

new generations of productively and reproductively competent adults," it expectedly addressed pregnancy matters.¹ Through the stories Kwere women told, Vuorela learned of the way women kept watch over their matrilineage's married daughters so that they were apprised immediately of incipient pregnancy. They explained that after marriage it was customary for a menstruating woman to sleep near her female elders. When a woman stopped coming to their elders' homes to sleep, it alerted them that her menstrual cycle had ceased and it was taken as a sign of a new pregnancy. After an approximate five-month waiting period a woman's pregnancy could be acknowledged openly, and she was led subsequently through important pregnancy coaching in which she learned to care properly for herself and her fetus.² Kwere speakers referred to those pregnancy instructions as *kukowa*.³

Similarly, Mawinza's work among Lugulu speakers revealed that at the time a woman was believed to be carrying a fully-fledged fetus, sometime between three and eight months, she was led through *mkowa* coaching. If a woman was carrying her first child, one aspect of the instruction stipulated that her grandmother or other elderly women present her with a white cloth that alerted people to her pregnancy. As delivery time neared she received further instruction on caring for her child and herself, which included learning about pregnancy prohibitions.⁴ These congruent accounts hinted that probing *kukowa*'s etymology could prove fruitful. 4

Further investigation revealed that, among descendant Lugulu, Kutu, Zaramo, and Kwere speakers, this term uniformly named instructions imparted during pregnancy, but Ruvu speakers outside of the ER subgroup did not so identify it.⁵ Based on this evidence, it would appear that **kukowa* derived from a verb rooted as early as the proto-East-Ruvu period of about 600–900 CE, suggesting tentatively that PER speakers may have innovated the term to name those instructions. However, upon further investigation, attestations of the same root outside of the Ruvu subgroup of languages uncovered additional possibilities. 5

A cognate verb root in the Tsonga language of the Botatwe branch of Eastern-Savanna Bantu names the period when a girl attained marriageable status. And as a noun in that language it named the instruction initiates undergo to reach a "marriageable state." Specifically the plural noun *makhoba* referred to "girls undergoing initiation."⁶ Taken together, this evidence requires the inference that the PER use of this word likely represents an instance of relict retention of an Eastern-Savanna-Bantu period instruction imparted to girls who had reached a locally recognized level of social and biological maturity. 6

**Kukowa*'s preservation in contemporary East Ruvu languages sheds light on possible historical developments regarding pregnancy-related restrictions among Ruvu speakers. In particular, those instructions frequently center on food prohibitions anchored in a view that particular foods harmed or created dangerous circumstances for unborn children and 7

pregnant women. Kwere speakers, for example, advised against eating eggs and the meat of small burrow-dwelling animals, arguing that, just as such creatures peak out and then turn inward back to their holes to stay, so too might a child peek out and turn back, refusing to emerge.⁷ Zalamo speakers maintain that eating eggs and breast meat lead to the birth of gaunt, unhealthy children.⁸ And Kagulu speakers instructed women not to eat eggs or their babies would be born without hair on their heads, which would impede important *mogo* ceremonies whose effectiveness depended on shaving a child's head shortly after birth.⁹ Additionally, Kagulu speakers taught that eating honey and sugarcane resulted in dangerous birthing because they caused a woman's pelvis to narrow.¹⁰

Among Ruvu speakers, egg prohibitions were the most widely shared. But there was a parallel also between one Gogo clothing tradition and the earlier Lugulu example involving white cloth. Mnyampala reports that during the third or fourth month of pregnancy, Gogo women were "brought a white cloth called *kumutumbiciza*. This cloth is worn around the womb every day until she gives birth."¹¹ Such pregnancy related practices highlight evidence of shared beliefs ultimately concerned with the successful birth of descendants. Such admonitions and instruction represent just a small example of the widespread teaching practices common among pregnant Ruvu women and their matrilineages. But they do provide a sampling of matters **kukowa* instruction addressed. **8**

Still, we as yet know little about the history of **kukowa* between the second millennium BCE and proto-East Ruvu emergence nearly 2,000 years later. Could it be that such meaningful institutions fell out of importance all together? While it is possible, the more likely scenario is that scholars have not yet asked pointed questions about pregnancy and the way societies managed it. There is little doubt that **kukowa* instructions were guarded knowledge held within the domain of women and that people likely continue to protect it. The unveiling of this aspect of Bantu and Ruvu history in societies serves only as a starting point for the kinds of histories that are still retrievable. If made the center of further study, commonalities and divergences in **kukowa* institutions that date to the proto-Ruvu period and beyond could well be recovered. **9**

But there are still pregnancy-related themes about which we can say more. In the proto-Ruvu era and in descendant Ruvu languages, particular words identified women who played a part in instructional and birthing needs. Importantly, some of these also are terms suggestive of periods of contact with non-Ruvu speakers. The proto-Kaskazi term **mkunga* appears to have named both the role of an older person and that of "midwives/birth attendants." Its structure and meaning indicate that early Kaskazi speakers took a proto-Savanna-Bantu-period verb **10**

meaning "to initiate" and applied it to senior women who attended or instructed in pregnancy and childbirth.¹² This word and meaning were then retained through to the proto-Ruvu period.

