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Cultural Relevance and Temporal Placement in Framing Female Genital Mutilation in Samburu County

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Abstract

The paper looks at the framing of anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) messages in relation to culture in Samburu County. It focuses on the framing of FGM in its value and relevance within the community culture as an indicator of a possible site for self-evaluation in the fight against FGM. The study draws upon research on anti-FGM media campaigns in Samburu County, combining an analysis of radio messages with findings from interviews and focus group discussions conducted among community members exposed to the broadcasts. The sample consisted of a media anti-FGM campaigner, four elderly persons and twelve young persons. It employed framing theory and used qualitative methods to analyse the data. It found that FGM, which is widely perceived as a harmful practice, is today framed variously in the media. Apart from focusing on its harmful effects and its negative role in education and marital bliss, the study has found frames that portray FGM as failing in the very role it seeks to play as a cultural ritual. These frames have cast FGM as falling short of these cultural demands, with a related frame portraying FGM as having lost its value and therefore become outmoded as a cultural practice. This paper explores these frames as aspects of community internal self-evaluation as opposed to the more common response to external pressure, especially national legislation in vacating the age-old practice. It argues that the new frames represent a case of cultural evolution for the community, which could have its own peculiar impact in bringing FGM to an end.

Key words: Change, culture, cultural standards, Female Genital Mutilation, framing

INTRODUCTION

Culture is the "relatively specialised lifestyle of a group of people that is passed from one generation to the next through communication" (DeVito, 2013, p. 29). It can also be seen as "the knowledge, values, beliefs, behaviours, and institutions shared by a society" (Nguyen, 2024, p. 122). Values are what a group defines as good or bad, and beliefs are the basic understanding of what the world is like. Customs or traditions are things people always do, or their routine behaviour in particular situations. Culture has been described as being central to human sociality, enabling coordination of social actions and cooperation in large-scale groups (Nguyen, 2024, p. 121). Cultural relevance is about a practice or belief resonating with the needs and aspirations of its people. Despite relative stability, culture changes in response to new beliefs, understandings, and allegiances (Stephenson, 2023). Cultures may also experience modernisation, whereby they may exchange cultural practices with different groups (Angkasawatips, 2024). Elements of culture that no longer serve the community's needs can be considered anachronistic and be dropped.

The Samburu people of Kenya have practised Female Genital Mutilation for ages, a ritual they have employed to mark transition from childhood to adulthood (Anthoney, 2015), as a way of ensuring fidelity among their women and girls and as a marker of their identity (Mahero, 2015). The practice has come to be associated with numerous health complications and has become a subject of much debate and legal sanctions, forcing the community to resort to reduced forms of the rite and alternative rites. Although cultures may remain stable for some time, they are also dynamic, responding to economic and technological shifts (Yeganeh, 2024). Samburu culture has been changing even with respect to FGM, which is reported to be being abandoned, performed in less severe forms, or performed in secrecy, especially from 2014, Notably, education and higher socioeconomic status appear to be related to lower FGM rates (Van Bavel, 2022).

There has been a shift the world over in the evaluation of FGM, with its harmful effects appearing to define it. Top on the list are health concerns, where FGM has been linked to numerous health issues. Among these are obstetric and neonatal complications, gynaecological complications, urological health effects, mental health effects, and sexual health effects. Women who have undergone FGM face substantially greater risks of adverse maternal and neonatal outcomes. They are 2.6 times more likely to experience prolonged or obstructed labour and have a 1.6-fold increased risk of stillbirth or neonatal death. The likelihood of perineal tears is more than twice as high, while the need for episiotomy is also increased. Additionally, women with FGM have a 2.2-fold higher risk of postpartum haemorrhage. The procedure is further associated with a 2.8-fold greater likelihood of extended hospitalisation following childbirth and a 1.8-fold increased risk of neonatal asphyxia (Pallitto et al., 2025).

FGM is associated with several gynaecological, urological, and mental health complications. Women who have undergone FGM are more than twice as likely to develop tissue-related complications, including keloids, neuromas, and vulvar cysts. They also face nearly twice the risk of reproductive tract infections, including tetanus and sepsis (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023), and are 1.7 times more likely to experience menstrual disorders. In terms of urological health, women with any form of FGM have more than a 3.5-fold increased likelihood of urinary tract infections. The practice is also associated with adverse mental health outcomes, with affected women being nearly twice as likely to develop PTSD and almost three times as likely to experience depression or anxiety. Toubia (1994) identifies three psychological effects of FGM: a state of anxiety, reactive depression resulting from delayed healing, and psychotic excitement due to childlessness and divorce. Women with FGM may also suffer sexual health effects, with about four times higher chances of painful copulation (Pallitto et al., 2025). FGM leads to downward social mobility by compromising one's education, occupation choice, and earning potential (Graff et al., 2022). It is also detrimental to productivity, as it leads to high rates of absence from work (Refaei et al., 2016). Apart from health-related problems, FGM interferes with the pursuit of education for young girls, foments marital dissatisfaction, and infringes on the rights of the undergoer.

