During the interwar years, though likely in the years before, district officials and elders lowered the age of initiates, eliminated important ritual practices, and curbed or ended young men's time as warriors. The elder state became an active participant in the most intimate moments among male generations, trying to push newly made men into the wage labor market and discipline their behavior. The crucible of manhood shifted away from a constellation of ritual practices to circumcision, which became the primary indicator that a boy had become a man. Despite these changes, men defended this diverted path, claiming that it still allowed them to enjoy their youth and strive for manhood.

In chapter 2, I examine the experiences of young men from Western Kenya who left home and traveled the colony working for wages from the 1920s to the early 1950s. Leaving home and earning wages led to tense negotiations among male generations. Sons viewed their newfound financial and spatial independence from kin as a chance to rearticulate age and gender. They enjoyed themselves in new ways, including buying Western clothes, drinking alcohol, and trying out new dance styles. Many fathers and chiefs disapproved of such cultural deviance and tried to prevent them from going back out to work. Other young men returned home with their wages, prepared to contribute to the household. For their part, provincial administrators and labor officers encouraged, and sometimes outright compelled, young men to live and work beyond their fathers' households. Wary that boys picking tea far from home might weaken elder authority or ignite international outrage, the elder state trod carefully. It drafted child labor laws, carried out workplace inspections, and investigated families' complaints of runaway sons.

The elder state did not encourage every avenue young men took to earn an age. In chapter 3, I follow the lives of young men living and working on the streets of Nairobi, the capital city of the colony, from the 1920s until the early 1950s. On this urban frontier, young men eked out livings in the legitimate urban workforce, the black market, and the criminal underworld. Street life afforded young men new ways to form masculinities, bonds with age-mates, and relationships with seniors and juniors beyond kinship. The British tried to restrict young men's urban migration, believing that town

life made them undisciplined and uncontrollable. Municipal authorities rounded up the underemployed or homeless, magistrates charged them with vagrancy, and police repatriated them home. Repatriation became the elder state's first, furtive step to inculcate in young men alternate, colonial models of appropriate mature, masculine behavior.

In chapters 4 and 5, I turn to the elder state's efforts to define and punish perpetrators of the most serious crimes through corporal punishment and institutionalization. Corporal punishment was a widespread, age-specific practice in the colony. Both African communities and colonial courts relied heavily on physical violence to punish boys. The young found caning terrifying and painful, and they conceptualized corporal punishment, whether meted out by parents or colonial officials, as part of a broader effort by adults to discipline their immaturity. Magistrates also institutionalized the most serious young offenders in approved schools. I trace the methods staff used to transform hardened house burglars and recidivist vagrants into obedient subjects. They drew on the latest techniques developed in Britain and the United States, such as vocational training and rigorous work-time discipline, as well as the very local practices of male circumcision and age grading. Young men rejected and reappropriated these efforts as they went about their own journeys toward adulthood behind bars. Some parents even negotiated for and demanded from colonial officials the incarceration of their delinquent sons.

By the 1940s, inadequate education, chronic underemployment, and debilitating poverty pushed men's plans for marriage and adulthood further into the horizon. In their frustration and confusion, they turned to violent protest. In chapters 6 and 7, I narrow the focus of the book for a moment to examine the Mau Mau war and the brutal British counterinsurgency of the 1950s. Mau Mau was one of many violent uprisings led by young men during the colonial period, yet it offers historians a useful case for how men argued over age and competing masculinities. The war became a new means for young Gikuyu to express their masculinity, lay claim to maturity, and capture the mobility that had eluded them. Their efforts ran aground against the violent, surging tide of the British counterinsurgency. A handful of influential British officials—in concert with conservative loyalists as well as Christian elite Gikuyu—identified Mau Mau as a conflict about age-relations. Together they framed Mau Mau as a form of juvenile delinquency and the failure of elders and the state to adequately discipline them. Their solution to Mau Mau led to a dramatic expansion of the elder state, in which the British sought to wield generational authority more forcefully, quite literally certifying young men's maturity in return for their acquiescence.

This work began at the Wamumu Youth Camp, built by the department of community development in 1955 to “rehabilitate” nearly two thousand Mau Mau detainees under the age of eighteen. In chapter 7, we visit Wamumu, where camp staff tried to unmake the masculinity of former Mau Mau insurgents, infantilizing them as undisciplined boys. Then, using circumcision rites, education, sports, propaganda, and job placement, they reimagined them as mature, disciplined subjects. Wamumu became a state-sponsored rite of passage aimed at defeating Mau Mau and entrenching the state’s authority through age and gender. But the elder state did not stop at Wamumu. In the late 1950s, officials believed they faced a colony-wide “youth crisis.” The issues that had driven the Mau Mau generation to war remained unresolved: underemployment, lack of education, poverty, political disenfranchisement, and racial inequality. Officials feared that they faced a new, rising young generation of frustrated insurgents. And so the elder state tried to piece together a youth service, massive in scope and size compared to those found in other colonies. The Wamumu program was distributed throughout Kenya in approved schools for young offenders and in hundreds of newly built youth clubs serving tens of thousands of poor young men and women in the countryside.

As the sun set on the British Empire, officials lamented the failure of this new network of institutions they had built for the young. Yet the elder state found new life in the postcolony, and age became a powerful tool of the state in newly independent Kenya. In chapter 8, I show how young men demanded action from Jomo Kenyatta and other politicians whom they had carried to power. In response, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, created the National Youth Service and preserved late colonial programs and rhetoric. Through the elder state, Kenyatta and the first generation of Kenyan leaders recast themselves as political elders tasked with leading a young nation of young citizens. In fact, they brought the elder state to fruition, institutionalizing maturity and masculinity as essential tools of statecraft. Young men became instruments of the elder state to build a fledgling nation and perpetuate a single generation’s grip on power—one that would last nearly as long as colonial rule.