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- 1 Tabitha Kanogo's *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya* traces the history of womanhood in Kenya amidst social, cultural, and economic changes in the period of colonial rule from 1900 to 1950. Not limited to a single region or ethno-linguistic group, the book surveys multiple communities, regions (urban and rural), and religious groups across Kenya. Male and female kith and kin, Local Native Council members and political leaders, missionaries, and state officials attempted to control Kenyan women's status through legislation and social control. However, girls and women negotiated their social, economic, sexual mobility through their own individual concepts of personhood. Kanogo concludes that no single identity of "Kenyan woman" existed. Rather, the analysis of women and girls' negotiations of "the colonial moment" reveals heterogeneous stories of contradictions, conflicts, and negotiations in determining women's agency, social standing, and identities. The emergence of individualism amongst Kenyan women and girls, Kanogo argues, involved "normative and geographical migration" (p. 9) as women traversed fluid boundaries between pre-colonial and colonial, traditional and modern sensibilities in exercising agency over their bodies and minds. A constant thread throughout the book is that the examination of individual life cases reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of Kenyan women's mobility and self-assertion.
- 2 Kanogo divides the book into seven chapters that explore key sociocultural institutions and practices around which women's lives were organized and contested: legal and cultural status; sexuality, culture, and the law; clitoridectomy; dowry, marriage, and the law; the medicalization of maternity; and formal education. As in indigenous and colonial societies sought to control these aspects of girls and women's lives, Kanogo

contends, “‘Womanhood’ thus became a battleground where issues of modernization, tradition, change and personal identity were fought” (p. 2). Chapter one on women’s legal and cultural status covers “the formative, deeply fractured and fluid” period of 1910 to 1930 in which the colonial administration attempted to codify women’s status under customary law. In continuation with the work of other scholars of colonial and customary law, Kanogo argues the colonial state’s interventions in inventing customary law and creating an embryonic colonial legal system opened up spaces in which women seeking to leave undesirable marriages could successfully petition for dissolution. This chapter sets up the argument throughout the book that the tentative and fluid nature of the colonial state unintentionally opened up new avenues for women’s self-assertion. Chapter two examines young women’s sexuality and community and state efforts to control their sexuality from the eve of colonial rule through the 1920s. Though customary law circumscribed the parameters in which women could exercise sexual mobility, individual women employed multiple strategies in engaging in sexual exchanges. The fluid nature of customary law in the precolonial period allowed, for example, individual widows to oppose levirate while leaving little legal recourse for women who had been subjected to sexual violence. This chapter emphasizes a second thread in the book that determining African womanhood was a contested process on the eve of colonial rule and that the colonial moment introduced further elements in the already complex process of formulating Kenyan womanhood.

- 3 The first two chapters set up the foundational argument of the book: that there is no monolithic portrayal of African women’s status and identity in colonial Kenya, but that individual strategies and engagements with figures of authority resulted in varied ideological and geographical migrations. Chapter three analyzes community, state, and missionary attempts to control clitoridectomy to argue that debates about whether the process was morally and medically sound reflected debates about what ethnicity meant in colonial Kenya. Chapter four argues that the increased monetarization of dowry in the late 1920s reflected the shift from marriage as a community event to an individual event. Chapter five reviews colonial efforts to codify customary marriage law in the 1920s and 1930s to argue that contradictory and parallel bodies of colonial and customary laws permitted and sometimes limited women’s attempts to determine their marriages. Chapter six examines protracted missionary efforts to medicalize Kenyan women’s birthing practice beginning in 1908 through the 1940s. The chapter argues that Kenyan male political leaders sought to determine how and which women would give birth in maternities as a mean to establish power and authority over women’s bodies. However, the professionalization and feminization of maternity employment in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrated how Kenyan women traversed geographic and ideological boundaries in shaping maternity. Chapter seven on formal education is the richest chapter, analyzing some gripping oral testimony by individual Kenyan women who struggled to obtain secondary and post-secondary education in the 1930s through the 1950s. The chapter argues that the few women who traversed normative and geographic boundaries to obtain degrees reflected change in how their communities viewed the economic, social, and cultural positions of women. *African Womanhood* is deeply imbedded in Kenyan colonial archives, the historiography of Kenya, and combines and analyzes rich individual accounts of Kenyan women. *African Womanhood* contributes to the expanding literature on women, gender, and colonialism. Furthermore, *African Womanhood* is part of a continued wave of literature in African studies that seeks to complicate the understanding of colonial rule beyond binary of

African resistance and colonial hegemony. Given that Kanogo contributes to two important themes in African historiography, it might have been fruitful for the book to engage scholarship from other regions in Africa in a comparative perspective. It was also not clear why the analysis began 1900 and ended in 1950. This book is a massive undertaking and will be of interest to scholars in the fields of women, gender and colonialism, Kenyan history, East African history, and colonialism in Africa.