Later, two additional nouns for "birth attendants" made their way into Ruvu. Appearing in West Ruvu's Sagala and Gogo as well as Kagulu, the term *mdala* shows the uniquely Njombe outcome /d/ and can therefore be identified as an Njombe loanword referring to both birth attendants and senior women in these societies. Because it also occurs to the north among the Langi, this term can be argued to have spread via the West Ruvu group, probably from Gogo, to Langi.¹³ **Mulala* is a third Ruvu term used to name birth attendants. Because of its limited distribution in Lugulu, Kwere, and Doe for "old woman" and "birth attendant," its source would have been a proto-East-Ruvu word that carried both meanings.¹⁴ Notably, this is, in fact, the same root word as appears in **-dala*, but with regular Ruvu sound correspondences rather than Njombe sound changes. It therefore represents the proto-Ruvu term for a female elder, which in proto-East Ruvu, in parallel semantic fashion to the borrowed term **-dala* in West Ruvu and Kagulu, took on the extended meaning "birth attendant/midwife."

11

Clearly, we have here an ancient Mashariki and probably Savanna-Bantu cultural idea of birth attendants and their place in the age structure of society. Because many of these terms carry an indication that birth attendants were senior women, it suggests a shared understanding that such women were qualified for the role by their own experience in giving birth. The term **mkunga* carries an additional underlying meaning, that only people who have been initiated can bestow such lessons to younger generations.

12

Beyond skills involved in safely delivering children and instructing women during pregnancy, birth attendants likely played roles in post-birthing observances centered in part on religious beliefs that newborn infants emerged from the realm of the ethereal to the physical world. During that transition, newborn infants were susceptible to illness brought on by the malice of other people or by ancestral spirits, who sometimes attempted to keep the child in the spirit realm. In some Kaguru communities, as Beidelman describes, for the first three or four days following delivery, mothers and infants were confined to the house where birth attendants and matrilineal kin looked after their needs. During that time the infant's umbilical cord dried, fell off, and was then secretly buried. But even after the child's navel healed, the attendants remained protective of the child's navel because it marked a point of entry into the child's physical body. In their view, a child's passage from the ethereal realm of the spirits was a protracted process.¹⁵ Similarly, Vidunda speakers maintained that newborns and mothers had to remain in the house for seven days to give the umbilical cord time to dry and fall off. After delivery, Vidunda and Lugulu infants, and sometimes their mothers, were given protective medicines prepared from *mpinga* trees to drink before children were nursed.¹⁶

13

Kwere speakers highlighted some commonalities: **14**

On the day going into labor the midwife will be called and the husband will prepare a place for delivery, a temporary shed called the *lago*.¹⁷ After delivery they all come to the girl's mother's house or her grandmother's place where mother and child remain indoors until the child's umbilical cord drops off. After this, the midwife, the *mulala*, sweeps the young mother's bedroom clean, making sure that the cord and any other waste related to the newborn is closely guarded and collected together.¹⁸ The midwife then buried it at the *mkole*¹⁹ tree the following morning.²⁰

Kwere and Zaramo placement of the umbilical cord at the **mkole* tree, which is associated with the matriliney and fertility in a widespread range of Ruvu languages and was also the place where religio-ritual offerings were presented to ancestors as supplication for bringing life into the community. **15**

In Lugulu societies, men were expected to stay away from women as they neared delivery. The people called to watch over laboring women included the woman's grandmothers and sisters of both lineal sides. Once the child was born, her sisters would occasionally show the baby in the space of the doorway when they went to inform the father of the birth. Until the child's navel healed from the umbilical displacement, mothers and children were kept indoors. When they finally emerged celebratory religio-ritual ceremonies are held over an eight-day period.²¹ **16**

When one interrogates both ethnographic and linguistic evidence, similarities in pregnancy and birthing practices across Ruvu language communities are evident. From the time pregnancy was suspected, members of Ruvu women's matrilineages appear to have played important roles in insuring healthy pregnancies and deliveries. Following that, the religio-ritual importance of waiting for the proper navel healing was critical. The attention given to the new mother by her matrilineage foregrounds the importance of children to the maintenance of clan and lineage in matrilineal societies.²² Fittingly, the women involved in this were those clanswomen who had given birth to the young women themselves and guided them through later female initiation instruction, which itself aimed above all at securing fertility, a topic we will return to later in the chapter. **17**

The importance of children did not end after the birth of a woman's first child, though at least in some Ruvu languages the first birth may have carried special social meanings. Across Ruvu languages, special names were used to denote children's order of birth, and although it is no longer standard practice to use them, they are remembered. About the middle of the first millennium CE, the term likely applied to a woman's firstborn child was **chaudele*. A second child was **magati*. A third-born would be **mwanabure*, and **mzuanda* was applied to all **18**

subsequent children.²³ The question begged by this practice is, what did such naming signify? Perhaps it was a way of drawing attention to women who had given birth, although in the context of these matrilineal societies it likely carried more meaning.

