**Kiptony's Circumcision**

I was raised in Kenya, in the tea-growing area near Kericho. Although people from many other parts of the country came to work on the tea estates, the land belonged to the Kipsigis people, and they are still the predominant local tribe.

The land is hilly, with broad ridges separated by deep forest-filled valleys in which streams or small rivers run. On the ridges there is open grass-land dotted with clumps of trees and scrub. Where the land was cleared for the tea estates, these hills are covered by tea bushes, neatly pruned to about waist height - although from a distance they look like a well-mown lawn. The days are hot, as you'd expect near the equator, but there is heavy rainfall during the wet seasons, mostly in the afternoons, and the altitude (over 2,000 metres above sea level) means that the nights are cold. The people live in family farmsteads (shambas), in a cluster of houses with mud and wattle walls. Traditionally these were thatched, but those who can afford it prefer corrugated iron roofs to keep out the rain. There are some fields of maize and tea, but Kipsigis people are proud of their cattle and goats, and the young boys have the task of tending the family's herd and making sure that the animals are gathered securely at night into the enclosure (boma) near the homestead.

My father and I lived in the estate-manager's bungalow. My mother died when I was five. Wages were cheap, so the household included a butler, Arap Rono, a cook, a washerman and a gardener, who lived with their families in stone-built accommodation about a hundred yards from the bungalow. I used to play with the younger of Arap Rono's two sons, Kiplangat, who was almost exactly my age. His brother, Kipsongoi, was two years older and spent much of his time on the family farmstead, where his step-mother, Arap Rono's first wife, presided over her own family of two older boys and three girls.

In front of my father, Arap Rono and the others addressed me respectfully as "Bwana kidogo" ("young sir" in Swahili), but otherwise I answered to the name Kiptony, the Kip prefix turning my own name into a Kipsigis name. Kiplangat and I would sometimes go to the farmstead, where Kipsongoi would let us help him with the animals, but he was impatient if we did anything wrong. Sometimes on a hot morning we went to the stream and, if the women weren't there collecting water or washing clothes, we would swim in the pool, splashing around until we had cooled off, then chasing each other through the bushes until we were dry.

I went away to boarding school when I was seven, but Kiplangat and I still played together in the holidays. We built ourselves a den - actually a shelter to extend a shallow cave - where we would spend hours talking together (in Kipsigis) and planning how we would have our own farms with many cattle when we grew up. He wanted me to teach him what I learnt at school, and I helped him learn to read in English as well as Swahili.

One school holiday when we were about twelve, as soon as I could after I arrived home, I went with Kiplangat to the farmstead to hear what had been happening while I was away. While I was there Kipsongoi arrived with his friends, all naked and painted in coloured clay in various patterns. I asked Kiplangat what was happening. He told me, in a tone which mixed some apprehension with matter-of-fact acceptance, that his brother was going to initiation. I knew that this step was inevitable for all Kipsigis boys, and indeed was something they looked forward to because it marked the transition from being a mere "kid" to being considered a man, with all the status and responsibilities and freedoms that implied. The word ng'eta, uncircumcised boy, carried a wealth of contempt if used to a teenager and was a serious insult to a Kipsigis man.

We clustered round the group of candidates as they invited the adults of the homestead to the feast, and followed them on to the next shamba as they went the rounds to invite all their father's relations. I pestered Kipsongoi with questions about when, where and what would happen, and he told me that the ceremony would be held the next day. A hut was being built specially, close to one of their neighbours whose son was also being initiated and who had offered to sponsor the initiation of the group. "But you ng'eta aren't allowed there." Kiplangat commented to me: "It's not fair. The big boys keep calling usng'eta, uncircumcised brats. I can't wait till I'm old enough to be initiated too, but my father has said I must wait till I'm bigger and until two years after Kipsongoi has been cut. I don't want to be treated like a kid by Kipsongoi and his friends, but I suppose I'll have to accept it for a bit longer. They say it hurts like hell when you're cut. But I'm sure I'll be the bravest in the district, and then all the girls will want me as their lover." Although I heard the rejoicing next day because Kipsongoi had faced the knife without flinching, I didn't see him again that holiday. With all the initiates, he was kept in seclusion in the special hut. Kiplangat was asked to help with the animals more than before, so he and I had the run of the shamba. When I saw Kipsongoi the following holiday, he was much less friendly, more withdrawn, freer with his insults to his younger brother and even to me, and obviously very conscious of his new circumcised status, which he took no trouble to hide.

