how to live peacefully in one's home without quarreling, and this helped me to keep my home happy. So that role as a member of the Mother's Union was more important than being a daughter. Being a member of the *kiama* was less important than being a member of the women's group because after the missionaries came, the *kiama* did not have as much meaning.

What has been my greatest accomplishment? All the work I have done on this earth. And I am proud of being a Christian and being saved. When I was a young girl, I used to have dreams about the young man I would marry, but now that I am old I do not have dreams anymore. My strongest character is staying at home without wandering from place to place or abusing anybody. I am also patient and follow Jesus. I used to have bad desires, like desiring somebody else besides my husband or wanting somebody else's bananas, but I called upon the Lord and was saved from those desires.

Being a woman means being one who is married and has joined her home together. It also means being able to hear things and keep them sealed inside. I think of myself as Mũgĩkũyũ before I am a Kenyan. Being Agĩkũyũ means having followed the steps of *mbuci*, *matũ*, and *Irua* as I told you.

It is only because you are my friend that I have given you this *kirira*, Nyina-wa-Stepheni. Now you are the one to benefit from it in your writing. I have talked all the things I have seen without refusing or hiding anything. You are learning and I am learning from you too. One can never finish learning. Learning only ends when one dies, isn't that so?

Notes

1. The goat refers to the present a father gives his daughter when she returns home after being circumcised, to celebrate her bravery.

2. Among Gikuyu, the term *mũrata* (friend) is often used to signify a love relationship between members of the opposite sex. However, in this case, Wanjiku used the term *wendo*, meaning "love."

4

Wamutira: The First Wife

Wamutira, the first of the four women in their fifties in 1983–1984, was chosen from among several women in polygynous marriages because, in addition to being a first wife, she never joined a women's group, nor had she attended adult education classes. Of those four women, she had been least affected by educational change, either formal or informal. A late convert to Christianity, Wamutira is an Anglican who attends church but is otherwise uninvolved in church activities. Her main interests are her family and farming.

When I met Wamutira, in the process of conducting the initial survey, she left me with few impressions, negative or positive. When I returned to request her participation as a life history informant and explained why she had been chosen, she listened with bowed head, thought it over for a moment, and then gave one of her indefatigable smiles and agreed to work with us. The first two sessions were somewhat hesitant—she was very shy about answering questions and kept her eyes on the ground much of the time. At the end of the second session, I asked Wamutira how she was feeling about the interviews and whether she wanted to continue. She replied, looking directly at me for the first time, "I feel good about them because they are making me think about my life." She wanted to continue.

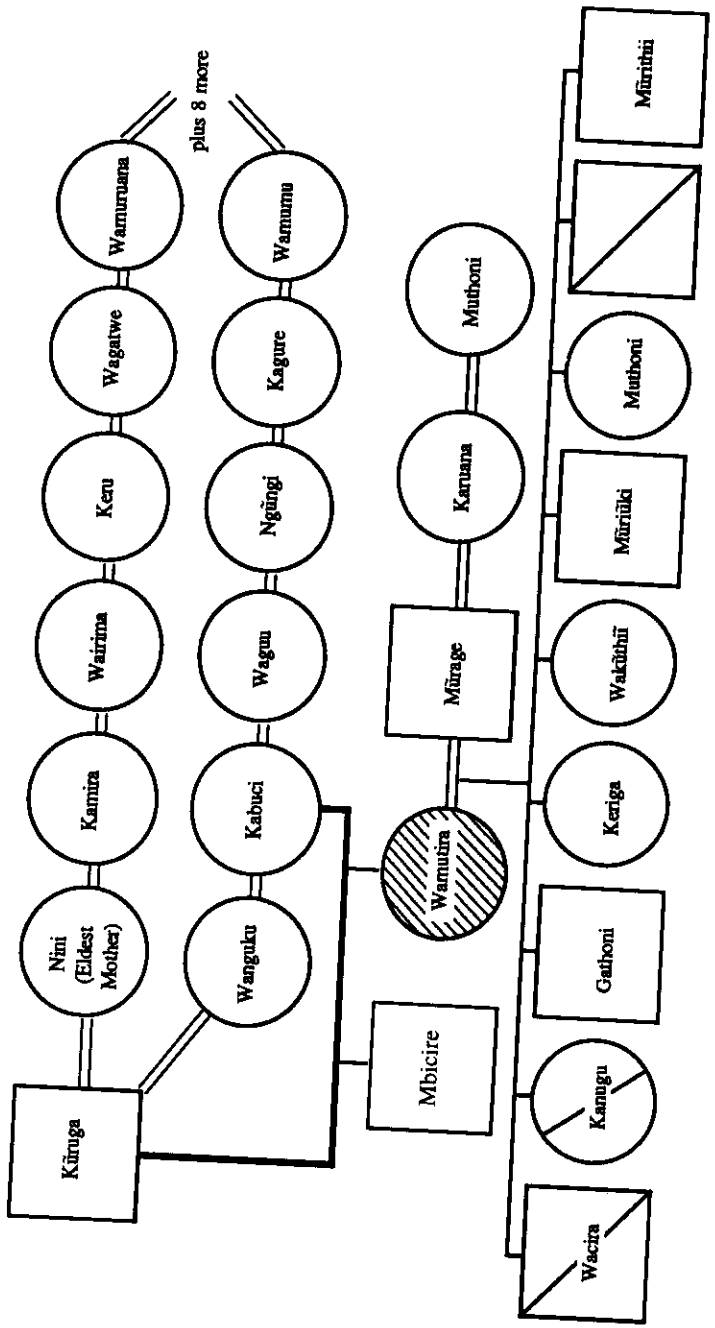
There was a marked change in Wamutira's behavior with the third session. Her earlier shyness began to evaporate as she grasped her importance as a teacher. Further, she became more confident in volunteering information about herself. By the fourth session, a few key questions were prompting detailed retrospective responses with regard to her experience with *Irua*. Wamutira's ability to remember detail as we moved forward in her life and her candid self-perceptions enhance her autobiographical account. In fact, from her buoyant behavior I sensed she rather enjoyed the opportunity to reminisce.

Wamutira

Another positive aspect of our sessions was Wamutira's relationship with her co-wives. Both women seemed pleased that we had chosen Wamutira and welcomed any chance to cooperate. At the same time, they respected our need for privacy during the sessions and, after providing us with tea, always withdrew to work in their *mashamba.* They would reappear at the end of the hour, learn what the topic had been, and contribute their own observations and knowledge. For instance, when the topic was basket weaving, the three wives collaborated in preparing samples of basketry, using different materials, stopping at various stages of completion to illustrate the task as the women learned it as children. All three women taught me how to *gwokotha,* the process of binding together plant fibers to make a string for weaving. And all wanted an opportunity to express their views on *Irua.* In a sense, the three wives jointly accepted the responsibility of my education. They also expressed concern for my well-being, remarking that as I spent more time in the community I seemed "healthier."

Wamutira and the second wife, Karuana, are age mates and have a particularly close relationship. The third wife, Muthoni, is about ten years younger, but over the years has made a place for herself in the homestead. Unlike the older wives, she has had a few years of schooling, which seems to give her an advantage she lacks in age. Nevertheless, she always deferred to the two older women in decisions concerning the homestead. Of the three women, the second wife, Karuana, is the most self-assured, and often, when the session with Wamutira was over, she would appear and want to visit with us. It was Karuana who volunteered that none of the three wives had *cuka*—brightly colored cloth wrapped around the lower part of the body as a sarong. She asked if I could bring them each one from Nairobi the next time I visited there. Wamutira is the most reserved of the three women, often deferring to Karuana in our casual conversations. On the other hand, when we were alone in sessions, she blossomed. In short, Wamutira's story must be viewed within the context of her relationship with her co-wives; thus their perceptions of certain events, such as *Irua* and marriage, are included.

In 1989 when I returned and headed toward Wamutira's homestead, a son had run ahead to tell his mother of my arrival. I heard Wamutira from a distance running toward me through the maize fields shouting in Kikuyu, "Nyina-wa-Stepheni, Nyina-wa-Stepheni, you have come back—now I am happy." She threw her arms around me, hugging me as we swayed back



and forth and I tried not to cry. We ended up laughing and hugging each other again. Things were not so good at that time, economically, for Wamutira. She was not earning enough to make ends meet from either coffee or tea. She also worried about an older son who seemed to be "wasting his time and not settling down even though he has a family now."