Anthropologist Marja-Liisa Swantz's research among Zaramo speakers captured an example of what recognizing birth order may have meant in earlier times. Specifically, she offered a basis for positing a hypothesis of the significance of a granddaughter's fertility. She found that in Zaramo communities the time when a woman's first female child reached puberty was a time of joyous celebration in her maternal grandmother's life because a granddaughter's fertility effectively guaranteed lineage survival, and for that reason *chaudele* celebrations were held in their honor.²⁴ The name of the celebration parallels precisely the way early Ruvu communities named a woman's firstborn child. Could it be that this ceremony exposes the earlier usages of the term? **19**

Interrogating this question as well as developing research on the potential early meaning of the ways of naming children who came after the firstborn is not only intriguing, it is important. That is because that research could develop our understanding about just how the matrilineal line may have been viewed from both social and religious perspectives. And it intimates that in matrilineal societies, as has been suggested by other researchers, grandmothers personified power and importance in their communities.²⁵ Such research may begin to shed some light, for instance, on the missing pieces of our understanding about women in these societies, which have been usually only gleaned by the prominent role that grandmothers commonly have in marriage negotiations for their granddaughters. Indeed, in more recent times it remained common that male suitors had to bring messages of their desire to propose to both the maternal grandmother and a young woman's uncle.²⁶ The etymologies of the majority of terms for the early Ruvu practice of labeling children according to birth order is something that we cannot say much about. But its early presence and its persistence suggest that it may have been of wide significance in early Ruvu-speaking communities. Moreover, the added evidence suggests that we have only begun to understand the place and power of matrilineal grandmothers in their communities. **20**

Children in their Formative Years

In early proto-Ruvu societies young children probably spent most of their time near the homestead. As in many Bantu-speaking societies, there were not heavily gendered distinctions made among young children. And they likely had relative freedom when it came to the spaces in and out of which they could move. As part of the immediate domestic sphere they were probably nearest women in their community from infancy to early youth, which would have **21**

meant that they were witness to the sphere of domesticity, learning about all that was involved in establishing and maintaining homesteads. But once they began to reach a recognized level of biological and social maturity, their social status and treatment changed.

Groups of boys deemed ready were taken through at least one, and perhaps even two, initiation observances developed from earlier Bantu institutions. During those times they were taught about sociocultural responsibilities normative for their level of maturation, and they were circumcised. In contrast, upon reaching menarche, girls were singularly escorted through religio-ritual instructions that date to at least the proto-Eastern-Savanna-Bantu period of roughly the second millennium BCE. Associated lessons likely centered on insuring the girl's fertility, but she also was taught about matters expected to be among her coming experiences: marriage, motherhood, and sexuality. In Swantz's view, the observances served "to protect, support, nourish and reaffirm female power and fertility."²⁷ Their initiation, in contrast to what we know about boys', appears to have more heavily involved religious aspects, although at a fundamental level both observances involved the use of ethereal and physical medicine. A girl's female elders played an understood role in making sure that she, as the bearer of potential children, brought forth new members for her matrilineal line. **22**

Girls in Northeast-Coastal Bantu Matrilineal Societies

In Ruvu communities it seems that among the primary factors influencing what communities expected from people depended on the inseparable processes of social and biological maturation. From the time of birth, family members attended to their daughters and sons as a way of imbuing them with myriad combinations of protection, knowledge, and responsibilities. **23**

Ruvu language communities were descendants of generations of Bantu people who had organized their societies along matrilineal lines of descent and inheritance. Of the many Kaskazi descendants who arose out of the pervasive matrilineal structures of the early Mashariki period, the PNECB people were among those who persisted in employing matrilineal systems of social organization. Among the PNECB descendants, however, Ruvu language communities in central-east Tanzania most staunchly held to their matrilineal ideals over the long run of history. Even in the face of increasing focus on patrilineages in coastal communities, and contemporaneous exchanges with patrilineal Njombe-, Eastern-Sahelian-, and Cushitic-speaking populations on their northern and western borders, Ruvu societies did not relent from keeping the prominence of the matrilineage entrenched in their cultures. **24**

While the outward sociopolitical prominence of the matrilineage were weakened in the colonial period of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sociocultural and religious aspects supporting and empowering the matrilineage did not cease.