A year later both Kiplangat and I had grown up. I had my first ejaculation soon after I was thirteen. Our voices had broken and, as we swam in the pool, we could each see that the other's genitals had grown very much since we had last seen each other naked. In our den we compared our penises and the distance we could "shoot" when we peed and wanked. We wondered what it would be like to be circumcised, and once we tried using juice from a euphorbia bush on our glanses: they swelled up so that the foreskin stayed back all day. I told Kiplangat that when he went to be initiated, I wanted to come with him to prove my friendship to him, (but mainly because I really wanted to know what happened). There was rivalry as well as friendship between us, and he sometimes called me a Luo.

The Luo were the neighbouring lowland tribe, traditional enemies of the Kipsigis, and were generally referred to as dirty cowards because they were uncircumcised. I often claimed that wazungu (whites) were just as brave as Kipsigis, but this generally drew a laugh from Kiplangat's friends. Kiplangat said he bet that I wouldn't dare to be circumcised like a real Kipsigis, and as we taunted each other, I replied many times that I most certainly would. But I knew that there was this difference: for him it was inevitable, part of his social framework, and something over which he had no choice. But circumcision was also something which, so long as he did not flinch under the knife, would bring him new status and respect. For me it would be a choice which would test my loyalty to my friend, and my boasts to the other boys. But if I chose to step aside, I would still have my secure status in the white community. Having to make this choice made it more difficult, not less, for me than for Kiplangat.

Initiations were held in the long school holiday at Christmas. The day I arrived home from boarding school, having turned 14, Kiplangat met me in an excited mood. "I told my father I wanted to go for circumcision, and now it's all arranged for Friday. He has told your father I'm ready. You could ask him if you can come to watch. If you really are as brave as you claim, you can join the ceremony with me and prove it." So this was it! If I pulled out, I'd lose my friend, and I'd lose face with his father, with his family, with all the Kipsigis lads I knew, and especially I would face embarrassing references and taunts about my childish uncut cock from Kipsongoi and his friends. I told myself that they often exaggerated their bravery in the stories they told about their own initiation.

The next few evenings, I visited the homestead with Kiplangat and joined him and his friends as they toured the other shambas, singing and dancing outside each hut that we visited. I had to learn the songs and special initiation dances which Kiplangat and his friends had already practised. These mainly involved jumping rhythmically up and down on the spot in time with each other. On the Thursday I had my hair cut very short, in a crew-cut.

Friday arrived. I dressed as usual. At breakfast I told my father that I'd be going to Arap Rono's shamba to watch Kiplangat's initiation. He told me I could go and watch if I liked, but I was not to get involved in the drinking. "You can go and support your friend Kiplangat, but remember, our civilisation is different from their customs." When I said that I'd been asked to stay the night, my father said I could if I wanted, "But watch you don't bring back any fleas." After breakfast I met Kiplangat and we went off to the shamba. We met up with some of his cousins, who asked, "Why's he coming? He's a wazungu." Kiplangat answered, "He's coming because he's my friend." Then he added, "And he says he's going to show us that he is as brave as we are." They laughed in disbelief, but let me come anyway. When we got to the farmstead, his step-mother was busy preparing quantities of porridge, and there were pots of beer ready for the party in the evening. She was much older than Kiplangat's mother, and sometimes came to our house to sell eggs from the hens she kept.

Arap Rono had asked my father for leave from work and was there already. He sent us off to collect the special plants which would be needed in the ceremonies. We spent most of the morning searching for these, and took them to the new hut that had been built near Arap Rono's farmstead. This time he would sponsor the group of initiates, including his own son Kiplangat. In the afternoon I went with Kiplangat and the other lads down to the stream. We washed in the pool, then spent time painting patterns on each other with red and white clay. Kiplangat asked me to put plenty of clay on his back, and he did the same for me - something we would be glad of later.