By 1992, however, Wamutira's life had improved. One reason was that *Mzee,* as she respectfully refers to her husband, had given each of his three wives their own land and each was getting a title deed to that land. This was something little short of a miracle to Wamutira and her two co-wives, who, over tea, chattered happily about their good fortune. They also commented on the tea strike, relating that it had prevented them from harvesting. "See how bad it looks? But we cannot do otherwise or we will be in trouble [with other producers]."

By 1994 when I again returned, each wife had built a house on her own land, and so the close communal proximity of a single homestead once shared had been replaced by a new feeling of self-sufficiency on the part of each woman. Moreover, on Wamutira's parcel, her oldest son—the one who had given her earlier concern—had built a small house for his wife and two small children. Wamutira thoroughly enjoyed showing off her grandchildren.

Wamutira was busy picking tea leaves when we first reunited in 1994. I volunteered to help her but she insisted on taking a break, so we settled at the edge of her tea fields on a grassy knoll to talk. She related that she had had some medical problems but that she was better now. "Do you remember that tea strike when you were here in 1992?" she asked me. I nodded. "It finished and now people are again picking their tea. Things are better. We're earning Ksh. 3.50–4.50 per kilogram for tea now. In 1992 when you came to visit, that year there was too little rain. The harvest was poor. But 1993—that was a good year with plenty of rain—almost too much. Now we have plenty of tea as you can see." She turned her head with a small smile of pride toward the chartreuse, evenly cropped carpet of tea beside us. She still grew coffee, she confirmed, but a friend can see that her heart is in tea.

Wamutira was well aware of the escalation of food commodity prices in Mutira over the previous decade but she had little notion of why and how the change had come about. "Prices of bread, sugar, and even cooking oil keep going up and up. People are not happy with these changes," she confided. I

asked her if she had heard of something called "structural adjustment." She had not. She was not alone. She attributed the worsening economy to political corruption. When I asked her about the multiparty elections of 1992, she shrugged and replied offhandedly, "Things didn't change—look, Moi is still there." She had not bothered to vote. She was much more interested in telling me about the land that she now owned, with a legal title.

The Wamutira I talked with in 1994 had grown in confidence over the decade; she was proud of what she had accomplished in building her homestead, pleased with her tea production, and satisfied with her ability to make a place for her sons on her land. Obtaining security in land and the attendant increase in her economic well-being by 1994 were the most significant changes that Wamutira had experienced over the decade since we first had come to know one another.

As a result of having their own homesteads, Wamutira and her co-wives were no longer a tightly knit band. Although Wamutira visited Karuana regularly, each was involved in developing her own property. Similarly, each had made the transition to another life stage, that of grandmother. With most of their children grown, Wamutira and Karuana were involved in maintaining heritable parcels for these children as they married. One or two sons had already married and had been given land to grow food for their families. They now had children of their own. The women who ten years earlier had been close as co-wives, sharing cooking and child care, had transferred their loyalities to grown children's families. These women had become elders, managing their own parcels. The youngest wife had joined a women's income-generating group that gave her additional income for her youngest children's school fees. The husband whom Wamutira once had described as being the "wheel and pedals of the [family] bicycle," now was a gray-haired elder living in his own *thingira* (man's house), circulating among his wives and their families.

—*J.D.*

I am the second child of my father, Kūruga, and my mother, Kabuci, who was my father's eighth wife. My father was a headman and very important. He had, altogether, twenty wives, but I can only remember the names of

twelve of them. First, there was Nini, our oldest mother. Then came Kamira, Wairima, and Keru. Keru had two children who were my agemates. Then there were Wagatwe, Wamuruana, Wanguku—and Kabuci, my mother. She was followed by Waguu, Ngūngi, Kagure, and Wamumu. I can't remember the names of the rest. Our compound was like a village with so many of us growing up together. Each wife had her own house where she and her children lived. My father stayed in his own *thingira* [man's house].

My father was a good man who liked everybody and never had a bad temper. My mother was similar. I had only one older brother called Mbicire, who was jolly and would never fight. The reason I came to be called Wamutira is because I was named for my father's mother who came from a place called Mutira. It was important to name the first daughter after the father's mother, the second daughter after the mother's mother. The same was [true] for sons. This way, the grandparents would always have a place in the clan. Our clan is Waithirandu, but I married later into the Ūgaciiku Clan.

Every morning, my brother and I would wake up and go to the house where porridge was being cooked. After being given calabash of sour porridge by our mother, we went to the *shamba*. During the day, while we were working there, food was brought to us. After working some more, we would go back home and start playing in the compound. What did we work with in the *shamba*? My mother gave me a sharp, pointed stick to dig with and I never lost it.

By going with my mothers and other girls of my compound, I learned how to fetch water. I would take a small gourd and a basket, just as I used to see the women do, and follow them to the river. I would fill the gourd and put in a maize cob to stop the water from spilling out, then put the gourd in the basket and carry it back from the river. Even collecting firewood, I took some string and went to the forest with other girls and women. When I had collected enough pieces of wood, I was shown how to tie them together with the string and carry them on my back. But I lost most of the pieces on the way home.

I never started cooking until I was a big girl because my mother would not allow me to cook with her pots from fear I would break them. [Traditionally, pots were made of fired clay.] But later, when I was bigger, I watched the way she cooked—how she peeled potatoes with a knife and the amount of beans and maize she put into the cooking pot for *githeri* [a beans and maize mixture that is the staple of the Gikuyu diet in rural areas]. When I was finally allowed to cook, I copied what I had seen my mother doing.

It was my mother who taught me how to make baskets, too. I would watch her when she was making the strings for weaving. She would

place a sisal thread on her lap and roll it over and then place another with it and roll them together in the same direction to make a string. This is called *gwokotha.* Here, I will show you. [She demonstrates.] You take these two threads and roll them each in the same direction with a little saliva against your leg. Now roll them together in the same direction, with a little saliva on your hands to make them stick together. I first learned to make threads using banana fibers and grass. I would make some threads and go and show them to my mother and ask her if that's the way she does it. Then she would say, "No, you have made the strings like a boy"—that's when the two rolled threads failed to join together in a tight string.

I used the tall grass to make threads at first. After picking it, I would bring it home and cut it lengthwise into long, thin strings and then I would *gwokotha* the strings and use them for weaving. After using grass and banana fibers and acquiring enough skills, then we [girls in the compound] made threads out of *migio*—a wild plant that grows around here. First, we'd strip off the leaves and then peel back the outer bark from the main stem. The inner bark was stripped back in long threads, and when it dried its fibers were good for weaving. We did the same thing with *ngutwii*—stinging nettle fibers. Later, we began to use sisal fibers when we were grown and more experienced. The baskets you see nowadays, those are made with sisal fibers and then decorated with woolen threads to form a pattern.

While the girls in our compound were learning to cultivate and weave baskets, the boys would make *mbara* [long thin branch of a tree joined at both ends with bark to form a hoop]. They would roll the *mbara* with a stick across the ground. They also made pointed sticks to throw and play with. Boys did some herding of goats and cattle, though usually this was done by old people. If a family had no sons, then a girl would herd. But me, I never herded because my father had a lot of sons. I didn't learn to herd until I got married. But nowadays, one sees more girls herding.

My brother and I were treated the same by my mother. He had his own gourd and calabash and I had my own gourd and calabash of the same size. The gourd was for porridge and the calabash for *irio* [general term used for food]. Nobody ate each other's food, but if my brother came with friends and he had drunk all his porridge and I had not taken mine, I would give it to his friends. When my brother grew big and started coming with lots of friends, then he was given more food, as I was still a child and was not able to finish as much. But when I grew up and started coming with my girlfriends, then my mother started giving me more, too. Sometimes, when I went and visited my brother in his *kithuni* I wished I could be a boy. I used to hear of a big rock whereby if you sat on it, you would change to a boy. I wondered about it, but never went to sit on it.

As small girls, we never wore very much—only a piece of blanket on the upper body and sometimes another piece for the skirt. But grown women like my mother wore a dress made out of three pieces of antelope skin, called a *njuri.* One piece was used as the front part, and the other two pieces went behind. When sitting down, my mother would wrap each of those pieces around her thighs and then tuck in the front piece.

What was I like as a child? I can't remember well, but I was told that I used to just stay at one place and mother would bring my food there. Maybe I was quiet.

We played games after we returned home from working in the *shamba,* like wrestling with each other and a game where we used to collect smooth stones from the river and gather in a group on the ground. Then one of us would throw the stones up in the air and try and catch all of them on the back of the hands. The game is called *ciũthi.*

Because there were many children in our compound, sometimes we would fight. But then any grown person nearby would come and threaten us with a beating if he or she ever saw us fighting again. That usually stopped us. It was only our mothers who were involved though, or some older son of my father. My father, being a chief, was never at home to know what happened to us children. He was always away on some business.