Since the proto-Bantu period, community members gave close attention to girls approaching puberty. It may be that because of a girl's anticipated contribution to her matrilineage and its associated social and religious windfalls, communities were especially concerned that she be properly prepared for motherhood. The primacy of motherhood in Bantu societies—both historical and contemporary—is exceedingly important and, like agriculture, it remains very much women's purview. While not every Bantu society gives equal attention to the details of the preparation of girls for their imminent life positions, there is good comparative evidence that is useful for understanding that preparing a girl for anticipated motherhood in all likelihood involved a set of ceremonies whose primary emphases were to insure fertility and readiness for sexual relationships.²⁸ A close examination of observed life positions offers insights into these aspects of Ruvu history. **25**

People in proto-Ruvu societies referred to young girls as **kihinza*. This word's root dates to the proto-Kaskazi period where **-pinja* designated "a (maturing?) girl."²⁹ Following that period, some Kati-derived Langi and Njombe speakers applied it more specifically to a girl whose breasts began to show.³⁰ PNECB speakers, also of Kati origins, may have used it with an equivalent meaning when they settled in central-east Tanzania. But in the middle of the first millennium CE, proto-Ruvu-speaking descendants began to apply that term in a slightly different way, to name girls who had not yet shown evidence of breast development. Later, when a girl did begin to develop breasts, it signaled a transitional time recognized by her community. From the ethnography we glean that it likely was at that point of physical maturation that her community members metaphorically referred to her as "having milk."³¹ **26**

As we know, the time when young girls' breasts begin to develop is highly variable, which is probably why this transitory period was not assigned a numerical age. But when she reached that point of development she was called **kigoli*. This designation parallels the Langi and Njombe uses of *muhinja*, and thus maintains the idea associated with a level of maturity that had been acknowledged in earlier Kati Bantu speech communities. The addition of the **kigoli* phase in a girl's life raises some questions. Its structure, which adds the **ki-* prefix, is suggestive of her being called the thing having the quality of **-goli*, or more probably in Northeast-Coastal languages, in which **ki-* became a new diminutive suffix, the younger person with the quality of **-goli*. But what does that mean historically? To discern this, it helps to examine the word's root in the Kaskazi period. **27**

Historian David Schoenbrun found in the Lakes region that the root's many meanings were ultimately tied to what he glossed as "maternal power, crown of motherhood." Several of **-goli's* reflexes, for example, were linked to such ideas as women as mistresses of their homes, women as new mothers, and more. Its meanings in wider Kaskazi descendant languages were tied in less specific terms to name a women.³² Based on its breadth of generalized meanings in Kaskazi languages, including areas outside of the Lakes languages, it likely emerged in the first half of the last millennium BCE meaning "woman or female," and later took on more nuanced meanings such as those in the Lakes and Northeast-Coastal Bantu examples. **28**

In later eras, various Kaskazi descendants let it drop out of use altogether, opting to use other available designations for women, while others retained it. But some time just before or during the proto-Ruvu language emergence, they attached a noun class prefix, **-ki/vi*, connoting a "small/young **-goli*" or, more specifically, "the girl soon to be initiated." Of course, a question we might ask is why would they do this? Why add to the life positions of girls and soon-to-be women? **29**

There are some possibilities we can consider. The Ruvu **kigoli* position was somewhat transitional because it marked the impending start of a more significant event anticipated by her family, her menstruation, and subsequent marriage.³³ The most undesirable thing for a matrilineage would have been to lose their daughters to a patrilineal community where descent and inheritance passed through the male line. The **kigoli* period was likely a common time when suitors began to notice their daughters; it thus behooved them to pay close attention to just whom was interested in marrying her. But another practical reason is that at the coast, where kidnapping and enslavement is likely to have been a continuous possibility, Ruvu people may have been particularly watchful of losing their daughters. After all, they represented the longevity of their societies. **30**

Other possibilities to consider may have had to do with the anticipation of and desire to plan for what followed a girl's **kigoli* life stage. If we consider the elaborate ceremonies that characterized her next life position, which we will turn to next, then the **kigoli* designation may have served a number of additional useful purposes beyond tightening their guard over their daughters. It could have been the time when potential marriage partners were alerted to a possible wife, which would have given her suitors time to gather the necessary and valuable items her matrilineage demanded for permission to marry. Concurrently, it could have also provided her lineage members with ample warning so that they could begin preparations for the expensive ceremony that ended her initiation period. **31**

The regular naming of these phases in a girl's life by Ruvu people, which they appear to have done more than any other of the PNECB descendent societies, surely did not happen for the sheer sake of naming. Given the historical and geographical circumstances in which Ruvu peoples sat, couched between the Indian Ocean world and the deeper interior, where traffic **32**

flowed both to and from the central Tanzanian coast, they were dealing with unique social environments. Though complete answers to this aspect of their social history needs further research, there are many more aspects of this history we can turn to by looking at the life position to which the **kigoli* transitioned.

Much more ancient than we know **kihinja* or **kigoli* to be is the life position connected to young women's designation as **mwali*. Across a wide range of Bantu societies this word is related in meaning, though with expected nuances, to its earliest proto-Bantu root, **-yàdí*.³⁴ Its most inclusive early meaning would appear to be "woman of child-bearing potential." This word related directly to female fertility. In recent Ruvu societies the **mwali* designation remained in use. It named the female religio-rituals associated with menarche as well as the label applied to the girl once these ceremonies were completed. In this institution, then, we are dealing with the retention of a long-recognized Bantu life position. Like its equally persistent counterpart among many East-Central-African Bantu-speaking societies, the **mwali* period was framed by formal ceremonial observances, the most prominent feature of which included a period of quiet seclusion that ended with elaborate emergence celebrations. It was likely the most momentous occasion centered on living people. We will see that its religious aspects placed primary emphasis on securing fertility through demonstration to lineal ancestors that the young woman was worthy and ready to add to her matrilineage. Convincing the ancestors of this involved extended training for girls in community beliefs, self-control, and supplication.³⁵