There were five lads including Kiplangat and myself. The other three were his cousins, about our age, though the smallest was only just into puberty and had a penis which was still smaller than our well-grown genitals. When we had painted each other to our satisfaction, the five of us set off in single file up the path to the farmstead. Apart from our mud-painted patterns we were completely naked, and out genitals swung from side to side as we walked. I carried my clothes in a bundle on my head and left them with Kiplangat's step-mother. As Arap Rono's senior wife, she took charge of the catering, although Kipsongoi and Kiplangat were sons of Arap Rono's second wife, who lived with him in the staff quarters near our house.

Late in the afternoon Kiplangat's mother shaved his head. She offered to do mine too, but I said my hair was short enough already. She gave each of us a cloak made from a single goatskin to wear - it was little more than a token covering but represented tradition.

At dusk a fire was lit in front of the homestead, relatives and friends gathered, and the women sang songs which mocked Kiplangat and me, telling us that we should go and live with the uncircumcised and despised Luo if we couldn't endure the circumcision ahead of us. Here was a very serious message to remind us not to disgrace the family's reputation and hopes. Kipsongoi and a crowd of his friends sang in competition with the women in a raucous verbal assault on us. When we did our dance the older boys joined in, and there was a generally bawdy mood, and an electric sense of erotic tension. The onlookers included several girls, and we were the subjects of their ribald comments. As the one white skin present my member was the subject of special interest, with comments such as: "Look at his mamarit. I've never seen a white mambarit before. It's not as big as Kiplangat's." Mambarit, obviously meaning penis, was a word I had not heard used before - people always seemed to use a euphemism. Later I learnt that this pre-circumcision party was one of the few times when such direct language was allowed. From Kiplangat's ancient grandmother as much as from toddlers of four or five (his nephews and cousins), everyone present subjected us to uninhibited stares which made us acutely aware

of the importance and vulnerability of our sexual equipment, of its huge interest to everyone present, and of the ordeal which lay ahead of us. After an hour or so of singing and dancing, Arap Rono called for silence, then anointed Kiplangat and me with some beer and made a speech stressing the reputation of the family. Solemnly he told us: "This is a very important occasion, not just for you, but also for all our family. Kiplangat, if you flinch tomorrow when the knife cuts you, you will bring disgrace on yourself, on Kipsongoi, on me and your mother, and on our whole family. Everyone you meet will laugh at you, and no Kipsigis girl will ever want you. So if you are afraid, now is the time to step aside, put on your clothes, and go home to your mother. You can always come forward to initiation another year. You have told me that you are old enough for circumcision, so you had better show yourself to be so. If you show any sign of cowardice tomorrow morning, I will disown you completely."

"I'll be brave, father. I won't disgrace you or the family. I want to be circumcised tomorrow. I have decided," said Kiplangat. "And you, Kiptony. I am your father's loyal servant. I have looked after him, and I have looked after you and watched you grow to be a fine young man. I told your mother that I would look after you, and I will. I have seen your friendship with Kiplangat, and seen how you have helped him. Now I see you painted and dancing with Kiplangat and the other lads. You say that you want to be initiated with Kiplangat. If you go through with it, you will be a Kipsigis like him and like me. But if you flinch when you are cut, you will disgrace yourself, and your father, and all the wazungu. If that is what you will do tomorrow, you had better go home to your father now. What do you say?"

"Arap Rono, I know you well, and I know you care for me. You are like a second father to me. I will not disgrace you, and I will not disgrace Kiplangat. I too will be brave when I am cut. I too want to be proud to be a Kipsigis."

"Very well. Be strong and brave, both of you. I will watch you both, and I hope you will both make me proud. Now come with me to the Poyot's hut." Arap Rono led us both out of the house and a short way down the hill to where the new menjit hut had been built, in a position screened from view from the surrounding homesteads by trees and a fall in the ground. An elder, Arap Wossa, a grandfather in his fifties with a grey beard and hair came out. He was the Poyot who would take charge of the ceremonies and make sure that everything was done as tradition required. Kiplangat and I were told to sit down some way from the hut, where Kipsongoi and four other boys who had been initiated with him two years ago had made a small fire. Soon we were joined by the three other lads who were to be initiated, brought along by their fathers.