Mariika were important because, as one was growing up, she learned how to treat people in different age groups. People of different *mariika* would not abuse each other or even greet each other. But you, if you were of my same age group, when we met we would greet one another and laugh and tell jokes or do anything we wanted together. We would never talk with those of other age groups, especially those younger than us.

My mother used to tell me never to appear near a place where older people were gathered talking. We never stayed in the same house with my father, and when he came to visit my mother we children were told to leave so that we would not hear what their talk was about. When we got to be a little older, we went to our oldest mother, the one called Nini, and she taught us things—like not to play with boys as their games are never good and would end up in bad things, such that they would lie on top of us. Nini told us how we should behave at dances once we were circumcised. And sometimes she would tell us stories at night around the cooking fire. There is one I remember well:

Long, long ago, during the time of Ndemi and Mathathi, there was one man who used to go to the forest to make knives, spears, and shields. He was a blacksmith. When he went there one day, he left his wife pregnant at home, and as the time reached for her to deliver she was assisted by an ogre.

The ogre never used to give the woman any food. Each morning it would spread castor-oil seeds out to dry and weaver birds would come to eat the seeds. The woman tried to talk to the birds in order to send them to her husband in the forest with the news that she had delivered. But the birds did not know how to talk, and so the woman chased them away.

The following morning, there came a dove, and the woman asked it whether it would go where the woman might send it. The dove said, "Yes, I will go," so the woman told it, "Go to the forest and find my husband and tell him I have delivered and I have never eaten anything." The dove went to where the men were making things in the forest and started to sing.

Mũturi, ũgutura ĩi.	Blacksmith, you who makes things.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.
Nduturange naĩhenyaĩi.	Make your things quickly.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.
Mũkagwuo ara ciarire, ĩi.	Your wife gave birth.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.
Agĩciarĩthio nĩ irimu, ĩi.	An ogre assisted her, yes.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.
Nduke tutui ũrie, ĩi.	Get this little to eat.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.
Warega merukie ĩi.	You refuse? I swallow it.
Cangarara ica.	Turn your head a bit.

All the men started asking themselves if there were any of them who had left a wife pregnant at home. The blacksmith said he had left his wife pregnant, and so he started sharpening his swords and spears and then went home.

On reaching home, the man found that the ogre had gone to fetch firewood to come and cook. The man's wife told him the story and how she almost died of starvation. The blacksmith cooked for his wife, and she ate until she was satisfied. Then he hid himself in the *thegi* so nobody would see him and waited for the ogre to return. When the ogre came and dropped the bundle of firewood outside the door, it started singing a song it always sang.

Wagiciiri, wagiciiri	You who have given birth
Wĩ nyumba ino?	Are you in this house?
Wogwa na mururumo wa ngu icio.	May you fall together with the sound of firewood.

And the woman replied:

Onawe wogwa nacio.	Even you may fall with the sound of them.

The ogre asked her whether the one who was in the forest making things had come back and that was why she was so brave in shouting back at him. The woman kept quiet. So the ogre entered the house, but before it could do anything it was pierced with spears and arrows until it died.

That's all I can remember of the story, but I tell you, the ogres used to scare us a lot as children. We thought they came from the forest, so we were afraid to go there alone.

While our oldest mother was telling us stories, two of my older brothers, one of whom was her son, were going to school. They were Mbicire, the one who died recently, and the other Mbicire at Kianjagi. Yes, they had the same name because they were both named after my father's father, just as my brother was. Our father did not have a good opinion of school, so he did not encourage us to go, especially the girls. But my brothers went anyway. My father did not see school as important and used to stop us from going by saying that once a girl goes there, she will become a prostitute. Yes, I had a desire to go to school, but I never got encouragement from the other girls in our compound either. None of them went to school, so I didn't want to go and be left behind [behave differently].

When Mbicire grew up and got married to his first wife, Wangeci, with a modern wedding and then built a new big house, he called all of us to come there one day. He told us that by using a *tawa* [kerosene lamp] in the house, we could start learning at night. Us, we just laughed.

* * *

What were the major events in my life? First, there was the piercing of the ears—the upper part of the ear first, called *mbuci;* then the lower part, called *matũ.* After showing signs of growing breasts, I was circumcised. I stayed for quite a long time until I got married, then had my first child. I was bigger than my daughter there [she refers to her twelve-year-old daughter] when I got my ears pierced. Piercing your ears was a sign that a girl was getting mature and soon would be ready for *Irua.* My mother told me I could not get circumcised if my ears were not pierced, and as I had seen a friend getting hers pierced, I told my mother I wanted mine done. There were two of us who went together to have them pierced, and many people watched.

A man called Kibui was the one who pierced our ears. People gathered very early in the morning to see him do it. First, the upper hole was cut. That was for putting in decorative beads called *ciuma*. Later, a hole in the lower lobe was cut for putting in shiny pieces of wood called *ndebe*. That is called *matũ*. Kibui took a sharp razor blade and went round the lobe in a circle, cutting out a piece of meat. I had seen him do this before with other girls. After the meat was removed, a round piece of wood that had been heated over the fire, then oiled, was put in the hole. In a few days, the stick was changed, and one would have to turn it around in the hole until it came out. Then another stick of a larger size was put into the hole.

After my ears were pierced and I went home, my mother spread some banana leaves on the ground for me to lie on to try and get used to the pain. Yes it was very painful. When my ear lobes got pus, I could not do anything as they were swollen and heavy on my head. I only removed the sticks, washed the holes, and put in bigger sticks. I continued this way until the lobes were healed.

After *matũ* and *mbuci*, my head was shaved with a razor blade along the front edges and then smeared with oil [rendered fat]. A sheet was bought for me to dress in. I was shown by my mother how to tie it using maize seeds to make a knot at one shoulder after folding the sheet twice to cover my body [like a toga]. Getting a sheet and our ears pierced made us feel more mature. Just recently, though, when we started wearing dresses, I paid money to have my pierced ears stitched up. Mine [holes in ears] were so big and drooping that I wanted them stitched so they wouldn't tear.

After I had my ears pierced, I didn't stay long before I went for *Irua*. I had not seen *mambura ma mũtũmia* [menstruation] yet and even stayed for a long time after *Irua* before getting it. Those times were not like today, when young girls are having their first menses at a very early age. I stayed for seven years before menstruating.

I heard about *Irua* from my mother. She told me, "You see so-and-so? She is circumcised now. You are also going to get circumcised." She told me that first we would make beer for her brothers who are my uncles and ask them for permission. The reason that it was my mother's brothers is that my father's brothers were not as important, as my mother's brothers had to be paid back the number of goats and the amount of beer that were given for my mother's circumcision. The daughter had to give exactly what her mother had given to the uncles.

I saw many people come to my father's compound, and they drank the beer we brewed and then a day was set for me to be circumcised. On the day of circumcision, I was told to go to my oldest uncle's [mother's brother] place and dance for my uncles so that they would give me money and a goat. I went and danced, holding a wooden club and showing my uncles my body. Then they gave me three shillings and a goat, and I went home with the permission to go for *Irua*.

I was never told exactly why I was going for *Irua*, but I heard from people that a certain man—who was the first to refuse having his girls circumcised—had daughters who would never marry. So we used to get circumcised so we would be able to marry, because no man wanted an uncircumcised woman.

I was circumcised at Giagato, where there is a coffee factory now. First, in the morning we went to the river where women would smear themselves with mud, and then in the river we would be washed by the newly married women with one child. The same women then carried us on their backs back to the field. We were washed to make us clean [pure] for the ceremony, and the reason they carried us was they did not want us to touch the ground—we were well taken care of.

There used to be so many people at the field, young and old, who made a circle surrounding the girls being circumcised. The women would be on the inner part of the circle singing, *"Ĩĩ, ĩĩ, ĩĩ, nĩ kiama"* [Yes, yes, yes, it is the truth]. My circumcision mother [also called "supporter"] was Nini, our oldest mother. She helped me spread the *mathangu* [leaves] on the ground where I would sit so that no blood would touch the soil. It was she who held me from behind, with her legs over mine so that my legs would stay spread while I was circumcised. Another mother held my hands away.

