

A Historical Investigation into the Changes in Male Circumcision Among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub-County, Kenya (1950–2016)

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Abstract

The study aimed to document the changes from traditional to modern methods in the male rite of circumcision in the said community. Male circumcision as a rite of initiation has been a subject of discussion, but the truth about the practice among the Ameru had not been adequately revealed. Researchers have often presented the topic of circumcision among the Ameru as difficult to penetrate because of the secrecy of the rite. This study investigated the changes that have taken place in the rite of circumcision among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub-County, in Meru County, Kenya. The period taken was from 1950 to 2016. The research employed the Descriptive Survey Design. The target population was 61,091 adult men from Imenti South Sub-County, and the sample size comprised 50 randomly selected respondents. Research instruments used were mainly interview schedules, Focus Group Discussions and observation, and data was collected from oral, secondary and archival sources. The findings were that between 1950 and 2016, there were changes in male circumcision rite in Imenti South, Sub-County. These changes could thus be traced from the time of colonialism, which started in this community in the 1950s. The changes were meant to Christianise the operations as colonisation and evangelisation went hand in hand. The study recommends that since changes are inevitable, there is a need for the blending of traditional and modern aspects of the male rite of circumcision.

Key terms: Changes, Imenti South Sub-County, initiation, male circumcision, rites.

INTRODUCTION

Circumcision, as a rite of initiation of boys from childhood to adulthood among Ameru, was a very important cultural practice. The traditional form of initiation is as old as the history of the Meru people, but from the 1950s, there have been changes from the traditional form to the modern form of initiation. The rite was used to distinguish a child from an adult because once a boy underwent the rite, he was considered a grown-up. According to Gray (2002), the traditional male rite of circumcision as a form of initiation among the Ameru was not only done for the transition to adulthood but also for socio-cultural issues, and it is viewed as the yardstick for measuring maturity and responsibility. Njuguna (2016) opines that anybody found misbehaving was ridiculed by the Kimeru phrase, "Akari ta mwiji" (Meaning he is behaving like an uncircumcised boy).

Traditional male circumcision as a rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood entailed physical brutality to harden and discipline the initiate, seclusion where the initiates were educated on healthy relationships and sexual taboos without which the society would plunge into social problems (Maigallo, 2019). The initiates were also given a new name as an indication of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Among the Ameru, the time when a boy was initiated was very important because it determined his age group. Age group was very important for the social identity of the Meru people (Rimita, 1988). According to Nyaga (1997), boys circumcised at the same time or season formed an age group and referred to one another as "Bamo, Wacia or Bamung'o" (meaning my comrade in circumcision). However, there have been changes in circumcision as a rite of initiation since the 1950s, but these changes have not been adequately documented and thus, the need for the study.

According to the Archival source (KNA/MRU/1937), the colonial administration resolved to encourage the spread of Christianity and the establishment of schools with the aim of modernising communities so that they could leave their 'backward or 'primitive' lifestyles. The stand by the colonial government and European Christian missionaries that communities needed to shift from traditional male circumcision to modern male circumcision continued to be advocated by the Government of Kenya, the Church and the civil society

after independence in 1963. As a result, African communities, including the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County, started embracing modern male circumcision as a rite of initiation into adulthood for the boys. This led to different perceptions of the practice between the conservatives who supported traditional circumcision as a rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood, and the dynamic and educated Ameru of Imenti South Sub-County, who supported modern circumcision as a rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood. By the year 2000, this dynamism presented contrasting circumcision options, with its apex being reached in 2016 as a result of widespread advocacy in the community. This means that the concept of male circumcision as a rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood has been changing since the 1950s, but the changing trends have not been adequately documented hence the significance of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Male circumcision as a rite of initiation among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County was one of the most important rites of passage. The period between 1950 and 2016 is historically remarkable in Imenti South and Kenya in general because the state of emergency was declared in 1952 by Governor Sir Evelyn Baring. According to Fadiman (1993), the missionaries took advantage of this to advance not only their religion and education but also the modern form of circumcision. Between 1950 and 1960, circumcision as a rite of initiation among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County was predominantly traditional and was not commercialised. Although people were generally peaceful, any interference with it was met with resistance as indicated by Edward Butler Horn in his report in KNA (1908) that there was, however, hostilities encountered among the Ameru of Kathigu . . ." the rite has, however, changed over time, and the aspects of change vary depending on the period it was done and the surrounding circumstances. Circumcision was a communal activity, and boys were circumcised in a common field known as Kigiri.