It is important at the onset to note that some researchers have placed disproportionate emphasis on sexual aspects of female initiation rites.³⁶ While it would be inaccurate to suggest that female sexual expression was unimportant to the overall objectives of the **mwali* initiation rites, the overall linguistic evidence attached to the religio-ritual events—and the ethnography read in light of these—suggests strongly that a woman's fertility held the place of primary importance when the totality of the events are considered. Such an emphasis, or reasoning, for the **mwali* life position would make far more obvious sociocultural sense in matrilineal and matrifocal societies than imagining that marriage and male sexual pleasure were most important. This is particularly clear when one considers that in these societies marriages appear to have been easily dissolved and that a woman's value as a member of her matrilineal clan was not determined by her marital status or by her partner's sexual satisfaction, but rather by her strengthening the clan by bearing offspring that belonged to *her* matrilineal line.³⁷

Mwali Instruction and Ceremonies

The event of a girl becoming a *mwali* is a very important day. Everybody takes part in the common joy, especially the women who shout, sing and dance up and down the village saying "*chereko, chereko*." The *mkunga* (the girl's instructor) sings "*mwali wangu, mwali wangu*" (my *mwali*). The mother of the girl sings "*Hungo langu, hungo langu*" (the child I gave birth to).³⁸

Ethnographic and linguistic evidence across the Ruvu languages is exceptionally helpful for gleaning particular features of **mwali* religio-ritual ceremonies. Through them we can point to some of the nuanced details that may have characterized the ceremonies in early times. Simultaneously, we can use ethnographic details to give texture to those items that are linguistically verifiable elements. 35

A **mwali*'s initiation began with menstruation; her **mwali* life position began when initiation observances came to a close. What is not so certain is when the life position terminated. According to my informants and to ethnographic data, a woman might be called **mwali* until she was beyond childbearing years, while others have commented that one was a **mwali* until she gave birth to her first child.³⁹ One thing was common, however—senior females were not **mwali*. This was made clear during the course of fieldwork when informants were asked if nearby women, who physically appeared to be well past childbearing age, were considered **mwali*. Many of them laughed at the naiveté of the question indicating that such women had moved past such designations. If we remember that the variability in duration was most likely linked to biological maturation and the moment when women either had a first child or ceased to have children, then the vagueness of when the position ended has probably always varied from woman to woman. 36

Because announcements, such as the example above, were likely made when a girl began menstruating, it probably was not long before many people knew.⁴⁰ That is because after the **kigoli*/soon-to-be **mwali* informed people close to her of her transition, they would have conveyed the news to her wider community. Those people, who likely comprised members of her matrilineage of her grandmother's generation, then took the news to others.⁴¹ After coming together they may have moved through their home areas ululating or singing in a manner that the community understood to mean a young woman had, according to the Zaramo, "broken the limb"/"broken the winnowing basket," or "cut the leaf," as it was called among Gogo speakers.⁴² Their broadcasts spread the news to her lineage, clan, and beyond.⁴³ The cause for elation was that she exhibited the most important biological indication of *potential* fertility. Those announcements, too, likely served to let prospective suitors or her 37

soon-to-be husband know that her initiation period had begun. In all Ruvu groups it looks to have been common for some **mwali* to emerge from seclusion prepared to move directly into partnership as a wife or co-wife.⁴⁴

Upon the onset of a girl's menstruation, women in her matrilineage may have presented her with a special cloth, proto-Ruvu **lupati*, which she was instructed to use in catching the blood from her first menstrual cycle.⁴⁵ Later, the cloth served important purposes in religio-ritual observances. Until those observances were held, the cloth was placed under the **mwali*'s grandmother's bed or in another protected place.⁴⁶ At or near the conclusion of her seclusion period, the cloths and other items were taken to a sacred site and buried.⁴⁷ In some cases it was said that the precise location was kept secret so that people could not tamper with the goods for evil purposes such as witchcraft. In other situations, the initiate herself was taken along to the site because some of her instruction occurred there.⁴⁸

A **mwali* remained in special quarters located near her family home. For the duration of her stay, careful attention was paid to fattening and strengthening her body. While in seclusion she was clothed from the waist down, so that her upper body was exposed. And she had to be mindful of keeping her exposure to the sun limited so that her skin would become pale.⁴⁹ Furthermore, she was shown how to keep her skin softened with oils and clay-based emollients. One of the identified substances Ruvu elders remembered using were white clay-like substances made of pulverized grains and water, which were regularly smoothed onto the skin.⁵⁰ Some informants referred to this process as **kuboboda*, which represents a word likely transferred into proto-Ruvu during a period of contact with Eastern Sahelian speakers in the middle of the first millennium CE.⁵¹