How were we dressed? The girls being circumcised had put on beads across the upper part of the body and a short skirt made of reeds and beads called a *thira* over our thighs. The bead necklace had gourd tops and was worn from one shoulder across the chest to the armpit of the other shoulder. Some girls were given containers called *ithitu* from the *mũndũ mugo*. These containers had *muthaiga* in them—a white powder like ground ashes or chalk. *Muthaiga* comes from herbs. It is what we call *miti dawa* [literally "tree medicine"] that has been burnt and ground to a fine powder. Having a *githitu* [singular of *ithitu*] protected one from becoming bewitched. The *muthaiga* in it was good medicine. But us, we were protected from any harm in our compound because *muthaiga* was put all around the houses—that way, there was no need of a *githitu*. So me, I did not need one around my neck when I was circumcised because I was already protected.

Kamira and another woman called Watene from Gichugu were the circumcisers. Kamira was slender and black. She did not dress in any special way. She just had a blanket wrapped around her and tied at the shoulder. Before circumcising us, she got a small gourd and emptied some *muthaiga* into her palm and touched herself with it on the face to cleanse herself for the ceremony.

The circumcisers used a *kienji*, a metal knife that was very sharp with a wide blade like an axe and a handle that was thin. But nowadays, they use razor blades because there is not so much cutting done. Each time a girl was circumcised, the *kienji* was washed in water and wiped with a *mathangu* [leaf] of the *muigoya* plant.

Our father, Kūruga, had given those of his girls being circumcised some shillings. He told us that those who never cried during *Irua* and were brave could keep theirs but those who cried would have their's taken away. Me? I lost my shilling. I was crying because I was afraid, and I knew it would hurt even before they started cutting.

During the ceremony, women of the clan sang special songs called *ndaiho,* but I can't remember how they go at the moment. Three deep cuts were made [removing the clitoris], and it was very painful. They used to cut deep until a *mathakwa* leaf fit in. But nowadays, those who want to be circumcised, only the tip of the clitoris is removed. After the cutting was done, the wounds were spread with castor oil because there was no medicine then. The oil was brought to the field by my mother in a bamboo container, and I used the oil to put on the wound until it healed. Then a *mathakwa* leaf—which is very soft—was stripped of its stem and tied over the wound, using thread, in between the legs to keep the leaf still and in place. [At this point in the interview, Wamutira stops to demonstrate how the *mathakwa* leaf is prepared for use as a bandage.]

How did I walk home with all that pain between my legs? I was being supported by those near me—by supporters who were my circumcision mothers. They were one on each side and another woman was ahead with a small gourd of water so that when I fainted she would pour water on me.

When I reached my mother's house, I went right inside. As I was not able to climb onto the bed, banana leaves were spread on the floor for me. I had to sleep on my back because if I slept in any other way, the leaf covering the wound might come off and then I would have to have another put in, which was a painful operation. So you see, it was no joke. I was told never to sleep on my sides, as the wound might close up the hole and then I would never give birth. But I only stayed that way at night. During the day, one could sit down on a banana leaf comfortably. Each evening, I would remove the leaf and smear castor oil on the wound and then put another leaf in.

All the people who had come to escort me home—who came from all places—were feasting at my home. There was so much food and beer, but it was not enough for all those people. My father had given me a goat when I went inside the house, which I never saw again.

I felt weak and light for a long time before I got back my normal health. Girls used to lose a lot of blood, especially if the uncles demanded that there were some goats that had not been paid them. The girl would bleed until the goats were given to the uncles. Then the bleeding stopped.

In those times, one never refused to get circumcised. Even those who were poor and could not afford the things asked for by the uncles, other members of the community would make sure they got them so the girl could be circumcised.

Nini told me after I was circumcised that now I would be waiting for *mambura ma mūtūmia* and I should take care and not wander about. And she told me that the calabash one eats from when circumcised—that one is never used again by another person, for it would mean contaminating the person who used it.

After I had gone through *Irua*, I felt different. I felt like I was a grown-up girl now, ready for dances. And everybody saw us as adults. People treated us differently and we were expected to act differently. Nowadays, you wouldn't know who is mature and who isn't because few girls go for circumcision, and even when a girl gets menstruation, you don't notice because girls do not have to stay in the house as we did.

Nobody ever told me about what menstruation was, and when I first saw it I got frightened because I learned that now I had to take extra care with men so as not to get a child before I was married. That was a very bad thing to happen to a girl then. I also wished that I had stayed long without it so that I would have enough time to go to more dances. [Here Wamutira contradicts an earlier statement relating that she waited a long time—7 years—before menarche. It makes for a contradictory, bumpy chronology, but older Gikuyu women did not seem to be concerned about gaps in time or the rationality of a perfect chronology.]

But now I would not want *Irua* to come back. Even the one who forbid it [Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi] did right.

* * *

[As we finished the session on *Irua*, Karuana and Muthoni, Wamutira's co-wives, learned what we'd been discussing and wanted to express their opinions. What follows is a discussion between the three wives.]

Muthoni: If it's now and I'm told to go and get circumcised, I would run away and leave all that food and beer there.

Wamutira: Yes, there is one girl who ran away and left the circumciser and beer in the gourd and even the cooked food.

Karuana: It [circumcision] was a stupidity that was liked very much by Agĩkūyū a long time ago.

Wamutira: With Wandia, she was bleeding badly, so we took her to the hospital. When the nurse came, she wanted to beat us when

she saw Wandia and told us we were very foolish to be doing that kind of thing nowadays. She told us to take the girl home and heal her. I said we were sorry and would never repeat it again. And I pleaded with her to just give Wandia an injection. But the following morning, the girl was still bleeding. What I saw that time, that was the end of it for me.

Muthoni: I feel good because the banning of circumcision means that none of mine [daughters] will be destroyed that way.

Karuana: The things nowadays are not the way they were long ago.

Muthoni: Yes, that is so. A long time ago, if a girl matured and had her menstrual period, she would never go out. She told her mother and was shown where to stay and would stay there in the house until the days given her by God were over.

Karuana: You would not go anywhere, nor cook or go to dances.

Muthoni: So your clothes would all soak with menstrual blood, one after another, until the days were over.

Wamutira: But nowadays, things are better because nobody calls another *karigũ* [silly uncircumcised girl] or *kahiĩ* [same applied to a boy], and so there are no fights between the circumcised and uncircumcised.

Muthoni: The only fights you get nowadays are between drunkards. You can't hear a girl fighting with another girl because of *Irua.*

Karuana: If you met an uncircumcised young man and a circumcised one you would not distinguish between them. It is only when he goes to school and is beaten by others [for not being circumcised] that he comes home and does it.

Muthoni: Now, you can't tell the difference between one who is circumcised and one who is not. Long ago, if you were of my age group and we met and my ears were pierced, you would never joke with me or abuse me until yours were pierced, too. There was a difference between those who had been circumcised and those who had not. Now, there is no difference. The old traditions are gone.

[Wamutira nods her head in agreement.]

* * *

[Wamutira resumes her narrative in the next session with an account of what, for most women, seems to be the happiest period of their lives—between *Irua* and *ũhiki,* or marriage.]

I stayed for quite a long time without thinking about marriage because of the happiness I got from dancing. Once we were circumcised, then we could go for dances. There was *mweretho,* where each man would

dance with a girl and would throw her up in the air and the girl would shake her whole body. There was *gicukia,* which was attended by those not circumcised, and another by only those who were circumcised. We used to go to dance very far from home when there was moonlight.

I remember one dance organized by boys for their girls in the area. We would spend the whole night there dancing and then go home the following morning. Those who were a bit brave would walk home during the night. When I was a *mũirĩtu,* I used to laugh a lot and sleep out in the cold night without even a blanket after dancing. As I had nothing to think or worry about, it was the happiest time I can remember. After dancing, I would go home and meet food already cooked and would just start eating. But now the mind is occupied with where to get food, what needs to be done next—like cultivating the tea or coffee, getting food for the cows.

In those times, the man who was very attractive—who was *kiumbi*—had his own unmarried man's house, which was just one room. Girls, during dances, used to go there every night. We washed ourselves, beautified ourselves, and went to this man's house and spent the night and would not return home until morning. Our oldest mother taught us how to dress ourselves when going there to prevent anything from going wrong. This was by tying ourselves with ropes so that the skirt was tight around the body. This is how we did it—I will show you. [She demonstrates.] Take one edge of the skirt in front, gather it into a knot and tie the rope around it. Then put that knot in between the legs toward the back. Now take the end of the rope and wrap it around each thigh so that when we are fondled by the man he cannot do anything [have sexual intercourse].

A man who is *kiumbi* is the best dancer, one who is handsome and able to lead in songs. The voice, itself, was enough to make one leave a pot cooking over the fire and go and dance! We would spend the night there in his big bed being turned over and over by him all night. So in the morning we would go tell others of our agemates who had not come with us and then they would go that evening to be turned over. With agemates, you can joke about things like that—where you spent the night and who was there. But with those of other *mariika,* you had nothing to talk about.