Kenya attained independence in 1963. The historical significance of this is that Kenyans had self-determination in their political, economic and social life, devoid of any influence from the colonialists. By the end of the 1960s, there was a negligible number of the Ameru in Imenti South Sub County who briskly

embraced modern circumcision due to the spread of Christianity. The few individuals who had received Western education, however, feared to openly oppose the traditional male initiation rite of circumcision because of their small number and the ridicule they faced from the general public. According to oral respondent, Riungu (2022), this period was characterised by a general decrease in the intensity of traditional circumcision practices, such as songs and night dances, because they had been banned by the colonial masters. Kanake (2002) denotes that few of those who converted to Christianity embraced modern circumcision as a rite of initiation principally because of the unhygienic conditions that the traditional circumcision took place and the barbaric behaviour portrayed during the circumcision period.

Mugambi (2022), one of the oral respondents, asserted that some of the drastic changes witnessed were the abandonment of the common ground, *Kigiri*, circumcision and bathing in the ice-cold river. One of the oral respondents, Munga'tia (2022), also explained that although the traditional rite transitioned boys into adult men, uplifted the social status and determined one's age group, there was much emphasis on making an individual a complete member in the society, because the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County had embraced some degree of modernity. This agrees with Bailey and Egesha (2006) that there are considerable changes in the male rite of circumcision in many African traditional societies, and so Imenti South Sub County is no exception.

Respondents in the study indicated that enlightened individuals began to distance themselves from traditional circumcision. They considered it a backward practice and adopted hospital or modern circumcision. This assertion agrees with Puren et al. (2002), who, in a South African study, revealed that traditional male circumcision was old-fashioned. Western formal education and Christianity, according to the study, gradually transformed the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County and rid them of their "savage and primitive" behaviour by the 1970s. An oral respondent, Kirimi (2022), posited that they refused to have their sons undergo the *Kigiri* circumcision and instead opted for the home-based circumcision practised in modern society. This finding was supported by Kanake (2007),

who earlier posited that the traditional practice of male circumcision as a rite of initiation was outdated.

Male circumcision as a rite of initiation drastically changed in the 1980s with the rise into power by the retired and late President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi. The Government of Kenya outlawed female circumcision and directed that boys be circumcised strictly after completion of Primary School Education due rise in indiscipline cases such as dropout and absenteeism in schools which were attributed to early circumcision (Kimathi & Mutwiri, 2022). The importance and meaning placed on circumcision also changed significantly in the period between 1979 and 2000. Boys were no longer circumcised just for preparation for adulthood and social status but as a preparation to join Secondary School. This period was also marked by a drastic change from the use of one knife for all, thus bringing to an end the "one knife, one field" tradition to the era of one blade for each candidate. The concept of social cohesion that was embraced traditionally, according to Kanake (2007), Rimita (1988) and Mbiti (1987), became meaningless. An oral respondent, Mung'atia (2022), differed with Nyaga (1997) on corporal punishment (in Kimeru language *Kianga*) designed as a form of discipline, as it was no longer applicable because it was considered a criminal offence of taking the law into one's hands. This was a clear indication that the male initiation rite of circumcision among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub-County was changing at a high rate.

By the end of the year 2000, it was clear that most traditional communal beliefs and cultural practices were hindrances to meaningful social, economic and political advancement (KNA/MRU, 1930). The period between 2001 and 2016 was therefore characterised by a drastic decline in traditional male circumcision as an initiation rite, according to Nkubitu (2022), one of the traditional cum modern circumcisers. Most people denounced traditional circumcision and embraced modern male circumcision as a rite of initiation among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County (Mwiti, 2022). Circumcision was no longer a clan decision but became a preserve of the initiates and their parents to choose the type of rite they wanted to undergo. Advocacy by the churches, social media and the government intensified the importance of boys undergoing the rite of circumcision in a modern way. Stephens (2008)

agrees with this study in the assertion that modernisation is historically an avenue of cultural change and social progress.

According to M'Mugambi (2022), a major change in male circumcision as a rite of initiation that occurred between 2001 and 2016 was that the rite became commercialised. Organisations intending to hold male circumcision camps highly advertised the events on electronic media, billboards and in the churches (Kiathi et al., 2022). Organisations hosting male circumcision camps tried to merge both the traditional and modern aspects of circumcision to effectively compete for initiates. They competed to offer quality services such as meals, integrity of practitioners and accommodation with considerable costs. According to one camp organiser by the name of Mputhia (2022), the proximity and popularity of the facility, organisers and the Church were also taken into consideration because they determined the number of candidates enrolled for circumcision in a particular place and time.

