

# Traditional Male Circumcision and Its Implications on the Socio-Economic and Psychosocial Life of the Bukusu Community in Kenya

Florence Mbachii, Sarah Likoko

Kibabii Teachers Training College, Education Department, P.O. Box 931-50200, Bungoma- Kenya

\* E-mail of the corresponding author: [florencewanjala@yahoo.com](mailto:florencewanjala@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Circumcision is traditionally practised among the Bukusu of Bungoma District, Western Province. This practise has had several implications on the community and the initiates involved. This study sought to investigate the impact of traditional circumcision on the psychosocial life of the Bukusu. This study utilized a survey research design in which data was collected on a number of variables simultaneously and at one point in time. The target population consisted of all circumcised boys between 12 –15 years in class 8 of primary schools in Bukembe location of Kanduyi division. Purposive sampling was used to select 100 boys from class eight and 40 parents from their households. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire and an interview schedule. Secondary data was collected from documented information about circumcision. The data collected was coded and analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5. Based on the findings, the study established that during traditional circumcision practices, the youths were taught sacred things, secrets, dos and don'ts, norms and regulations of their community. Thus they graduated as responsible members and future leaders of the community. It was also established that circumcision practices affect the socio-economic status of the families because it proved to be very expensive. It was also established that circumcision boosted the youth's self-esteem because after graduation they were allowed to participate in communal activities, including decision-making. This made them feel courageous, confident, worth to be respected and socially accepted members of their community. Based on this findings, it is recommended that teachings and songs being sung during traditional circumcision should be vetted to discourage immoral behaviours among the youth and also parents should be provided with adequate information on hygiene pertaining to the long-term medical effects of circumcision so that they can make informed decisions.

**Key words:** Traditional Circumcision, Moral, Economical & Psychological Effects of Circumcision

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Just like any other African tribes, the Bukusu people of Bungoma District practiced traditional male circumcision as a rite of passage from childhood to a adulthood. However it has several implications. Male circumcision is the cutting off of the foreskin from the tip of the penis without damaging the organ itself (Nahid, 1993). On the other hand female circumcision which is referred to as female genital cutting (FGC) or female genital mutilation (FGM) or female cutting (FC) is defined as the set of procedures used to remove or cause injury to parts or all of external genitals whether for cultural or non-therapeutic reasons (WHO, 1996; Nahid, 1993). There are different types of FGM such as "sunna", circumcision, clitoridectomy excision, infibulations and other unclassified forms of FGM (WHO 1996, Nahid, 1993).

Male circumcision has advantages and disadvantages (WHO 1996; Nahid, 1993). The perceptions of people towards circumcision are influenced by attitudes of the community that practices it. It is believed that group activities that encourage cohesiveness and corporate communal experiences are preferred by most Africans (Boykin, 1983). According to (Greg warner 2009), circumcised men have substantially reduced risks of contracting HIV/AIDS. Thus several campaigns have been launched to circumcise men in Africa.

In 2007 The World Health Organization (WHO) recognised circumcision as a new AIDS prevention measure. Long before male circumcision became the hot weapon in the war on AIDS, it was an ancient rite of manhood practiced by many African tribes. All over half of African men are circumcised in traditional ways. Circumcision marks their readiness to take up the duties of men: to defend the village, find a wife and begin sexual activity.

Studies have also found that boys with foreskin tend to have higher rates of various infections and inflammations of the penis than those who are circumcised. It was also reported that performing circumcision in the infancy is the most effective prophylactic measure against penile carcinoma. Boczko and Freed (1979) concluded that 20% of the men with penile cancer were circumcised at birth. The recommendation of circumcision for medical indications remained somewhat controversial, and the risks and benefits must be weighed.

On the other hand, the Bukusu of Bungoma district, Kenya, value traditional circumcision ceremonies and rituals seriously as a way of transition from childhood to adulthood. They

Circumcise their children in the month of August every even year. During this time, they leave all other activities pending and concentrate fully on traditional African circumcision, even when someone dies very few people will attend that funeral ceremony. This is because they believe that it's a taboo for one to attend the funeral and circumcision ceremony at the same time, as it may cause harm to the initiates, if one attends, he or she can be blamed for causing harm to the initiate and be punished by clan elders.