We used to go dance just near our home, and one day afterwards Mũrage [her husband] made beer for us at his home. He never invited me but invited my friend, Kanyiba, and she took me with her. When we went there, Mũrage started talking to me on the subject of love and I told him that I was not interested in him. He realized it, too.

So, it happened that we had to pay back the beer we were given by having visitors to our place. When Mũrage came, I refused to listen to him, and he thought I was refusing him because of the beer we were taking. One night he came to the granary outside my mother's house and started blowing his nose. When I heard, I started asking, "Who is that?" I

vowed not to marry him if it was the same person. I went out and told him to go home because we were going somewhere. He left, but the following night he came again. I went and told him to never come to our house again. But he started coming near the granary from day to day without stopping. He finished a month doing that.

My parents asked me who this man was who always came to the granary. I told them it was Mũrage and that I could not marry him, because I heard that at his place they beat their wives. Still he never stopped coming. So, I decided—because of his insistence—I would give him tobacco for his father. I went for tobacco from my father and gave it to Mũrage—that's the way our friendship started.

Mũrage took the tobacco to his father, and he was told to go to the sugarcane *shamba* and get some sugarcane to make beer. When it was made, it was brought to our place in large gourds by two women from Mũrage's place. Then I made sour porridge to pay back the beer, and Mũrage and his many friends came to take it. During *gũthokia* [the "gourd-having-period"], a girl would sit with a gourd of sour porridge on her lap, and an agemate, a girl who was a friend, would sit next to her passing the calabashes of porridge as she served them. So when Mũrage came with his friends, I would shake the porridge, then pour it into a calabash, and my friend would pass it to Mũrage and his friends. If a girl happened to put the gourd of porridge down on the ground, the man and his friends would not take it, because it showed that the girl was not interested in the man as she didn't respect him enough to keep the gourd off the ground.

After this period, Mũrage made more beer, and I made more porridge. When my father got enough beer, he asked for *rũracio*. It was the men of the two clans who were the ones who carried out the negotiations as to how many goats and cows would be brought to my father. The women cooked food to take to the place where negotiations were going on, and they brewed beer for the occasion. During that time, I was very far away, cultivating in the *shamba*, and was not allowed to come near. When all the goats and cows that had been agreed upon were brought by Mũrage and his helpers, a ram that was part of *rũracio* was sacrificed at our place and its blood poured into the yard. The mixing of the blood from the groom's ram with the soil of the bride's home means that peace is made between the two sets of parents and clans. *Uthoni* [in-laws] is how they refer to one another from then on. The process of mixing the blood of the ram with the soil is called *gũthinjiro*. Now I was promised to Mũrage.

I had been told by the older women in our compound that when you get married, you are carried shoulder high from your place to where you are marrying—to your husband's home. They also told me that I would go first to the man's mother's house and never come out and would always wear a veil covering the head as a bride to show respect for the mother.

So when Mũrage came to get me, I told him I wouldn't go. The following day, Mũrage and four others from his place came and insisted in knowing the reason. They threatened to carry me by force to his home. I got scared. I went into the house then and packed a few clothes, and we started walking. It was during the night, for they did not want to be seen. Sometimes, when people saw their daughters were being removed, they would refuse and would try and beat the man and his relatives because they did not want to lose the girl. I went slowly with Mũrage, sometimes sitting down because I did not want to go. Sometimes I wondered whether I could escape and go back home, but then I was threatened with a beating and I would start walking again.

When we reached the gate of Mũrage's homestead, I refused completely. I became afraid wondering what we were going to say to each other at his house—just the two of us. Then his father heard us and asked why we were refusing to go in. I had not even told my mother I was going. I knew that they would discover in the morning when they missed me. So the following day, food was brought to me from my father's place, for they knew I had been taken to Mũrage's.

I got food from my home until that time when I was welcomed to Mũrage's family by his parents with a goat. What happened is that when one married and went to her husband's home, she could not eat cooked food prepared there until she was welcomed officially. Up to that time, she was being given *kirira* [secret knowledge] by the husband's mother on what to do in that compound and how to behave. For instance, I was told by Mũrage's father's older wife not to wander about or go outside my husband [commit adultery]. She said, "You are newly married so you should not be seen outside until the time you will be allowed to." If I did go outside the house, she told me to cover my face and legs with a veil—a big sheet—so as not to be bewitched. Also, it was hard for the husband's father to see the bride that way, and [it] showed respect for his wives.

Above all, I could not eat meat during this time until a goat was slaughtered for me. I can remember it was slaughtered when I got my first child almost two years later. That was our custom. The bride would not eat any meat. Even if the husband came with meat, she would just cook it for him and not eat it.

I did not go to Mũrage's mother's house as I had been told because he had already built a house for me. After we stayed together for awhile, I learned what he wanted and how things should be done. So we stayed from that time without fighting.

I did not meet Mũrage's mother when I went to live there because she had died. Only his father's other two wives were there. Their behaviors were very bad—they refused to give me a gourd, a calabash, and a tray basket for winnowing. I had to ask for these from my father's place.

And those two did not get along with each other and used to fight sometimes, calling each other names. It made me feel sad to see them.

I stayed for one year before I got pregnant. What happened is that I was called home by my father, who was worried that I had not gotten a child yet. He called me so I would be washed in the river by the *mũndũ mugo*, just as happened to my mother when she did not get pregnant. The *mũndũ mugo* fetched some water from the river, using a calabash, and in a hidden place between some arrowroot plants, he washed me saying, "I have washed you of the bad omen that refused to let you have a child. May you have a child. I have washed you completely. I have cleansed you completely." His words worked, for I never finished that year without becoming pregnant.

Soon after the *mũndũ mugo* cleansed me I missed my monthly flow. I went to a short woman in my husband's father's compound called Waduru. She told me that I was pregnant and I would know when the baby inside was three months old. After three months, I started feeling sleepy during the day and vomiting. When I started feeling the child playing in the womb, I knew then that Waduru had told the truth.

Once I knew I was pregnant, I could not sleep with my husband anymore. He called me to come to stay with him in Nairobi, where he was working then, but when I told him I was pregnant, he said there was no need for me to come. We were told by our mothers that if a woman had sexual relations when she was pregnant, she would make the midwife vomit because the child would be very dirty.

As time neared for me to deliver, I was always feeling sleepy. When I went to the *shamba* to cultivate, I would sleep there until it was late—toward sunset—then go back home. I was not able to cultivate well. So my husband called me to come to Nairobi. His father was not happy. He told me that I should not go to Nairobi, for even here at home there was now a hospital. But I made up my mind to go because my husband wanted me to be near him so that he could take care of me as there was nobody at home to care for me—my husband's mother being dead and the other wives not friendly. When I left for Nairobi, the *Mzee* [Kiswahili word meaning "old one," a respectful term] was annoyed and started complaining and muttering.

After staying in Nairobi a short time, one day I started feeling some stomach ache and feeling like going to the latrine. A woman neighbor came, and I told her how I was feeling. She told her husband that I should be taken to the hospital because my husband was at work. It was not my wish to give birth in a hospital, but in Nairobi there was nowhere else I could have gone. People in Nairobi go to the hospital for delivery.

When I went into the hospital, there were doctors there and a woman midwife. I was put on a bed. After some more pains the baby came

out, and the midwife took scissors and cut the umbilical cord and tied it using thread. Then she started pressing my sides to make the afterbirth come out. I felt pain when the afterbirth fell out. But one of the doctors gave me some medicine. A nurse attendant came and went with the child even before I had seen him! I was taken back to my bed. I slept for a while, and then the baby was brought to me to suckle. But the child refused. I knew it was because I had made the *Mzee* angry. You know, in those days, if an old man was made angry and grumbled, the one who was the cause could be inflicted with some kind of unusual thing—like a curse. So that is why the child refused to suckle—because *Mzee* was angry that I had gone to Nairobi to deliver.

So my husband decided to go home and get *Mzee*. Let me tell you, when the old man arrived, everybody was astonished to see that the child began to suckle—suckling fast and a lot. What the *Mzee* did is he brought milk from home for the child and then he blessed the child by spitting on his own chest [a traditional Gikuyu blessing], and that ended the curse.

Because I had been stitched after I was cut to make room for the baby to come out, I stayed in the hospital about three days. We gave the baby the name Wacira, as Mũrage's father, for whom he was named, had always wanted to act as a judge and wanted people to solve their problems by consulting a judge—Wacira means "judge."