When we were all there, Arap Rono came out to us with a steaming pot and gave us each a bowl of a soup with a bitter herbal taste. Squatting around the fire, we candidates were closely questioned by Kipsongoi and his friends, who boasted about their own sexual exploits and then asked if we had ever had sex with any woman, and if so, who with and how often. I thought of boasting, but then thought better of it and said that I only wanked. Kiplangat and the others gave similar answers. Before long each of us was gripped by stomach pains and had to make a dash for the latrine to relieve ourselves - the soup was obviously a powerful purgative, and several more such dashes were needed. It was a cold starlit night. The goatskin cloak over my shoulders was little protection and I began to shiver, despite sitting near the fire. There were comings and goings from Arap Wossa's hut, and we could hear voices. About midnight we were taken into the hut and stripped naked of even our cloaks. There was a fire and also a couple of paraffin lamps. In the middle of the hut a tunnel of sticks had been built about three feet high, three feet wide and nine feet long, and hung with nettles. The bigger boys made us crawl in a line through this tunnel four times, led by Kiplangat and then each of us gripping the thighs of the lad in front of us, while they pressed down on the tunnel. The nettles stung our backs, arms and legs. These local nettles had a particularly vicious sting, causing a burning itch and some swelling. After we had been through the tunnel four times, the elders asked us to confess whether we had ever had sex with a woman. They threatened that if we did not tell the truth we would be sodomised by a monster with a huge penis – at which point, fucking noises came from a dark corner of the hut. I guessed that the lads who had been sitting with us around the fire outside had told the elders what we had said - which hadn't been much! But Kipsigis people believe that an uncircumcised boy who has sex with a woman soils her and make her barren, so the sexual prospects for an uncircumcised Kipsigis man are minimal.

Then each of us in turn was led to a stool covered with nettles, and we were made to sit down four times. We were told that the nettles would stop the flow of blood after the circumcision, but their main function was obviously to test our stamina, and the elders discussed our reaction to the pain. One of them had more nettles tied to the end of a stick, and as we passed him, he applied them to our genitals. The elders had been drinking beer most of the evening, and there were long pauses while they drank some more, so the proceedings went on until about 3 am. Then we were told to gather up the sticks and the nettles and were led out by Kipsongoi and his friends, back to the near-dead fire to wait for dawn. We were all still naked, purged, cold, wet from the dew, sleepless, and throbbing with the pain of the nettles. Although Kiplangat was close beside me and we all huddled together to keep warm, I had never felt so alone and miserable.

At the first sign of dawn we were led down to the stream by Kipsongoi and his friends. They told us to have a pee and to wash off our mud decorations. As we waded into the chilly water, it reactivated the effects of the nettles from the night before. The older boys made us go in to the deep part of the stream and stand with the water flowing round our genitals. Kiplangat came to me and one of the other older boys to each of the others. He grabbed my penis, forced back the foreskin and rubbed my penis thoroughly clean. They made us stand in the water until our legs hurt with the cold. When they finally let us out, they made us wait in line while they again stung our foreskins with still more nettles. They told us that if the skin swelled up, it would make the operator's task easier. Then we filed up the hill in the brightening dawn, numbed by the chilly water, stinging from the nettles and exhausted from the trials and sleeplessness of the night.

Arap Rono came out of the hut and made us do an initiation dance, moving so that our genitals swung up and down until they slapped against our stomachs. Soon my penis was no longer small and shrivelled, but hung long and loose. Then he told us to stand in line facing the rising sun, and a crowd of men and initiated boys gathered in front of us to watch. Kiplangat was on the right, I was next, and the other three lads were to my left, the smallest last. Looking down, I could see that my foreskin was red and heavily swollen from the nettle-stings, and these also showed on other parts of my body. Arap Wossa moved along the line, pulling firmly on each boy's foreskin and then making a small cut across, level with the base of the glans -- it was no more than a nick, and I thought, "That's not too bad". But of course, it wasn't the proper circumcision yet; it was just to show where the circumcision cut would be made. Then we were told to sit down with our feet well spread and our knees bent, and were supported from behind by one of the older men, in my case Arap Rono and in Kiplangat's, one of his uncles. They told us to stare steadily at a stick stuck in the ground in front of us. As we got settled, I saw the circumciser waiting in the doorway of the hut, brandishing his knife.