The Bukusus indulge in wasteful and dangerous ways of circumcising; like using the same knife for circumcising more than one initiate (Nahid, 1993). This may increase the risk of transmitting HIV. Cultural customs that surround circumcision such as alcohol consumption and increased sexual activity, may be associated with increased risk of sexual transmission of STIs including HIV infection (Musebe, 2000: Population Council, 2003). Other risks related to Circumcision are contained in a report by the Circumcision of Resource Pages; some babies die of complications resulting from circumcision. Deaths occur due to loss of blood or Systemic infection from the circumcision wound. A number of death cases have been reported in the medical set up and mass media. Research done by the American Academy of Paediatrics Task Force on Circumcision-AAPTFC.(Metcalf, Osborn and Mariani, 1983) purposed to investigate the following: the current incidences of circumcision, the reasons governing parental decisions regarding circumcision, the immediate and later complications of the procedure, as well as genital problems occurring to uncircumcised boys. The investigation revealed that circumcision had not changed over five year's from 1983. Metcalf *et al* (1983) had a task to convince parents to withdraw from the practise of traditional circumcision which was only possible by them providing adequate information on hygiene. The committee further recommended that physicians provide parents with information pertaining to the long-term medical effects of circumcision so that they can make informed decisions. However later studies reveal little change in the practices. It is clear that (Metcalf *et al*, 1983) mainly focused their study on the medical and social issues which they felt were related to the continuing high rate of circumcision.

#### *1.1. The Statement of the Problem*

Matjeke (1999) encountered several problems with traditional circum`cision and categorized these problems into four groups: health, socio-cultural, legal and economic. He confined his study on the health problems. On the other hand, WHO (1996) confirmed that some documentation and studies are available on the short-term and long-term physical complications

of different types of FGM. Literature review has revealed that much research has been done on the health problems, physical complications related to circumcision, parental decisions regarding circumcision specifically concerning the medical hygiene. However, very little has been done on the psychological, psycho-sexual, legal, economic, socio-cultural and moral issues that are related to circumcision. This study therefore investigated the impact of traditional male circumcision on the psycho-social lives of the Bukusu

#### *1.2. Objectives of the Study*

1. To examine the moral implications associated with traditional circumcision
2. To examine the economic consequences of traditional circumcision on the household.
3. To establish the psychological effects of circumcision on the initiates

## **2. Research Methods**

### *2.1 Research Design*

This study utilized a descriptive survey research design in which a phenomenon was observed, described and documented as it was in the natural setting without manipulation of variables. It involved events that had already taken place and related to present conditions. This design was preferred because the researcher was interested in the opinions of a large group of people and thus it helped in collecting information from a sample that had been drawn from a predetermined population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The design helped to cover a large area of study.

### *2.2 Participants*

Probability sampling procedure was used in choosing the number of schools and households from which students and the parents were interviewed. A sample of 100 circumcised boys was randomly drawn from a population of 16 primary schools of Kanduyi division of Bungoma district. A Sample of 5 schools out 16 schools was selected by use of simple random sampling and then purposive sampling was used to select 20 circumcised boys in class eight from the five selected schools, 40 parents who had circumcised boy(s) in their households were also purposively sampled. The circumcised boys and their parents were targeted for specific information about circumcision in the study area. 100 boy(s) and 40 parents formed the sample size for this study.

### 2.3 Research instrumentations

**Questionnaires and interview schedule:** The main instrument used in this study was a questionnaire, an interview Schedule was also used to overcome the limitations of the questionnaire. A questionnaire was used to reach many respondents. This instrument was piloted and test re-test method used to determine the reliability, as reliability index of 0.7 was obtained using correlation coefficient formula. The questionnaire was used to collect information from the pupils (boys) concerning the impact of traditional circumcision on their psychosocial life.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study investigated the moral, socio-economic and the psychological implications of traditional male circumcision on the initiates psychosocial life.

#### 3.1 The moral Implications of the Songs on the Thinking of the Initiates

The songs and dances have various effects on the thinking of the initiates. From the study, the sample respondents mentioned four main effects of the songs on their thinking during the period of circumcision.

**Table 1: The moral implications of songs on the thinking of the initiates.**

Effects of songs on the initiates	Circumcised boys		parents	
	Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
Symbolized that time to be circumcised Had come	25	25.5	8	20.0
Confirmed the success of the rites	24	24.0	8	20.0
Enhanced bravery and courage	23	23.0	18	45.0
Symbolized the beginning of sex And marriage	28	28.0	6	15.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 1** above reveals that the songs sang during circumcision symbolizes that time has come and there is no turning back. One is encouraged to be bold and withstand the pain to prove that he is now a man. Those who fail to do so are scolded and never to be respected in the society. No woman would also want get married to someone who could not even withstand the knife since they believe that children will inherit the father's cowardness. The songs also confirm the success of the rites and they praise the initiates for his decision to undergo circumcision. The initiates are also prepared for sex and marriage because they are convinced that girls will only accept them when they have been circumcised.