The application of white clay has been an important facet of Bantu ceremonial expression since early times.⁵² Such treatments were intended in part to beautify but religio-ritual medical uses were also an aspect of the treatment.⁵³ Turning to the ethnography, we get recent descriptions and rationales for these treatments. According to Beidelman:

During these [seclusion] days the initiate must not bathe but instead is frequently dusted with chaff from the grain she is processing. This is sometimes mixed with water to produce a white paint-like paste. The whiteness is thought to cool or regularize the girl, who is otherwise heated by her sexuality. The initiate is encouraged to eat as much as she can, especially meat and broth, which are thought to strengthen.⁵⁴

Here anthropologist T. O. Beidelman illuminates a potential medical reason for using a white paste on her skin. It cooled the body. It was a remedy for, in his accounting, a "hyperactive libido." My own research did not dispute that such substances were used to cool the body, however, I was not told it was related to regulating a girl's sexuality. Instead, cooling was

described as a preventative measure that brought her body to a state of neutrality in core temperature, which some people intimated kept spirits at bay, and which consequently maintained her health.⁵⁵

While secluded, the **mwali* was required to follow additional customs. To insure she slept while positioned in the requisite fetal position, her instructors provided an exceptionally small bed, which early East Ruvu people called **-tego*.⁵⁶ This word's history is tied to a root whose various structures and meanings have been commonly associated with medicinal items linked to fertility throughout Ruvu languages.⁵⁷ It was believed that her bed or the way she had to position herself in it contributed to her fertility. Perhaps in some metaphorical sense we can say it was a "fertility catcher or trap." The distribution across Ruvu societies of such a bed suggests it was a proto-Ruvu period aspect of initiation, although we cannot reconstruct a proto-Ruvu word specific to it. **42**

The initiate's family took care of the instructional aspects of her initiation. Her primary mentor was known as a **-kungwi*.⁵⁸ This term preserves a proto-Mashariki noun meaning "an initiation leader." Its earlier historical origins trace back at least to the proto-Savanna-Bantu period, when the verb from which it derives had the meaning "to initiate" in general. Here, proto-Ruvu retention of the root and its presence in Bondei and Zigua languages of the Seuta subgroup of NECB as well as in Swahili of the Sabaki subgroup confirms the retention of this noun and the social role it denotes from the PNECB period and the continuation of that role right down to recent centuries.⁵⁹ Moreover, the *namkungwi* role also exists among Nyanja-Chewa speakers in Malawi, which suggests it is a role enduring matrilineal societies of Mashariki origins have preserved until recent times. **43**

Mwali* initiates among the proto-Ruvu also had an assistant, the **mnandi*, whose role was to help in her care.⁶⁰ In early Ruvu times, this person probably was a member of the initiate's matrilineage, although in later times, there seem to have been some adaptations to the role. A description of Zalamo **-kungwi* and **mnandi* assistants states: **44

Two guardians were chosen for the girl, the kungwi and the nandi. If the girl was engaged, nandi was always the sister of the bridegroom; kungwi could be the grandmother on the mother's side. If the girl was not engaged, the kungwi could be chosen from the mother's side and the nandi from the father's family or vice versa. It was important that the kungwi was capable of instructing the girl, but other women could also be called in to do the instructing.⁶¹

The roles played by the various women in the excerpt are seen as quite flexible, but there does seem to have been some regard for pulling a woman from the line of the patrilineage of her father or, if she had one, her husband. This participation by both lineal lines is not **45**

inconsistent with the Ruvu recognition of bilateral descent; however, the evidence also suggests that the girl's matrilineage was most prominent in the roles associated with the spiritual aspects of her fertility.

The instructions **mwali* received covered the aspects of life expected to follow seclusion: marriage, sexual relations, and pregnancy. Of these, the question of her fertility predominated as a concern throughout the collected ethnography. Related to this concern, religious beliefs and observances were important because ancestral sanction was believed central to fertility and pregnancy. **46**

In proto-Ruvu communities some **mwali* instructions were likely imparted at the base of an **mkole* tree, a shrub tree with small red buds that secrete a white sap when pierced. The sap turns red upon drying. The sap's change, some claim, was evocative of an imagery connected with menstruation, and is thus widely associated with fertility and matriliney.⁶² Because of its connection to fertility, it is widely associated with rites conducted in connection with pregnancy and birthing.⁶³ In some cases a **mwali*'s instructor would tell her, "it is the tree from which you have gotten your growth." After that she might be instructed to hug the tree so that its power of fertility would be imparted to her.⁶⁴ Among Kwere and Zaramo speakers, **mkole* customs commonly involved concerns represented by beads of different colors that connoted medical and religious meanings. According to Rashid, among Kwere speakers, "the white bead symbolized her mother's breast; black, pubic hair; red, menstrual blood." The **mwali* placed these under her tongue while at the **mkole*.⁶⁵ **47**

Mkole* ceremonial songs suggest a sense of teachings once linked with the tree. Here are excerpts of songs Zalamo elders sang: **48

You, mwali, you have taken hold of mkole, it is being full grown. You have held mkole, you are now big.

Some do not start menstruating their breasts grow. They die if they do not menstruate. They cannot come to the ngoma of their friend unless this has been done to them.

