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The removal of deciduous canine tooth buds in early childhood is a practice that has been documented in Kenya and in neighboring countries. This paper describes the occurrence, rationale and method of this practice amongst rural Kenyan Maasai. In a group of 95 children aged between six months and two years, who were examined in 1991/92, 87% were found to have undergone the removal of one or more deciduous canine tooth buds. In an older age group (3-7 years of age), 72% of the 111 children examined exhibited missing mandibular or maxillary deciduous canines. It was found that the actual removal of a deciduous tooth bud is often performed by middle-aged Maasai women who enucleate the developing tooth using a pointed pen-knife. There exists a strong belief among the Maasai that diarrhoea, vomiting and other febrile illnesses of early childhood are caused by the gingival swelling over the canine region, and which is thought to contain 'worms' or 'nylon' teeth. The immediate and long-term hazards of this practice include profuse bleeding, infection and damage to the developing permanent canines. A multi-disciplinary approach involving social anthropologists in addition to dental and medical personnel is recommended in order to discourage this harmful operation that appears to be on the increase.