**Table 2: Effects of the songs sung during circumcision on the moral behaviour of the initiates.**

Effects of songs on moral behaviour	Circumcised boys		parents	
	Frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
Taught about the essence of Circumcision	22	22.0	4	10.0
Taught about moral expectation of the community	23	23.0	8	20.0
Encouraged to consume alcohol	21	21.0	4	10.0
Encouraged to engage in immoral Behaviour	22	22.0	18	45.0
prepared for sex and marriage	12	12.0	6	15.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2** above reveals that the songs sang, taught the initiates about the essence of circumcision as a transition from childhood to adulthood. One is also encouraged to have good morals that can be copied by young boys. They teach about the moral expectations of the community from them. Alcohol consumption is also encouraged as a venue of socializing with other men in the society. Only 22% of the initiates claim that they are encouraged to start wooing girls and engaging in sexual activities claiming that they are now adults thus ready to marry.

### 3.2 Moral Teachings During Circumcision

Apart from songs and dances, the initiates were also taught on various topics that are intended to help them in their future life.

**Table 3: Moral teachings during circumcision**

Moral teachings	Circumcised Boys		Parents	
	frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
Taught how to be responsible	18	18.0	6	15.0
Prepared for sex & parenthood	18	18.0	6	15.0
Taught community expectations	17	17.0	6	15.0
Importance of unity	12	12.0	6	15.0
Respect for different people	11	11.0	4	10.0
Need to protect the community	10	10.0	6	15.0
Sacred teachings and secrets of the Community	14	14.0	6	15.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3 above shows that, all the respondents reported that they underwent teachings during the circumcision ceremony. They were taught how to be responsible including knowing what to do, when to do it and how to do it responsibly, so that the young ones may learn good examples from them. They were also taught how to work hard so as to keep the community going. They prepared them for sex, marriage and parenthood. Every Bukusu man is expected to marry and get children. They were taught about unity in the community and the need to always be there for one another and how to treat different categories of people in the society. For example they were told to respect the age mates of their fathers, the same way they respects their own fathers and the same should be applied to the age mates of their mothers. They were also taught the sacred things of their community.

### 3.3 Effects of the Moral Teachings on the Thinking of the Initiates

When asked about the effects of the above teachings on the thinking of the initiates, the sample respondents enumerated a number of them most of them. Table 4 summarises the major effects of these moral teachings on the thinking of the initiates of Bukusu community.

**Table 4: Effects of the moral teachings on the thinking of the initiates**

Effects of moral teachings	Frequency	percentage
I have complete knowledge about the community	23	23.0
I can now make independent decisions	22	22.0
I am now a grownup	22	22.0
I am now responsible for my actions	33	33.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In table 4 above the initiates claimed that their thinking after circumcision is quite different because they now have complete knowledge of their community, the teachings also helped them to make independent decisions since they were taught to think maturely as grownups for they were no longer children. They also gained confidence due to the respect they received from others especially the uncircumcised boys; this really boosted their self esteem. They proudly confessed that they are grownups and that they can also participate in community decision making because of the knowledge they have received from the teachings during circumcision. Above all they are responsible for their actions, since they know what is expected of them by the society: they now understand the norms, regulations, dos and don'ts (taboos) of their society. However the effects of the mistreatment during circumcision on the thinking of the initiates was observed.

### 3.4 How the Initiates were Treated During Traditional Circumcision Ceremony

Sample respondents differed on the kind of treatment they were subjected to during circumcision. Majority (68% ) described it as a mistreatment while 32% were satisfied with the treatment. Table 5 summarises some of the reasons for what they regard as mistreatment during circumcision.

**Table 5: Mistreatment of the initiates**

Type of mistreatment	Frequency	percentage
Spent sleepless nights out in the cold	14	20.6
The process is physically painful	15	22.1
My parents could not meet the economic expectations		
Of the community	12	17.6
Beaten and mocked	15	22.1
Walking naked regardless of the weather	12	17.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Immediately the candidates announced that he wanted to be circumcised, he was given permission by the parents to start inviting all relatives who were to come and witness his bravery and courage. While doing that he was not allowed to sleep in the house with others instead he spent sleepless nights assuming they were preparing him for the hard tasks that he was to undertake after circumcision. The process of circumcision is physically painful because they don't use any anaesthesia to relieve the boy from the pain; this sometimes leads to prolonged bleeding and thus risking the child's life. Munoz (2003) concurs with this study as shown in his research that no anaesthetics were used during traditional circumcision. The initiates could not be allowed to put on clothes regardless of the weather; they were mocked and beaten wherever they passed just because they were candidates for circumcision. This made some of them to regret as to why they decided to be circumcised. As per that 32% of those who were satisfied with the treatment all reported that they were psychologically prepared it and considered it as normal routine during such practices, since they were aware that their forefathers passed through the same type of treatment.