I felt nothing but happiness when I had my first child because I had always been asking myself, "When shall I have my own child?" And now, because I had a child, I felt myself a woman. My breasts dropped because now I was suckling the child. And I found that when I came home to Mũrage's place, people treated me differently. When I came here with the child, a goat was slaughtered because now I had named the child after the father's father. The women here started cooking food for me, and I could begin eating meat.

How had I been prepared to be a mother? As small girls, we were always playing at taking care of babies. We would take roasted bananas and chew them to make them soft, then feed them to toy babies. We would wash them and clothe them the way we saw our mothers do. When we got a little bigger, we chewed the bananas and fed them to the smaller children in the compound with a finger straight away without keeping the chewed bananas in a calabash the way our mothers did. We also learned how to carry babies on our backs, tying them securely with a cloth so they didn't fall.

Being a mother means having happiness and sadness too. Six of my children are alive, but many of them died before they were big—three of them. Wacira, the first born, died before he was two years old. But there was a girl called Kanugu who followed Wacira who died when she was nine years old. I say that the child who dies when he/she is very small is

less heartache than the one who dies when she has fetched water and firewood for you and has cooked for you. That one is hard to forget.

What happened is that Kanugu started swelling in her stomach. We took her to Tumutumu Hospital, and she was admitted. They removed the water that made her stomach swell, and then she was discharged. We went for her and paid the hospital bill and brought her home here.

When she came home, she started telling us that she could feel her stomach swollen again, so we took her back to Tumutumu and she died there. I thought maybe she was given poisoned food, as she had come from school and got sick that afternoon. I first took her to Kerugoya, but when it turned out to be more serious I decided to take her to Tumutumu. Before we took her to the hospital, though, we had taken her to the *mūndū mugo*, because the grandmothers were so much for him and thought he would help. We went to my father and he told us to go and buy a cow and a goat and slaughter them. He cooked beer for her to get well. But she never did.

When we went to the hospital the next morning after she was readmitted, we were told that she had died. So we went to the mortuary to see her and then started making arrangements for the burial. My husband made the arrangements for the coffin and grave, and then he came and told me she was buried.

Even after Kanugu died, I stayed for a long time thinking that it must have been somebody who gave her poisoned food so that she would have a disease that would not kill her right away but she would suffer before dying.

The one who has never lost a child has not seen any problems in her husband's house. That one might ask how one looks when one is dead because they have never seen a dead body. But me, I have been to see, so I can't go asking.

When the girl died, I went home, and my father asked me whether Kanugu felt better. I was unable to tell him because I was crying, and my heart was heavy with tears. I could not find the courage to tell him. So others told him.

I changed very much after that child's death. I started fearing that I might never be given others. The ones I had later after Kanugu's death, I took much care of so that they might not die—like making sure they were clean, had good food, and went for clinic. At times, I keep quiet and think, "I had very strong children who died compared to ones I have now"—like when the two-year-old boy died, I had just given birth to Mūrithii, my last born, and I prayed, asking, "Why has God taken the bigger one and left this tiny one?" But you see, Mūrithii is the one fetching water for me now. There are none of my children that I take for granted. Kanugu's death taught me that lesson.

* * *

After that time when I had Wacira, my first born, I returned here to Mūrage's place, but I was not happy. As I have told you, Mūrage's mother, Wagathare, who was the father's first wife, had died, leaving the other two wives here. I found these two women would not give each other food, nor did they share food with me. They never wanted to talk to me, and they hated each other. But it was their husband, Mūrage's father, who was at fault. He liked one more than the other and bought her better things, like clothes. The other one stayed feeling bad. Another thing, if the two wives made beer, *Mzee* would not give the second wife the beer but would share some with the younger wife. Those two women were very uncooperative, and I began wishing I had somebody I could talk with. I remembered how I'd seen my father's wives having good talks when sitting eating their evening meal together after the day's work. Then one day Mūrage came home from Nairobi to visit. He had been working for some Europeans as a houseboy. He told me that he could see the child and I were not very happy, so he was going to marry another wife so we could be working together. I agreed with him. "Yes" I told him, "that is a good idea, because now I will have somebody to talk to and work with." So we started looking for a bride.

Mūrage heard about Karuana from another woman who was her neighbor. We were told that she was a very good girl—hard working and not naughty. She knew how to control her mouth. So I told my husband to marry Karuana, because if he married a woman who was *ng'aa*—a woman who didn't care and wouldn't listen to me—then the home would collapse.

When I saw Karuana, I liked her and wanted to have her as my co-wife. I knew she would help with the work and was one I could communicate with. From then on, I felt a lot of happiness. Like today, when I'm visiting you, she is the one home cooking for the children, and when I return home I will meet things well taken care of. That's why I like Karuana so much.

I am able to remember well the day I went for Karuana, even though it was a long time ago. It is only that I don't remember the year, but I know it was during the start of Mau Mau [1952]. I can remember Mūrage and me taking beer to her father's home near the Kariko Coffee Factory, where there was a homestead of some Britons. And it was me who went for her on the day that was arranged for her to marry, because the husband was in Nairobi.

The first night after I brought Karuana home she spent the night here with me in my bed. Then, the next morning, I escorted her to the bus stop to go to Nairobi. It is me who married her. After becoming pregnant,

Karuana came back here. When she came, my son got sick, so she told me to go to Nairobi so the child could be taken to the hospital. I went and left Karuana here. But I was only in Nairobi for a short time. Then I came back here and stayed with Karuana until the husband wrote a letter telling me to go back to Nairobi. Karuana and I, we each had our houses here, but she would always cook with me—even now.

At the time that Karuana came to live here, there was no coffee planted, only cultivating of food crops like maize and beans. We had our own *shamba* in different places, but we cultivated together. I never felt any jealousy toward Karuana. I was happy because the husband was finding children with her, which I also wanted. And he would also come and give me mine. And after one of us got pregnant and was unable to work, it was the duty of the other to cook for her, cultivate her *shamba*, and feed and wash that one's children. Jealousy? That would be a waste of time. Mũrage would spend the night with Karuana and then come in the morning and ask me to warm his bathwater, and I would gladly do it. And the same with Karuana if he spent the night with me. The thought of where he slept and what he did was never in us. When two or three wives are good friends, that home is always warm and lively. But if they hate one another, there is no home.

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[In order to find out Karuana's perceptions of her marriage to Mũrage and her relationship with Wamutira, I interviewed her on a day when Wamutira had gone to the clinic in Kerugoya. This is Karuana's account.]

First Mũrage came to our home, and we talked with him about the marriage. So when he came for tobacco, I gave it to him and he went and took it to his father. Then he brought beer, after which came *gũthokia*. Finally, the negotiations for *rũracio* were completed. My people had talked with Wamutira and she told them she had asked Mũrage to marry a girl who would keep her company. So he had that pressure from Wamutira because she wanted a co-wife.

After *rũracio* had been brought, I stayed at home until the day Mũrage said he would come for me. As I was told when the day was, I washed all my clothes and got ready. It was Wamutira who came, about three in the afternoon, carrying the child who was her first born on her back. We stayed at my home until dark because I would not agree to go in daylight. We met Mũrage at Karia coming to get us, as it was dark. The following morning, Wamutira escorted Mũrage and me to the bus stop in Kerugoya.

When Wamutira escorted us to the bus stop she was pregnant with that girl, Kanugu, who later died. When I went to Nairobi, I never changed

in my feelings about Wamutira—I liked her. While we stayed there, a letter came telling us that she had given birth. At this time, there were difficulties in traveling because of the state of emergency during the Mau Mau times—the British put up roadblocks. Mũrage feared to go home, as he was a Mau Mau supporter. I felt very badly that he was not sending anybody to take money or soup to Wamutira. I reached a point of quarreling with Mũrage until he sent somebody home.

I had gone to Nairobi in May, and the following May I returned home to Mũrage's place and was three months pregnant. When I came here, I met Wamutira and we stayed together in the same house. You could even see me carrying her child when I needed to go somewhere. And if I went for a visit to my parents' home and was given something to eat, I would not eat it but instead carry it back here to share with Wamutira. We stayed together until we were taken to the villages run by the British during Mau Mau.

During that time, Wamutira was called to Nairobi with the *komerera* [type of bus that secretly transported Africans], and she left me here. When we were forced into the villages, it was me who carried all our things. Then I went back to my parents' home and there gave birth to my firstborn girl. When Wamutira returned home, we lived in a house with two rooms, but the doors were very close together. We are still good friends. Even if the husband would not wish it, we would still be close, and he would not be able to separate us, for Wamutira and I are of the same clan. But Muthoni is from another clan.