Mwali does not wash, she doesn't cut nails or plait her hair. This is for the coming out preparation. The dirt is hidden in a secret place. It is not buried, for then your child would die.⁶⁶

Embedded in its words are many underlying beliefs centered on a girl's potential fertility that inspired the activities involved in initiation processes.

In another example, East Ruvu speakers believed they were required to demonstrate their readiness for motherhood through careful care of "*mwana nya nhiti*" (carved of wood and occasionally clay) or "*mwana sesele*" (made of a gourd) figurines.⁶⁷ Though commonly referenced as "dolls" in the historiography, they were more than a child's plaything. Both were linked to notions of fertility through connection to spiritual forces considered central to a girl's ability to become pregnant.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, much of the published discussion surrounding these figurines, as seen above, has commonly stressed what outsiders understood to be symbolic, functional dimensions of the practice. Simply stated, it was often assumed that her actions with the doll amounted to a young girl practicing to be a mother or wife. But such conclusions largely assess the event without emphasizing the religious understandings undergirding such practices. **49**

For example, among Zaramo speakers: **50**

The doll may have a string of white beads or a chain around its neck. The chain represents a snake, which plays a significant role in traditional Zaramo symbolism. The white beads, which today replace the snake vertebrae that were used before commercially made beads were easy to obtain, are symbolic of children and generations.⁶⁹

The young woman cared for the *mwana nya nhiti* or *mwana sesele* as if each were a small child. She washed, fed, oiled, and carried it. And when she slept, the figurine was placed on her bed. The figurines were kept by her father's matrilineage, and when not used they were carefully stored.⁷⁰ Their association with the father's matrilineal line was explained as a spiritual necessity in assuring her fertility because Zalamo believed that important spiritual properties come from his line while the "organic continuity of the clan" descended from the mother's.⁷¹

A look at the etymology of the names used for the figurines shows that there was much more than apprenticeship happening in the girl's initiation. In the first place, the *mwana nya nhiti* ("child of wood") incorporates an aspect of ancient Bantu ideas of wood as having medicinal properties, which in Bantu contexts did not preclude the power or "medicine" of ancestors. And the fact that they were sometimes clay, but still given the "child of wood" designation also supports that what was being identified in the name was their medicinal properties.⁷² **51**

The second "doll" presents a different view. The *mwana sesele* is commonly translated as the "child of "gourd/calabash."⁷³ This common translation, like the former, is also problematic because it fails to capture all senses of its meaning, which then obscures its religious and medicinal purpose. On one hand it is true that these figures are constructed of a gourd, but the root meaning of the word *sesele* is not the common noun for gourds. Instead the meaning would be better represented by a translation such as "child of menstruation," and here is why. **52**

The root at play here appears to be a proto-Mashariki verb meaning "to pour, to menstruate," *-sesel-.⁷⁴ The use of a gourd, like wood, is often tied to medicine. For example, gourds commonly hold medicines prescribed by religio-medical specialists. And they also are the instruments used in divining etiology of illness. All of these contexts highlight their relationships to curative or healing properties, which in turn often get their efficacy, at least in part, from the ethereal realm.

Though it is difficult to know with precise detail, **mwali* figurines show strong links to ancestors and lineages in East Ruvu languages. And as Swantz has noted, they may well represent portable altars or "spirit dolls."⁷⁵ Might all the care and attention they were given be a form of religio-ritual veneration to ancestor spirits who in exchange for supplication granted the initiate's fertility? The Zaramo evidence explicitly supports this conclusion. Whenever a **mwali* among the Zaramo failed to conceive a child, she was advised to redo the "offering" by wearing and watching over the figurine to the satisfaction of her ancestors, who had concluded that "she had not given them sufficient care" the first time around.⁷⁶

53

Do Ruvu Peoples Circumcise Their Girls?

"There is always the question of circumcision."⁷⁷ This was the reaction one of the women with whom I worked gave when I broached the topic. Circumcision, particularly that of women, has long held the curious imaginations of spectators from outside Africa. Indeed, for many women and societies, African and others, this is an important issue with questions of health and abuse often at the forefront of research and policy. In early Ruvu societies, and in all likelihood in the wider NECB-speaking communities, no linguistic evidence has been recovered to suggest that female circumcision was practiced at the time of initial settlement in Tanzania. Such findings accord with previous research confirming that girls in early Mashariki societies took part in initiation rites, but "it seems clear that female 'circumcision' was not among them."⁷⁸

54

However, there was a later point in Ruvu history, probably after the ending of the first millennium CE, when communities of Kaguru, Vidunda, and Gogo speakers took up various forms of female circumcision, perhaps because of relationships with non-Ruvu societies who circumcised their daughters.⁷⁹ Gogo and Kaguru speakers tend to intimate that such procedures were tangential to broader initiation practices or altogether separate from them. Such perspectives may result from wariness about emphasizing its importance in their communities, particularly since informants are commonly aware of modern-day negative judgments of female circumcision. On the other hand, these responses may be indicative of those communities having placed less importance on the custom when it came to a girls' overall maturation. In the case of Gogo girls, circumcision was described as separate from

55

**mwali* ceremonies. It took place before the more prominent **mwali* initiation.⁸⁰ According to anthropologist Peter Rigby, female circumcisers and their assistants would take girls out to bush areas where they chose a sandy area, such as a dried riverbed, or other place where the fallen blood from the clitoridectomy could be easily covered.⁸¹ Following the surgery, a girl returned to her home where she went immediately to her mother's *kugati* room to avoid being seen by men until she was fully healed.⁸² The fully-recovered initiate was then called *munyacipale* or *munyacinga*.