### 3.5 Effects of the Mistreatment During Circumcision on the Thinking of the Initiates

When asked whether the mistreatment during circumcision has caused any change in their thinking, 85% (58) of the 68 respondents agreed while 15% (10) disagreed. These findings showed that some initiates claimed that it made them regret why they decided to be circumcised and that is why some of them don't support traditional circumcision at all because it had done a lot of harm on their bodies before the day came for them to be circumcised. However they also said that it made them become more hardy, brave and courageous to face the knife since they never wanted to repeat the same process again, which they said would torture them more psychologically.

### 3.6 Socio-economic Implications of Traditional Male Circumcision Practices.

Traditional circumcision proved to be very expensive as the boys put it, some parents sold land just to meet the expenses of the practice, this therefore affected the economic status of their households, and some could not go to school simply because their parents could not afford fees since they had become poor.

When asked how traditional circumcision practices had affected the economic activities of their households, 56% of the circumcised boys' respondents reported that their households became poorer while 44% saw no change in their standards of living. Table 7 summarises the effects of traditional circumcision on the household economic status.

**Table 6: Effects of traditional circumcision on the economy of the household**

Effects on their economy	Frequency	percentage
Standard of living never changed	44	44.0
Became poorer	56	56.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

When parents were asked whether traditional circumcision preparations affect the family's economic status, 100% of them agreed that the exercise is economically very expensive in terms of feeding the initiates and visitors. Some even sold their family properties in order to finance the ceremony. All these happen at the expense of other activities in the family including paying school fees. The circumcisers' fee of 1000 shillings was given first priority since it is believed that in case one failed to pay this money, then circumcisers' have the powers to spoil the child.

### 3.7 The Psychological Effects of Traditional Male Circumcision on the Initiates

The various social activities and teachings that accompany the Bukusu traditional circumcision practices caused a number of psychological effects on the initiates involved. The activities' and teachings include the songs and dances; beating and mockery; colouring of the skin with mud; walking naked along the road; various teachings, and

treatment given to the initiates during the circumcision, among others. These psychological effects may be both positive and negative depending on the extent to which the initiate believes in them and how they are practised. When the sample respondents were asked about the psychological effects that traditional circumcision has had on the initiates, the following effects were mentioned.

**Table 7: Psychological effects of traditional circumcision on the initiates**

Psychological effects	Circumcised Boys		Parents	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Social identity	14	14.0	12	30.0
I can now protect myself	9	9.0	0	0.0
I am physically mature	8	8.0	8	20.0
Am now mentally mature and				
Can make independent decisions	11	11.0	6	15.0
It had boosted my self esteem	14	14.0	0	0.0
I should now be respected	10	10.0	0	0.0
Am now ready for parenthood	16	16.0	6	15.0
I can now participate in community				
Decision making	11	11.0	8	20.0
The society expects a lot from me	7	7.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 8** shows that circumcised boys become identified in the community. Walker (1993) agrees with this study as it is indicated in his research that circumcision defines who one is in the cultural group where it is practiced. They are given an age grouping which they belong to and new name. This makes them feel very important and think that they should be recognized in the community participation including decision making, conflict resolution and protection of the community. They also feel that they have a right to own property. They should also be recognized by their age mates especially during any traditional practice. They also feel brave and courageous and therefore can protect themselves. Generally circumcision boosts the boys' self-esteem. It therefore improves their dignity and respect. The society as well expects a lot from them.

#### CONCLUSION

The study investigated on the traditional male circumcision and its impacts on the psychosocial lives of the Bukusus. The findings of the study may be useful in helping to create awareness and sensitize the parents on the risks their children are exposed to during traditional circumcision. And thus help them to make informed decisions concerning the rite of passage they should engage in. Based on the findings, the study made the following conclusions;

- i). Traditional circumcision is a socially acceptable practice that enables the youth to move from childhood to adulthood stage of development. It also prepares them to be responsible members of the community through the teachings given to them during circumcision ceremony. This is seen in objective one (1) where the initiates were taught to be hard working to keep the community going and they were also taught about sex and marriage thus being prepared for parenthood.
- ii). The teachings and songs used during traditional circumcision encourage the initiates to engage in marriage and marital responsibility.
- iii). Traditional circumcision proved to be very expensive and affected the economic status of their households. This was established in objective two (2) where the boys claimed that circumcision never changed their standard of living instead they became poorer. On the other hand the parents also claimed that they had to sacrifice as much as possible in order for them to meet the expectations of the invited guests and the circumcisers'.
- iv). Traditional circumcision boosts the child's self-esteem since he feels courageous, confident and worth to be respected as established in objective three (3) of the study. This promoted their thinking.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the conclusions of the major findings the study makes the following

Recommendations:-

- i). The teachings and songs used during circumcision should be vetted to ensure that they impact positively on the initiates thinking about the themselves and the community at large.
- ii). Parents should be provided with adequate information on the long term and short term effects on their children during traditional circumcision.

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