* * *

[Probably the other major change in Wamutira's adult life in addition to the births and deaths of her children was her relocation to Nairobi during the Emergency. She describes her trip.]

It was the beginning of Mau Mau when I went with other women to Nairobi. We were taken by a bus called a *komerera*. It was a vehicle that had canvas covers for hiding people underneath. I walked with other women wanting to see their husbands up to Baricho and got into the *komerera* to Nairobi. I had left Karuana here that time. When we reached outside Nairobi, those who went further into town were taken prisoners by the British and taken to Lang'ata Police Station. But us, we got off very far from town at a place that was all forest. We walked awhile and then were met by an old *mzee* who told us there was no roadblock near the railway station. So we passed through there. At the station, we met a man who was Mũgĩkũyũ, who took us to his house. The man cooked for us, and we washed and slept there overnight. We were very tired. In the morning, the man sent messages to each woman's husband, telling him where his wife

was waiting. So each husband came to that house without being noticed by the police.

While in Nairobi, Mũrage and I stayed in two rooms of the "railway houses," which were many rooms in a row built for Africans by the British. The rooms had concrete floors and were built of stone. Mũrage was a supporter of the Mau Mau freedom fighters, even though he was working for a *muzungu* [European] at the time. The supporters of Mau Mau had made groups, one at Karatina, another at Sargana, another just before reaching here. The last one was at Nairobi. These groups would communicate with one another and tell each other when the roads were clear of roadblocks. That way, Mau Mau people would move from Nairobi to here and back without meeting government soldiers. Mũrage was part of the Nairobi group.

Before I went to Nairobi to join Mũrage, I had already taken the Mau Mau Oath, but Mũrage took it while in Nairobi. The Oath was being given by force to everybody here. Even when going to take it, one did not know that was what one was going to do. Somebody would come and tell you to accompany him to go and eat rice and broken maize. When you got to the place, it was a bitter experience. If one had plaited her hair, it was cut off using a blunt *panga*. If one made an attempt to refuse, one would be slapped hard. Also, we were made to take off all our clothes, and if one tried to cover her private parts with her hands she was beaten. The meat eaten in the ceremony was rotten, and one had to swallow it and could not spit it out. One would not even utter a word in that hut. It was bad. You only hear about the Oath. You do not know how it really was. Me, I know.

I went to Nairobi when the trench was being dug, so I never had to dig it. But I was involved because my husband was. The Mau Mau supporters brought money to me, and I would go and buy soup to give to the freedom fighters.

We returned home from Nairobi while the fighting was still going on but was not as great as it was at the beginning. Mũrage lost a lot of money when he left Nairobi and his job there. When we got here, we discovered that the goats and cows that he had left here were *gũtaho* [commandeered]. They had been taken by British government soldiers to Mwea and Ndomba to feed government soldiers. It was that time when people were just being released from the villages [1958–1959]. We began to build the houses here and they were not yet completed by the time *Uhuru* came.

I was feeling very happy the day of *Uhuru* because now we would not be beaten again. I could not eat anything, because I was excited that we were no longer slaves. There was a lot of dancing and singing that night and all the next day. People were ululating and telling Munyao to raise the flag on Mt. Kenya. We were not sad to see the British leave.

* * *

After Mũrage came to settle here, he became a tailor. He worked at a tailor shop on the other side of the market. Muthoni was sewing there, too. So it happened that every night he would visit her in her room next to the tailor's shop on the pretext that he was staying there to keep watch over the machines—that's what he told us. We did not know about it until Muthoni, who was only a girl, got pregnant, and then Mũrage came to tell us that he was going to marry another wife. Karuana and I, we told him that he couldn't marry again because we wanted to stay just the two of us. He told us he could not leave Muthoni, because she was already pregnant and she was a good girl—even had been to school.

We told Mũrage to go and hear what his father had to say. When he went, the father told him that he would not allow him to marry another wife. But Mũrage went and made beer and bribed his father with four gourds of it. And so the father gave his consent to go ahead and marry Muthoni.

Before, when Mũrage came home from Nairobi, he often wanted to beat Karuana and me because of our friendship. He would ask me, "Is it me who married Karuana or you?" This was when he found Karuana always staying at my house. Karuana told him it was me who married her because I went for her at her father's homestead. The husband would try and separate us, but he was unable to. It is our hearts that like each other—Karuana and me.

When Muthoni came we just kept quiet. But later, we reasoned that even if we three lived together feeling bad because of one another, there were none of us who had the power to take another back to her father's home. Karuana and I stayed for almost one year feeling bad about Muthoni, but we found that even if we fought with her or tried to abuse her, we were doing nothing because she was there to stay. Karuana knew Muthoni because she comes from the same place, but I did not know her. Finally, we agreed between ourselves to get united together as wives, the three of us. Like now, if a visitor comes and I'm not around, the others will welcome her and entertain her for me. The husband has never told us to be friendly, but it is our wish and what our hearts want—to like one another and be friends.

* * *

[Karuana, when interviewed, had a different perspective on Muthoni's arrival as a wife, as she relates here.]

When Muthoni came she found me with only one child. When the husband told me that he was going to marry Muthoni, I never felt bad.

During that time, Wamutira and I never used two pots to cook—we always cooked together. The houses were two, but if you were told that one had an owner you would not agree. I only went to my house to sleep. Sometimes Mũrage would come and ask me, "Karuana, are you unable to get firewood for making your own fire?" Then I told him, "Wamutira is my mother, and she is the one who came for me from my mother's house. If you want me never to go to Wamutira's house, then take me back to my mother's. You knew very well we would stay together when you came for me. Leave us alone to do our work."

When Muthoni came, we welcomed her. At times, you cannot differentiate which children belong to whom here. Those children who are away, when they come home they always go to Wamutira's house. So sometimes you might say, "Wamutira has a lot of children." In my house, there is never a child. If there is food to eat from my house, the children will carry it to Wamutira's and eat it there. There is no difference between the way we treat the children—they are all the same.

* * *

[Having heard Karuana and Wamutira's perceptions of Mũrage's marriage to Muthoni, I approached Muthoni to hear her version.]

When I first came to live here at Mũrage's, I met Wamutira and Karuana. I was eating and drinking without seeing anything bad about the home, and I decided to stay. When I first met Mũrage, he was a tailor. I stayed with him next to the tailor's shop, and then I got pregnant. After seeing me, he would go to his other wives at home. They would cook food and send it to me at the shop. When time reached for me to have my baby, I came here and gave birth as I never went to the hospital. My co-wives were the ones who caught the baby—my first baby girl. They cooked for me for a long time and treated me well until my body got back its strength. So I started helping them in their work, and we stayed together, eating together and laughing a lot.

When I first knew Mũrage, he did not tell me he was married, because he wanted us to be friends [lovers]. But when I stayed with him and got pregnant, I pressed him for more news of his home, for I knew my fate was to marry him. He told me that he had two wives and I was going to be the third. I felt very bad inside and even wanted to leave him then. I went to my parents' home and stayed for two months. But Mũrage came and told my parents that I was free to go and marry elsewhere but I should not take his child along. When I thought about it, I decided to marry him. And when I came here, I never found him changed. If he brought anything home, he would give to each of us the same.

When I came here in 1962, I was a young *mũiritu* [newly circumcised] and a child to the other two wives. I was not even cooking. I started cooking when I had my second child. There have never been three houses for cooking. In this house, each wife has her own sleeping room and one for the children, and the other separate room—that one with a lock—that is the husband's. So there is no discrimination.

We help each other with the work here, but each wife has her own *shamba* and knows its extent. But when it is plowed, we plant together, and during weeding, when the plants are young, we do it together with the children. But when it comes to harvesting, one knows where her *shamba* reaches and harvests that one only.

Before we had the cart with the bullocks, we used to carry the coffee harvested in sacks on our backs to the coffee factory—all three of us. Now that Mũrage has the cart, our work is easier. When there is pay from the coffee harvest, if Mũrage gives one wife 100 shillings, he will give the other two the same. If he thinks of buying meat, he buys it and divides it equally, giving each her share.

* * *

[Karuana, in a separate interview, agrees that Mũrage treats all wives equally.]

When Muthoni came here nothing changed, because the husband never started to differentiate. If he had something to give, he gave it to all of us. The same with the children. If one of the girls' dresses gets torn, he will buy a new one for that child. But if he is buying new clothes, he buys for all of them when he has the money. If the children are sent home from school for lack of school fees or uniforms, he will not differentiate amongst them but will help them as they need it. He treats us all the same. You are not the only one who is surprised, Nyina-wa-Stepheni. Many people ask what makes us stay such good friends—all three of us.