When Arap Wossa was satisfied that we were all settled, he called out to the onlookers to be quiet and signalled to the circumciser, who squatted down in front of Kiplangat and got to work with his knife. Quickly, before I expected it, he moved in front of me. I could feel all eyes on me. The intensity of the moment was electric. I concentrated on keeping my eyes fixed on the stick and managed to remain motionless and silent. I could feel him pull my foreskin forward hard and cut across it at the end. I felt him cut again and a third time, but it was no more than 20 seconds before he moved on to the boy to my left. Only then did the stinging pain hit me. I turned my gaze to watch and saw him make three strokes of the knife, one from each side and one underneath. After the fifth of us had been cut, the operator stood back and the young men who had been watching us so intently began shouting and singing to praise our courage, led by Kipsongoi. The crowd joined in, then broke up and wandered off, leaving us five sitting on the ground. As he put my cloak over my shoulders Arap Rono said, "Well done, Kiptony. Well done Kiplangat." He gave each of us a stout stick and told us that if we started to have an erection, we should hit ourselves sharply on the ankle. He handed us short leafy branches and told us to

use them to keep the flies away from the wound. He also told us to keep pulling on the skin around the wound to prevent it from drying and scabbing.

The operator was a busy man and, I heard later, had three other groups of initiates to cut in the morning, with some way to walk between them. We were his first 'patients'. As soon as he had cut the fifth and last of our group he was quickly on his way to his next group. Arap Rono, Arap Wossa and the other older men went into the hut and soon two of the young men brought them large pots of beer from the homestead up the hill. Meanwhile, watched over by Kipsongoi and his friends, we were left sitting quietly, warmed by the morning sun but exhausted. Two of the younger lads started moaning, but were quickly silenced by Kipsongoi. I wondered what would happen next, but no-one told us anything and we were simply left sitting there. I looked down to my penis to see what had been done. The end of the foreskin had been cut away to a line about level with the middle of my glans, which was covered by a whitish layer of inner skin extending to just beyond the tip of the glans. The whole thing looked ragged and I felt very vulnerable. At first blood trickled from the end, but after a while this stopped. The nick which Arap Wossa had made was now no more than a line of dried blood, some way from the cut edge of skin. So, the operator had taken less of my foreskin than Arap Wossa had wanted! I gripped the shaft of my penis firmly and pushed the skin forward. The pressure seemed to ease the pain and the bleeding stopped. Kiplangat said to me, "Well done, wazungu." I replied, "We're not ng'eta now."

We sat there until the middle of the morning while the temperature rose. I had almost dozed off, when the circumciser suddenly reappeared. He called out, "Hodi" and Arap Wossa came out of the hut with some of the other men to greet him. They gathered round to watch us again, but this time they did not seem concerned about whether we kept quiet or flinched.

The circumciser sat down again in front of Kiplangat and told him to hold still. His uncle sat behind him to support him, entwining his legs to immobilise them. Arap Rono took up a similar position behind me. This time the circumciser took five or six minutes to do his work, during which Kiplangat sat looking stoically ahead. When it was my turn, I resolved to watch what he did, rather than stare away.

The circumciser pressed back the skin around the wound (undoing my efforts to pull it forward) and used his knife to scrape the exposed tissue, removing the dried blood in the wound. Then he pinched up and trimmed away the whitish skin which still covered my glans, trimming away every bit to a line just behind my glans rim. It was extremely painful as he scraped and cut -- far worse than his first cutting. The most painful part was as he cut at the loose skin underneath, and the frenum. Several times he poured some cold water over the wound from a bottle he carried. When he had trimmed away all my foreskin to his satisfaction, he pulled the shaft skin forward, pinched it and made a cut about an inch long in the loose skin on the top of the penis, where Arap Wossa had nicked it. This cut was parallel to and about an inch from the cut edge of shaft skin. He pulled the skin further forward and forced my glans through this new cut. The effect was to seal the wound with a neat line just behind my glans. Later I found that the skin on the upper side of my shaft was pulled tight, but there was still a bunch of fairly loose skin and an open wound underneath, from which blood dripped for a while.