The dynamism in society pushed modern circumcisers to perform the male rite of circumcision as desired by either the parent or the initiate. The study established that circumcision could be done at home, in private clinics or hospitals, in public hospitals or dispensaries, and in organised camps. When probed further, some 44 (88%) of the respondents reported that this was possible because of the availability of basic infrastructure, such as roads, which allowed easy access to areas where circumcision camps were held. These findings agree with the Archival source KNA/MRU/1937 that the community under study was by the accessible fact that as early as colonial times, roads, hospitals, and commercial centres had been developed.

Another significant change in the practice of circumcision as a rite of initiation in 2016 was the aspect of detailed documentation and formalisation of the process. Proper records were kept with all details of the candidate and the parent or guardian (Mputhia, OI, 2022). This was a sign of professionalism that was meant to build confidence on the part of those seeking such services. The organisations holding camps to do modern male circumcision as an initiation rite also began issuing certificates to formally certify

that the young persons had transitioned from childhood to passage to adulthood.

By the year 2016, the period of seclusion for the initiates was also reduced. According to the majority, 46 (92%), of the oral respondents, seclusion takes between two (2) to three (3) weeks for those in the camps and hospitals and up to one month for those confined in their respective homes. The initiates are given instructions on personal hygiene and morality by the caretakers, popularly known in Kimeru as *Atiiri*, who are also educated. The initiates are also given medical check-ups at least twice while in the camps. Another major change was little or no traditional education was transmitted to the initiates (Mutwiri & Kang'aara, 2022). The initiates are mainly instructed on the current emergent issues while the traditional life of the Ameru is ignored (Mwija, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive research design, which enabled the researcher to collect data from various sources and analyse it thematically. The purpose of using this research design was to describe the state of affairs as they exist (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Data were obtained from oral, archival and secondary sources. The research instruments used were interview schedules, focus group discussions and observation. The target population for this study was 61,091 males in Imenti South Sub-County. Thus, all men in this Sub-County who had undergone circumcision by 2016 were the subject of this inquiry (GoK, 2009). The sample size was 50 respondents, following the recommendation of Kathuri and Pals (1993) that a sample size of 20 to 50 people is adequate to indicate a small sub-group. This was in consideration that the Ameru of Imenti South Sub-County can be regarded as a minor sub-group of Meru County, Kenya. Fifty (50) respondents were thus arbitrarily chosen to take part in this investigation, and because every circumcised male in the study area had an identical probability of being chosen to take part in the study, simple random sampling was viewed as appropriate and hence used.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study established that before the 1950s, the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County practised traditional male circumcision, but by 2016 majority had

embraced modern circumcision, which was done in hospitals and circumcision camps organised by religious organisations. Before the 1950s, being a circumciser was a preserve of a few families, and circumcision was done by men. By 2016 various medical and community health practitioners, including women, were trained on how to circumcise boys and began circumcising boys. Circumcision before 1950 was done in an unhygienic way, especially due to the "one ground, one knife" at circumcision. However, this concept of "one ground, one knife" was not in existence by 2016 because it had become unpopular due to the HIV/AIDs scourge.

Before 1950, circumcision was done mainly for social and cultural reasons so as to maintain cultural identity. Therefore, it was not commercialised. However, by 2016, male circumcision was totally commercialised, and it became a norm for boys to undergo the rite in a camp where they pay large sums of money. There were no formal records kept before the 1950s when circumcision took place, but by 2016, organisations that were offering circumcision services in camps had begun formalising the process by keeping formal records of the initiates through detailed documentation such as enrolment forms and issuance of certificates. Traditionally women were indirectly involved in male circumcision as a rite of initiation. Nevertheless, due to dynamism in society, such as the onset of single-parent families, individualism, urbanisation and Christianity led to the involvement of women in matters of male circumcision by 2016.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study established that traditional male circumcision as a rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood was deeply entrenched in the community. The importance of circumcision before the advent of colonialism was that an individual became a complete member of the community and was accorded social rights and obligations. Before the advent of colonialism and the formal school system, male circumcision as a rite of initiation was characterised by brutality, informal education during seclusion, naming and age groups. Traditional initiation rite was for both boys and girls and involved the whole community.

The distinct physical sign of circumcision of traditional male circumcision among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County was a loose hanging skin flap on the penis after healing (*Ndigi*). The study established gradual aspects of the change in the practice of male circumcision. The concept of "one ground, one knife" was not acceptable among the Ameru of Imenti South Sub County by 2016 due to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Traditional circumcision as a rite of initiation was close to extinction by 2016 because modern circumcisers learned the art of traditional circumcision and incorporated it into their practice. The study also established that dynamism in society, such as single parenthood, individualism, urbanisation and Christianity, led to the involvement of women in matters of male circumcision.

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