

# Significance of Circumcision in Modern / Current Bukusu Society: A Case Study of Bungoma County in the Republic of Kenya

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**Abstract:** *This article examined the social significance of circumcision in modern Bukusu society. Functionalist theory, gender identity and social learning theory informed and guided the study. The article used a qualitative research design with a case study strategy being Bungoma County. It employed in-depth one-on-one interviews that were complimented by document analysis and observation as methods of collecting data. It also used non-probability method of sample selection, specifically purposive sampling and snow ball techniques. The sample included six newly initiates who had undergone the traditional male circumcision and residing in Bungoma county, five family members and seven community members. It also sampled nine key informants which involved, five circumcisers, two committee leaders and two chiefs. Data was analyzed qualitatively through content thematic data which used interpretative approaches and textual presentation. The findings showed there have changes to traditional Bukusu circumcision brought about by way people live nowadays. Such changes have been influenced by poverty, education, church, modern science and urbanization. The study recommended further studies covering other factors influencing the traditional circumcision of the Bukusu community.*

**Keywords:** Social, Significance, Male, Traditional, Circumcision, Bukusu, Community

## 1. Introduction

The Bukusu traditional male circumcision as rite has been undergoing some great bit of changes which is as a result of modernization (Worthman & Whiting, 1987). The social, cultural changes that were brought about by Western religion, education and social media have greatly influenced the Bukusu traditional male circumcision practices. The beautiful faces of the rituals, such as vigorous dances, do no longer exist widely as it were in the past. Today, traditional male circumcision represents a ritual which is the mixture of old and new texts and performances. Traditional male circumcision is not a traditional community's affair but rather a private function. Today male circumcision can take place in various places unlike in the past specifically at home. These places may include; the home, the church and at the hospital. This may depends on where the "cutting" could take place.

Traditional male circumcision is a rite of passage and it happens in different societies in the world. These rites of passage are moderated and regulated by traditional circumcision instruments, some ceremonies and rituals exist in every particular society. There are main stages that occur in the rite of passage. These include separation, seclusion stage and incorporation into the society. The stages are very significant to the rite of passage as it transforms one from childhood to adulthood which is male circumcision. Circumcision comes from two Latin words Circumcision: "circum" for "around" and "coedere" for "to cut" (Loosli, 2004). Male circumcision is the cutting or removal of the foreskin. Many theories have been put forward on the genesis of the removal of the foreskin that is in the male circumcision. According to Cox (1995), he says that the cutting or removal of the foreskin was attributed to the timing of the onset of sexual intercourse. Some people believed that there was a need for people to learn and get some skills on the reproduction. There was a

belief that delay in the reproduction could accord to people some advantages.

The Bukusu people are found in the western region of the Republic of Kenya in a County called Bungoma. Most of Bukusu people of Bungoma do believe that all young boys at the age of 12 years have to undergo male circumcision. They do believe that these boys cannot grow in mind or mature up without being exposed to circumcision which part and parcel of Bukusu traditional ritual (Sifuna, 2002). Traditional circumcision within the Bukusu community is an important affair through which young starts to learn and understands the community's affairs as mature people. Despite this, the social media has continued to report on advantages and disadvantages associated with traditional initiation that inspired the undertaking of writing of this article. Traditional male circumcision has been seen as a way of differentiating between young and mature person. For circumcision procedure to be complete among the bukusu people the candidates are put to tests to find out if one is ready to be circumcised for example being exposed to cold temperatures by putting on light cloths (Sifuna, 2000) However, even if traditional male circumcision of bukusu is criticized by current societies, it is happening and taken root in Bungoma county. This prevalence of Bukusumale circumcision is what influences and places pressure on Bukusu young men to undergo circumcision among them are; taboos, stigma associated with circumcision and non-circumcision and significance of circumcision in modern/current Bukusu society. It is upon this background that this article was envisaged.

## 2. Circumcision initiation Rite among the Bukusu

Circumcision marks the end of childhood and is an introduction to manhood in moral behaviour and responsibility as well as exposing the child to traditional education. As Makila (2003) says: this transition is

followed with a lot of education which includes marriage, sex education, self-identity among others. Boys who delayed getting circumcised were jeered and ridiculed by the public especially by their own age mates who were circumcised as well as by girls who would readily snub their proposal for courtship (Makila, 2003:122). Makila emphasizes the impact that this rite has on the initiate and the society as a whole. Circumcision by its nature causes change in the individuals and has impact on the community. This initiation enables a child to personally enter adulthood physically, socially and spiritually and become a full member of the community. "What affects the initiate affects corporately the parents, the relatives, the neighbours and the living dead." (Mbiti, 1969:121). Mbiti argues it is important to remember that initiation is one of the most important rituals meant to produce able-bodied youth force, labour, military and leadership. Some of the initiates can become entertainers, dancers or storytellers. Initiation also cultivates solidarity among the youth – that could be essential in the protection of the society.

Mbiti posts that to get admission into the adult world; an adolescent has to pass through a series of initiation ordeals. This admission ensures that the initiate is in a position to share full privileges, duties and responsibilities of the adult world. He is ritually introduced to the communal living. Most learning takes place during the period of seclusion when the initiates are convalescing. They would normally be kept away from the people and during this time, they would learn secrets of the society and other matters that would help them to be productive members of the community.