Despite the agony of the pulling and cutting, I knew that I had to keep still, or maybe the knife would slip, perhaps cutting into my glans: that I wanted to avoid at all costs.

Having finished with me, the circumciser moved on to the three other lads on my left. The lad next to me had braced himself by putting his hands on the ground behind him. I looked over and saw that each time the operator scraped and pulled and cut, he wriggled and winced. One of the watching men called out, "Hold still. You don't want him to cut off too much!", but no-one commented otherwise. The fourth boy, probably scared

by what he had heard and seen, tried to get away, but was caught by the young men onlookers and held down, so that the circumciser could work without distraction. They also had to hold down the youngest, and one of

the men made him bite on a piece of wood to stop him crying out. Nothing was said about this later.

When the circumciser at last finished cutting the fourth and then the fifth boy, we were helped to our feet and led to the shady side of the hut to rest. By now I was extremely tired, hungry, dizzy from the operation and from sitting in the hot sun, and shivering with shock. Arap Wossa gave us each a pair of grass rings, about an inch thick. One had a hole about 3' inches (8-9 cm) in diameter and the other about one inch (2' cm) in diameter. Arap Rono put the bigger one around both scrotum and penis and the smaller one around the base of the penis in front of the scrotum, tying both with twine to a string around our waist. These held our genitals away from our bodies. When he put the smaller one on my penis, it hurt.

As he stood carefully manoeuvring these rings into place, Arap Rono examined my penis carefully, then looked me in the eyes and said, "He cut you well, and you did not flinch, even at the second cutting. You were a wazungu, but now you are a Kipsigisindet'. -indet means "one who is strong in something", so this meant "a real Kipsigis" who had earned this title as he was circumcised. That was a very proud moment in my life, marking an end to all the slighting comments implying immaturity (usually asides in my case, but open insults to Kiplangat). It marked my acceptance as a full member of the tribe. Despite all the pain of the past night and the cutting which I had endured in the early morning and again just now, it all seemed worth that quietly spoken accolade. I was thrilled and elated.

We were brought mugs of strong sweet tea and some food, and stayed by the hut with Arap Wossa for the rest of the day. Periodically he made each of us stand while he inspected our penises, showing particular concern about one of the boys who seemed to be bleeding long after the rest of us stopped. Fortunately, by the late afternoon he had stopped too. Arap Rono brought my clothes and told me to put on my shirt and shoes, then walked slowly with me home to the bungalow. As we met others on the path, he told them that he was proud how brave Kiplangat and I had been. The news had spread that the wazungu had been steady under the knife, and I was greeted with broad smiles and, "Habari mzuri, Kipsigisindet" ("Good news, real Kipsigis man.").

As we neared the house I put on my shorts. Arap Rono said he'd tell my father that I was very tired from the party the night before and had gone to bed. When we got home, I had a shower, soaked my cut penis in a mild antiseptic solution, replaced the two grass rings, and fell exhausted into bed, remembering to lie on my back, as Arap Wossa had told us to do, before falling asleep exhausted. I woke in the night for a pee, but slept into the following morning until long after my father had gone to work. Late in the morning Arap Rono knocked on the door and came in to waken me. He asked to see my penis, and after he had inspected it carefully, he nodded approvingly: "Mzuri sana" (very good). I had bled onto the sheets during the night so he took them for washing. When I saw my father at lunch he asked, "So, was it interesting? You look tired. How's Kiplangat? I bet he's a bit sore!"

I replied, "Yes, it was fascinating. I haven't seen him today. I'll go tomorrow," and thought to myself, "I'm sore enough, and he must be too." He asked, "Was he brave, or did he flinch under the knife?" "He was brave. We're both Kipsigisindet now." "What did you say? Do you mean you were circumcised too? "Yes. We were beside each other".