* * *

[Wamutira, in a separate interview a week later, agrees.]

Each of us wives has her own portion of land to cultivate, but Karuana and I work our lands communally with the children. We start with one of our portions then go to the other one. The food that we cook, all three of us, the food cooked first is given to the children and husband. Then the food that is cooked later will be saved for cooking again the next day.

If disagreements occur, the husband calls me and shows me the mistake. But if we three wives have quarreled amongst ourselves, Mũrage

calls us all, starting with me, and hears each one's account. Then, later, we talk and solve the problem with him. He never likes seeing us quarrel. He asks what we are missing here that makes us quarrel.

Mūrage treats us all the same. If it is school fees, he pays for all the children. He takes all the children to get new school uniforms, and also he loves all the children more than he loves us three. No, it would not have been so peaceful at home if he had favored any one of us over another, but he is equal in the way he treats us.

* * *

[One day when I was visiting the homestead, Karuana made the following analogy of our occupations.]

Nyina-wa-Stepheni, you see how you use a pen and paper and that machine [she referred to the tape recorder] as your tools for work? Well, Agĩkũyũ women use the *mũkwa, kibanga,* and *ũma* as their pens and pencils in the *shamba,* and they use the *nyungũ* [pottery cooking pot] and *muiko* [long stick that is rounded and flattened at one end—used for mashing food] in the house.

[The *mũkwa* is the woven rope carried by all women to haul containers of water, bunches of bananas, sacks of potatoes, and firewood home on their backs. The *kibanga* is the machete used for weeding, planting, cultivating, and digging out tubers. It also serves as a cutting tool around the homestead. The *ũma* is a short-handled pitchfork, with the fork set at a right angle to the handle, used in cultivation. Finally, the *kiondo* is the term used for any woven basket used to carry produce home from the *shamba* or market. Karuana's analogy is perceptive, because the tools she refers to provide a rural Kenyan woman with the ability to support herself economically, just as my pens, pencil, and tape recorder provide me a means of support. Mutira women are full-time farmers who cultivate not only subsistence crops but have major responsibility for the two cash crops grown in the area—coffee and tea. Wamutira describes how she learned to grow them.]

We first began planting coffee after Mau Mau. We were shown by government agricultural officers how to plant the coffee, take care of the bushes—pruning them when needed—and how to pick the ripe seeds [coffee berries]. They showed us that we should pick the seeds when they are red. Before, we were fearing to pick coffee because we were afraid that it might not sell. But now, we do not fear it, and through practice we have learned to pick better and faster. Coffee is picked twice a year, in late May and again in November. Everybody helps then. We put the seeds in large sacks and carry them to the coffee factory for processing. The coffee factory is a cooperative. When the skins have been removed, we collect them and use them as fertilizer around the bushes.

With tea, it has to be picked year-round. The government took us to a training course at Kagosi to learn how to cultivate and pick it. We learned from extension workers that we should pick two leaves and a bud. At first we used to pick using one hand, as though picking vegetables, but now we are able to pick using both hands at the same time, putting the tea leaves into *gikabu* [large baskets] on our backs. Because we have learned how to pick better through practice, now we get a bigger yield. So, more kilograms of tea and coffee are sold now than when we first started. We take tea to the weighing stations and are paid at the end of the month according to the number of kilos picked. One of the things I am proudest of is that it was me who planted all these coffee bushes you see here. From what we earn, we can pay for the children's school fees.

Yes, it is true that school has taken our children from the *shamba.* When I was a child, we were expected to help our mothers once we learned how to handle a digging stick and a hoe. Nowadays, children have to go to school, so they can help us only on Saturdays and holidays. But I think it's important for children to go to school so that they can get educated and get the good things I see—like more knowledge and the ability to read road signs so one doesn't get lost. Those who go to school are able to get employed and support themselves, unlike us who were foolish enough not to go to school. School might have helped me, because I would know some things I do not know now—like how to write letters to people whom I want to write. Like now, if I had gone to school, I would be writing to you, Nyina-wa-Stepheni, and even talking to you in English.

Nowadays it is just as important for girls to go to school as for boys. Even a girl can do a lot of good things to develop her home. It is not like the old days, when people used to say that they would not take their daughters to school because they thought they would become prostitutes. Our fathers were foolish then.

My daughters did not get enough schooling. When we tried to force them to go like other people, they preferred to get married. But they do not have the best marriages. I know they regret, now, that they never finished school. Even my sons did not get much schooling.

What do I think is important to teach my children at home? To teach a child obedience—that is important. That means waking your girl very early in the morning so she can wash herself and go to school. It means when I send her for something, she should obey me. If it is after school, I tell her to go and fetch water for me and cook. I tell the younger ones to respect the older ones because they are just like their mothers. I would also like my daughter to be hard working and somebody who is able

to rely on herself later on. After educating herself, she should be respectful to me and her father, knowing that she was able to go to school because of our hard work. It is the same with a boy, but, above all, a boy should be clever and study hard to be a teacher or an officer in a big company somewhere.

I taught the girls how to cultivate with a *kibanga*, how to pick coffee, cook, and wash their clothes. But I remember I never showed them how to dig with a hoe. They used to follow me in the *shamba* with a hoe and do as they saw me doing. That way they learned how to use a hoe. But for picking coffee, I had to show them how to do it. They learned how to pick just the red berries, putting them into their baskets without spilling them on the ground. Sometimes one of the children would find a chameleon on one of the branches and become frightened. Then I would take that child away—for a chameleon is a bad omen.

The main difference between being a grandmother and a mother is that my sons' children are told to go to *Cũcũ's* [Grandmother's], but the children of my co-wives are told to go to their eldest mother's house. But there is no difference when I'm taking care of all of them. If it is giving food, I share it equally amongst them—they are all my children. The most important thing is to take care of *all* children, regardless of whether they are yours or not. When giving tea or food, one should not discriminate—that way the home will stay in good harmony. To be a good mother is more important than being a good wife.

Which do I think is my most important role? The one of cultivating, picking coffee, fetching firewood and water, and cooking. Also that includes feeding the cattle. It is a difficult thing to think about the rest, but I told you being a mother is more important than being a wife because my children depend upon me very much. I only need to obey my husband as a wife. But now I am not very interested in him sexually. The next most important role is being a co-wife, which is more important than being a daughter, as that was long ago.

When did I become a Christian? It was after Mau Mau. Everybody had joined, and I was left behind like a fool. I found that so because when somebody died, she was buried by the church she belonged to. And me, I did not have any church, and so I would not be buried properly. So I joined the Anglican Church at Mutira.

Before I started going to church, when somebody began quarreling with me I would fight back. But now I don't do such things, even if somebody abuses me. The things I used to do—like nagging or feeling bad when my husband came asking me whether the cow had been given food and water, and I'd tell him to go and take the cow to the river himself—I don't do anymore. Now, I never talk back rudely to him, because I know

he is the wheel and pedals of the bicycle and if he can't take the wheel and push the pedals, then we wives can't move.

* * *

[I asked Wamutira if when her first child was circumcised she had gone through *nyumithio* in order to achieve elder status.]

My oldest son went through *Irua* not so long ago, but there was no ceremony for me like in the old days when a woman's head was shaved and she got new ear plugs. And the tradition of the *kiama* for elders I never met—it had passed, too. Not long ago, I went through menopause, but I never got any headaches. I got some hot feelings and chills and sometimes I felt low. But I never felt sad when menstruation ended. I felt only happiness because I had layed down a burden that I did not want anymore.

What am I proudest of having achieved? I'm proud because I planted all the coffee trees you see here. I do not have any future dreams because I am satisfied with my life the way it is. My strongest character is being hardworking. I work in the *shamba* all day and feed the cows. I generally like working. My weakest is that I have a very bad temper when somebody does me wrong—but everybody loses her temper at times. The thing in my life that changed me the most was when my children died. I started worrying and wondering whether I would ever get others to keep. I was not able to eat or drink anything, and even working was a problem. I started taking extra care to see that my children were well fed, clean, and when they got sick, I took them to the clinic.

What does being a woman mean to me? A woman is one who plants herself firmly at her own homestead without wandering. Being Agĩkũyũ means that I took the Mau Mau Oath—for if you did not take it, one was not considered a true Mũgĩkũyũ.

I liked the way we talked, Nyina-wa-Stepheni. The things you have asked me about my life make me think. I will keep them in my heart and never forget.