In light of these negative effects, the government and other stakeholders have embarked on a campaign to eradicate the practice using legal restrictions and educational efforts. Among these efforts has been the use of media to decampaign the practice. The campaign has mostly focused on the health, educational, and legal implications of the practice. However, a less discussed issue is the cultural dimension of fighting FGM from within the community. This paper considers the frames that employ cultural arguments to decampaign FGM, which has the potential to introduce new impetus into the campaign.

Media Framing

Framing can be understood as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The concept of framing was originally posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972, who defined psychological frames as a "spatial and temporary bounding of a set of interactive messages" (Bateson, 1972, p. 197) that operate as a form of meta-communication.

Frames that relate to the presentation of issues in media discourse are called news frames or media frames (D'Angelo, 2017). According to Entman (1993), media framing is the process by which an individual selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text with the effect of promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Framing may involve the use of framing devices, which are seen as condensing information and offering a media package of an issue (Geise, 2025). These can take the form of format-based presentation features, such as headlines, visual scenes and still images, pull quotes, backgrounders, hashtags, and charts, which determine how words and images are presented. They can also include discourse structures such as metaphors, catchphrases, and keyword patterns, as well as image attributes such as facial expressions, camera angles, image cropping, and image sizing (D'Angelo, 2017). The list may also include concepts and symbols (Zaklama, 2025). Metaphors, which fall under rhetorical devices are particularly notable for structuring communication (Flusberg et al., 2018) and are so efficient that "by calling up a metaphor, the rest of the coverage of the story can be interpreted within the terms of the metaphor" (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 148).

Frames have four functions, namely defining problems, identifying their respective causes, proposing solutions to address them, and offering a moral evaluation (Entman, 1993, as cited in Dan & Raupp, 2018). To do so, frames draw on prevalent ideas, values, and norms in a given culture (Dan & Raupp, 2018). In Lecheler and de Vreese's view (2019, p. 7), "frames are culturally bound and serve to reduce the complexity of our everyday world."

Media messages against FGM have been framed from various perspectives. FGM has been presented as a health risk, an educational risk, and a legal issue. In addition, there are human rights, gender equality, and marital threat frames, as well as the archaism frame and cultural futility frame. There are also frames that present FGM as an antiquated practice and as a practice that does not meet contemporary cultural requirements. These have been termed the archaism frame and cultural anachronism frame, respectively. The present study focuses on these culture-based frames because of their emphasis on culture, which is at the very heart of FGM.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to examine anti-FGM media programmes aired in Samburu County and audience perceptions of the programmes. The sample consisted of six media programmes that were purposively selected, including an interview, media spots, a radio report, and songs. These were coded RIT8, MST11, MST12, ST9, ST10, and RRT13. The programmes contained anti-FGM content and were broadcast on three radio stations with wide coverage across the county, namely *Radio Ashe*, *Serian FM*, and *Radio Mchungaji*.

The study also selected 17 informants from the community through snowball sampling. The informants included a lead anti-FGM campaigner, male and female elders, young girls, and young men. They provided data on their perceptions of the messages and the actions associated with them. The informants were coded CT1, MET2, MET3, WET4, and WET5, while

the focus group discussions were coded MFGDT6 and GFGDT7.

Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect the data. The resulting recordings were transcribed and translated before being subjected to qualitative analysis, which focused on identifying themes and patterns guided by Framing Theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion

Obsolescence Frame

The frame describes FGM as an outmoded practice that ought to have been abandoned as people keep pace with modern trends. It was observed that the community has made strides towards modernity in other fields, such as dressing, where the use of animal skins for girls' clothing has been abandoned

In making the point about the need to keep up with the times, the anti-FGM campaigner (CT1) explained in a radio interview that sticking to FGM was like remaining under a tree that had been cut and was about to fall down:

> *Informer: We also have many cultural practices that we abandoned as Samburus. Things like girls and women wearing skin were dropped. Our girls are now wearing skirts, and we did not become a different community. We have abandoned many cultural practices, and our identity didn't change.*
>
> *…The tree has already been cut, all other communities have stopped doing it. It is only us Samburus that have been left under this tree. Now that this tree has been cut and it is about to fall, what happens when we refuse to climb down? Can't the branches of the falling tree injure us? (MIT8)*

The informant, who is a member of the community, recounts a case of the Samburu people abandoning animal skins as items of clothing in favour of skirts made of cloth. He says that this change did not lead to a loss of the community identity, as they remained the same community. He further compares lingering on FGM to sitting under a tree that had been cut. He sees it as exposing the community to danger. The description brings out FGM as anachronistic, unwise and dangerous.