"Tony, I'm amazed. You must be very brave, then. Are you all right? The knife can't have been sterile. I don't want you to get an infection. I'd better arrange for you to see Dr Heilbronn - get him to check you over and give you a course of antibiotics."

Dad took me to the doctor's surgery that afternoon. The doctor examined me, then commented, "Ja, it is the typische Kipsigis circumcision, but well done. Did it bleed a lot?" "Yes, quite a lot, doctor, after the first cut, but not after the second one." "Good. If it bleeds, it washes out the dirt. I'll paint it with this, and give you some of these new antibiotics. You must take one three times a day, every day until they are finished. Come and see me again in a week, or sooner if it gets swollen or inflamed."

The following morning, I went to the menjit initiation hut, and visited it most days for the rest of the month that we were ceremonially unclean. Kiplangat and the three younger boys stayed there continuously. One of our first visitors was the circumciser. When he appeared it alarmed us considerably. Was he going to cut us yet again? As we stood in line in the bright sunshine, he passed from one to the next, examining each penis carefully and paying particular attention to where the slit skin fitted around the glans, and to the bunch of loose skin underneath. When he got to the boy next to me, he told Arap Wossa to hold him while he took out his knife and trimmed away a bit of loose skin near the glans rim. When he had checked us all, he went to a nearby thorn-tree and broke several thorns from it which he brought back to the hut. He took out a small pot with some butter in the bottom and put it over the fire. While it was heating, he sat trimming the thorns, then dropped them into the fat, let them boil for a while, then set the pot aside to cool, meanwhile talking gravely with Arap Wossa. When he was ready, he told the five of us to stand in line in the same order as before. One by one he took a thorn and by pushing it through both layers of skin twice, used it to pin together the loose skin which hung underneath the glans of each of us. When the thorn was in place, he broke off the sharp point. He told us these had to stay there until our wounds had healed. Of course this hurt, just as we were getting over the pain of the cutting.

The circumciser was known as the Elder, although ours was in fact quite a young man. He did not take any other part in the rituals and was a technician, while Arap Wossa had been the master of ceremonies. There were no formal requirements to become an operator, but operators are paid for their skill with the knife (in my case from the money I had drawn from my savings and given to Arap Rono earlier in the week). While we were watching him prepare the thorns, our operator told Arap Wossa that he had, of course, seen many circumcisions, but he first started circumcising boys when he went to his brother's son's initiation. Seeing that the man selected to operate was old and slow and a bit shaky with his hands, he jumped forward and took the knife from the old man before his nephew was cut. He then finished the rest of the boys in the group. The onlookers had admired his skill and he had been hired every year since.

He told us that it is the first stage of the operation which is the major test of a boy's courage and endurance -- so we had worried unnecessarily about flinching all of the morning while we waited for the second part of our own circumcisions. Parents want a man who can do the first stage as quickly as possible. His reputation ensured that he was in demand throughout the district and in the season he had several groups of lads to cut each day.

During the first few days after the operation our wounds were checked often. Any man visiting the hut, and particularly a father or, in my case, Arap Rono, would ask to have a look. Although we used antiseptics, our wounds oozed for about a week after the operation. Arap Wossa had some methylated spirit which he applied morning and evening. The fact that this was very painful for us was considered a fortunate side-effect!

On the third day we were told to wash our wounds in warm water and then to stand very straight with our backs to the wall and our eyes shut. Kipsongoi and his friends were there and held each of us in turn while the treatment was applied. They clearly relished making sure that we each suffered as much as they had done when they had been cut. Arap Wossa caught each penis firmly in a leaf, coated with a paste of leaf-ash and water. The ash was caustic and intended to promote healing, but the resulting pain was a really nasty one, making Kiplangat cry out in agony. After that we were forewarned, and braced ourselves for what was coming -- but that didn't make it hurt any the less.

These attentions kept our minds continually on our newly circumcised status. At the same time the men and older boys who had been initiated in previous years took pleasure in talking of the sexual privileges to which we would be entitled when our seclusion was complete – while watching us fight off erections! It was clear that they saw their role in our initiation as ensuring that the tests and pain to which we were subjected were up to the same standard as they had suffered.