Kagulu speakers offered a different picture. Foremost, they maintained that clitoridectomy was not an aspect of the cutting procedure, however, some of them explained that such practices were components of Parakuyu Maasai female initiation.⁸⁴ According to them, if any cutting was done it took place at the time of the **mwali*'s seclusion period and not as a separate event, as may have been done among Gogo communities. They preferred to do the surgery in the cool part of the day, either at dusk or dawn. All that was needed was a bush-laden area near the girl's initiation quarters. An old woman whom they called *muhunga* carried out the procedure.⁸⁵ The girl was then taken to rest, and as early as the next morning, provided she was healed enough, she was dressed in new clothing and strings of beads, gifts from her maternal and paternal kinswomen. Then later in the day, to the sound of much ululation and drumming, she was brought out of seclusion. She was then called **mwali*.⁸⁶ **56**

Similar to Kaguru, the Vidunda practiced something short of clitoral removal. It was described as an incision of the labia *minora*. They maintained that the original occupants of the Vidunda Hills region had not done this, but that it was something introduced in later times. Contrasting with both Kaguru and Gogo speakers, they maintained that the procedure was performed at the onset of menses, and that following it girls began a period of seclusion that lasted one to two weeks. During that seclusion the girl was expected, among other things, to speak in a whisper, to rub red ochre on her skin, and to remain unclothed above the waist. At the end of seclusion she was reintroduced to her community through an **mlao* ceremony.⁸⁷ **57**

These varied timings and procedures of genital cutting are suggestive of cultural practices adopted after separate periods of cultural exchanges. As we have shown, during the second millennium CE, Gogo-, Vidunda-, and Kaguru-speaking communities had ongoing exchanges with culturally distinct people from whom they could have adopted such practices. The descriptions of the procedures themselves offer a clear opportunity to see how this new cultural element was incorporated into the frameworks of communities who had long maintained methods of initiating their daughters by methods other than circumcision. In keeping with the conclusion that genital cutting of girls was a historically recent introduction, **58**

there is no indication that circumcision procedures had any relation to the primary social concern of initiation, fertility. It seems that an initiate's fertility still rested on the far older religio-ritual practices associated with the spirit forces of her lineage.

The Mwali Is Danced

The duration of female seclusion in early Ruvu societies is not fully knowable. Recollections offered by the eldest women in various Ruvu villages claimed that long ago it lasted up to two to three years. They also volunteered that it was not a time they particularly enjoyed, though they had learned many necessary things. They usually followed up that point by explaining that girls who are of **mwali* age would much rather do other things than remain in seclusion. In contemporary situations there is much more flexibility with the length of seclusion. It is likely to be no more than a six-month period, but on average it is only a few weeks long, as in the Vidunda case above.⁸⁸ In recent times, many people have made accommodations for girls who attended school. One **mwali* initiate I got to know attended school in the daytime and returned to her seclusion quarters afterward. 59

Whatever the duration of her stay, a **mwali*'s coming out, in early times, called for celebration. Preparing for a **mwali*'s emergence, **mlao*, was on the whole the largest and most significant commemoration in a young woman's life. If a girl had been engaged before she menstruated, the celebration could signify the start of her marriage. At other times, a girl's emergence indicated that she was available to suitors.⁸⁹ **Mlao* ceremonies were held in honor of both female and male initiates in Northeast-Coastal Bantu descendant communities since the PNECB period. The noun **mlao* itself is not a Bantu-derived word. Instead, it appears to have been transferred into PNECB from Cushitic speakers.⁹⁰ 60

At the same time, there have been other terms applied to this ceremony in recent periods. For instance, Kami and Kwere speakers have called it **lusona*. This word, like **mlao*, derives from an exchange with Southern Cushitic speakers, though this exchange likely dates to the proto-Wami period of a couple of centuries later than the PNECB era. It appears to have applied originally as a general term for ceremonies of all sorts, and the way it attests across the Ruvu languages upholds such meanings through more recent times.⁹¹ For instance, in Kaguru **lusona* applied to ceremonies that included marriage and circumcision. In Kami its application included marriage observances as well as one aspect of a ceremonial offering, while in Zigua it named just the marriage ceremony. 61

The days that led up to the **mlao* included the girl's final instruction, bodily preparation, and communication with her ancestors. Zalamo speakers held a symbolic "grain pounding" ceremony in which grains of three colors were used: maize, millet, and rice—red, black, white 62