It is worth noting that the community has also changed traditional socialisation practices and embraced modern education for both boys and girls. This pursuit of education for girls cannot be effective with FGM, lures girls from school and advocates for early marriage. The practice of FGM is therefore an odd relic of earlier ages that some have clung to.

Achaism was evident in the songs played in the media seeking to see the Samburu community drop FGM to be in tandem with the rest of the world, as found in songs ST9 and ST10:

"Can we in one voice say NO to FGM as other communities did?" (ST9).

"You need to know that circumcision has no meaning and marriage for a girl does not have any importance." (ST10)

In the songs, the community is called upon to turn away from FGM, which the songs present as a practice that has been abandoned elsewhere. Additionally, an argument is made that FGM has no meaning and it is not right to trade schooling with marring for a young girl. The descriptions above portray FGM as an outdated practice that lacks a place in modern society. The purposes that FGM was believed to serve, such as discouraging promiscuity and conferring ethnic identity are today served by other systems such as modern religions, while ethnic identity is no longer a critical currency in the global world.

Many communities in Kenya have turned their backs on FGM due to its harmful effects, and the description of trying to sit under a tree that has already been cut off is a way of making this point. The image of sitting under a tree is a metaphor that helps the audience visualise the situation that the speaker describes in terms of easily relatable phenomena. The falling tree, which represents an obsolete practice, could crush the community, leading to untold suffering. Metaphors, as framing rhetorical devices, efficiently structure our ability to communicate (Flusberg et al., 2018), as they provide a mental picture that is easily processed. Metaphors are perceived as communicatively effective. In the view of Hertog and McLeod (2001),

'by calling up a metaphor, the rest of the coverage of the story can be interpreted within the terms of the metaphor.' (p. 148)

Cultural Futility Frame

The media campaign makes the point that FGM, as practised today, has lost its cultural validity. The argument is that the practice has lost many important elements that were key to its validity because, today, it is performed clandestinely, forcing practitioners to eliminate many crucial steps. CT1 argued that it is no longer the original form of FGM:

Informant: "...as you are doing this practice, you are no longer doing it the original way." (CT1)

An elderly lady, WET4, similarly reported this evolution of FGM, saying that it is quite different from what she once knew:

> Informant:... *Wakati wao wa kitambo, mtu akitahiri, unatoa sherehe kubwa. Lakini ubaya ya hii ya kisasa hauwezi jua ata mtoto wa mtu ametahiri. Hawaambiani ata neighbour hawezi jua. So haifuati kimila.*
>
> Informant: *In the old days, when was one performing FGM, they would organise a big ceremony. The problem with the modern one, you cannot even know that someone's daughter has had it. They do not share the information, and even a neighbour cannot know about it. Therefore, it is not according to the culture (WET4).*

The loss of originality for FGM as described results from the secrecy involved. The secrecy is observed in order to remain under the government radar for fear of prosecution and punishment. In this effort, the practice has been stripped of certain key elements: expected participants, such as the FGM candidate's father, are left out, and parts of the process are dropped in an effort to avoid publicity. In addition, the practice has to be performed under the cover of darkness to enhance the shroud. These changes have whittled down the cultural content of the practice and, in the final analysis, the process loses its legitimacy.

FGM's validity has also come into question following a revision of the community's culture by the elders. The elders, who are seen as the custodians of community culture, were widely reported to have invalidated FGM in a groundbreaking ceremony known as the Kisima Declaration in 2021. This is as stated by MIT8:

> *Informant: It is no longer a debate, as we have a greed as clans and as a community that we have agreed to end this thing and we have blessed it (MIT8).*

The community elders, in a ceremony graced by the then President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, cursed FGM and blessed those who had not undergone it in a widely publicised event on national television.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: The frames discussed in this paper demonstrate a case of taking a new look at FGM and its place away from the traditional issues of the law and human rights. The archaism frame presents FGM as having lost its relevance given the community's history of re-engineering its culture to keep pace with the times. The cultural futility frame, on the other hand, looks at the pragmatic aspects of FGM as practised today, where the law of the land is so stringent that FGM cannot be said to be meaningfully carried out and is therefore not a valid rite.

Recommendations: In view of the two frames in which FGM has been presented as discussed above, it is clear that a community's internal evaluation mechanisms can be activated to address issues that affect them. Further studies could be undertaken on the effectiveness of tackling undesirable practices through homegrown ideas that easily resonate with the community as opposed to application of external forces

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