The Kipsigis claim that the effect of the second stage of the circumcision operation helps the penis to heal quickly, causes it to remain semi-erect and ensures that when erect, the penis is straight, 'so that a man does not have to use his hands during intercourse". The result was certainly tight and closely trimmed on top, with the scar-line close by the glans rim. Underneath there was an 'apron' of skin which usually sat in a wrinkled bunch, but could be pulled and spread to become an inch square.

When I went back to see Dr Heilbronn, he said he was pleased that I seemed to be healing up quickly, and commented: "Oh, he's put in a thorn, has he? Did he boil it in oil first?" "Yes, doctor." "Good. That sterilises it, and usually it gives no trouble." At the end of the month Arap Wossa lined us up and pulled out the thorns, then performed the ceremony which ritually cleansed us and ended our seclusion. The thorn left two small holes near the base of the 'apron', which gradually closed up.

Kiplangat returned to live with his own mother in the staff quarters, and we had a week when we were free to do as we pleased, before I went back at the end of January to school, where I was keen to show off my newly-circumcised status, but rather embarrassed by the almost permanent state of erection which I seemed to be in.

As it turned out, five other boys in my year had also been circumcised in the holidays, and some of them were still very swollen and sore, for which they were treated by the school nurse. Unlike me they had not had the final "button-hole" cut in the Kipsigis way, and at each erection the wound still pulled apart. The boys from the Luo and other tribes who did not customarily circumcise tried to make a virtue of this by saying that they would be better lovers than us whose foreskins had been chopped off, but we won the argument partly by force of numbers and partly because they could not deny that it was clearly a considerable test of courage to have your foreskin trimmed away without anaesthetic while all your relations and friends watched closely to see if you would flinch or wriggle or even cry out.

Arap Rono told me that in his father's time Kipsigis initiations were held only every seven years, so the youngest lads might be just into puberty but the older ones might be well-grown men of 20. More recently initiations are of smaller groups, a few lads at a time. The five of us had been one of the smaller groups. By the mid-1950s all the boys' initiations were held from late December to late January, during the six-week school holidays, as had ours. Generally, a boy was thought ready when he showed the physical signs of adolescent sexual development, so most were aged 12 to 14. Kiplangat and I were older than the other three in our group.

At home again in April, I found that my status had risen considerably with Kipsongoi and his friends, with whom I now ranked as an equal -- though also as a challenger in the flirting with the young girls which became the main pastime for us all. I got increasingly friendly with a girl of 14, Tapkesos, whose well-developed breasts meant that she was considered grown up, though she had not yet been to initiation. Her regular boyfriend was working away. Because of my double status as both a Kipsigisindet and a wazungu who spent most of his time away at school, I was eligible as a boyfriend but not a threat to her established relationship. One day she suggested that I spend the night with her in the singroina, the shared hut where unmarried youths take their girlfriends. As we entered, the firelight showed that two other naked couples were there already. But there was still a sleeping space left, to which Tapkesos pulled me. She stripped off her skirt and spread it on the low platform, and I too stripped off and lay down. "No, the boy lies on his left side", she told me as she lay beside me. I worried in case I might make her pregnant. Obviously the skin-colour of any child of ours would make it clear who the father was. But also, as she was uninitiated, pregnancy would disgrace her. There were well-understood

ways of limiting this risk, however, which we had been taught during our convalescence. I soon discovered why, when they wanted to know if a girl had a lover, the Kipsigis would ask, "Between whose legs do you lie?" Tapkesos made me lift my right leg so that she could put both her legs between mine. Then, whispering "Now I've got my hands on the mambarit of the wazungu Kipsigisindet", she gripped my throbbing penis and placed its head at the top of her vulva. Then she made circular movements which, in my sex-starved state, soon brought me close to an orgasm. As we lay together panting and caressing each other quietly, she put my penis between her thighs, so that she could help me come without fear of pregnancy. Although neither of us moved much, we found this position surprisingly stimulating on the several occasions that we woke during the night. Although I only spent the one night with her, it was another important stage of my initiation to manhood. Circumcision had given me its social status, but the first full experience of sex with Tapkesos gave me an elation which I would repeat many times in the future.