In other words, after seclusion when the initiates rejoin their relatives, they have new personalities as they have lost their childhood. They have been introduced to adulthood and are prepared for matters of procreation and other types of education. Traditional male circumcision have a greater value which marks the starting of getting some privileges that uncircumcised cannot access to in bukusu community. (Mbiti, 1969:122). What is important regarding this ritual is that it is a perfect African education. Mbiti further notes that this education emphasizes on social, political, spiritual and moral responsibilities. Circumcision; popularly known as *Embalu* is held during even years with preparations lasting between May and July. The actual operation takes place in the month of August. To reinforce the resolve of the candidate during this time, everything is done to humiliate him like dressing him clumsily and jeering him through with songs. Once a date has been fixed, the candidate invites the paternal and maternal relatives, friends and neighbors to turn up for the occasion.

### Modernity and Bukusu circumcision

After the colonial era, the historical and cultural nuance of Bukusu circumcision has been impacted by several factors such as poverty, education, urbanization, religion, changes in gender roles and government policies towards the practice. These factors are discussed below as follows;

### Poverty

Initiates no longer go round villages calling on all the relatives because of the expenses involved and the energy that those movements entail. Population increase has made this difficult. Initiates simply call on the close neighbours and relatives and do not have to make long journeys to the maternal uncle. These times, ceremonial animals are also not slaughtered. Instead, the cattle are preserved for sale to cater for the initiate's school fees or for marriage in future. This is because schooling these days is regarded by the Bukusu to be more important than circumcision itself and it is very expensive. Malika (2003) notes that *lubito* or counseling that is part of the traditional initiation is discarded by many initiates after hospitalization because there is no money to cater such. He adds that initiates don't go for seclusion which is an important aspect of training the youth to be adults and yet *lubito* in traditional initiation was a crucial moment that every initiate had to go through.

### Education

Namanda (1999) notes that the timing of circumcision in Bungoma County is influenced by the school calendar and the farming season. Circumcision takes place in August in alternate even years, a time when those who are likely to be circumcised are on holiday. August from time immemorial has been the time schools are closed after mid-year examinations. It is also a period that ushers in the examination term -third term when all the national examinations done. These normally take place in November. Godfrey Wanyonyi (O.I., 12/11/2019) said that:

*Arrangements have been made by the Lukembe Association that students in the examination year do not undergo the ritual. Those between classes five and seven and those between form one three could be circumcised and not those sitting for examinations in standard Eight and form four. (Godfrey Wanyonyi O.I., 12/11/2019).*

According to Musamali (2003), initiation is the time of celebrating when there is a lot of dancing, eating and drinking. August is the appropriate time because it coincides with the harvesting time. There is plenty not only to eat but also to give away as presents. In addition, the fact that the ceremony is held bi-annually also gives those involved ample time to prepare and also to identify prospective candidates.

### Urbanization

Majority of people in Bungoma County moved to work and live in mega towns. Some of these people are semi-skilled and skilled people and have joined their educated counterparts in urban towns. Most of these people have, because of economic reasons, chosen to stay in towns with their children and not to return to Bungoma for the ritual ceremony. These going and coming back to country have changed candidate perception. Traditionally, it was difficult for a candidate who has undergone the ceremony in hospital to stand amongst his peers and speak. He would

be booed because he was considered to be a coward. The irony however is that most of those who went to school and were circumcised in hospitals are the ones who seek leadership in Bukusu society. Most members of parliament are of this class.

*The movement from the rural to urban areas which have interfered with the life pattern of the Bukusu people. Many people are educated and therefore, move to urban centers for jobs or career opportunities. Some of these people sometimes finds it difficult to travel back to Bungoma County for circumcision rituals. They prefer therefore to undertake clinical circumcision in the centers where they work and live. (Godfrey Wanyonyi O.I., 12/11/2019)*

### Modern Religion

Simiyu cities a number of factors that have necessitated these changes:

*According to Joseph Simiyu, (O.I., 14/12/2019), Christianity has widely spread in Bungoma County. Christians do insist that young boys to be circumcised in hospitals. This has reduced the role of performances. In addition Simiyu says that there is no mudding done for Christian candidates. In steady some Christians just wash the candidate and get circumcised. This has made traditional circumcision to lose its impact. With lubito which refers to seclusion of initiates when they are counseled, the pastors are invited to do it the Christian way using the bible.*

In certain instances, the clinically circumcised initiates spend the night in the church where they are told the importance of circumcision within biblical context. The effect of Christianity on the Bukusu way of life and circumcision must be viewed within the context of Dini ya Musambwa to majority of Bukusu subscribed in the forties and fifties.

Dini ya Musambwa is a Makila (2003) argues that Christianity has reduced the impact of the Bukusu tradition as recently projected by Dini ya Musambwa. Christians have tended to associate Bukusu embalu with thuggery where young people drink busaa and become chaotic in the village. They also associate it with looseness of girls and therefore, condemn it as primitive. Makila says that Christians have not christened some of the traditional circumcision songs but have composed their own songs. Religious faith founded by Elijah Masinde and the Bukusus. It owes its existence directly to bukusu gods Wele Khakaba, Wele Murumwa and Wele Mukhobe.

When Dini ya Musambwa began, it was basically to revive the Bukusu way of worship. The movement spread from Bungoma to Uganda where the Bamasaba, the Bukusu cousins live. It also reached kabras and pokot. (Simiyu 2000). Simiyu narrates;

*As the missionaries approached Bungoma the bukusu land, The people of Bungoma had own way of worship through which traditional circumcision was practiced. But*

*the founder Elija Wanameme of Dini ya musambwa wanted to use it as a political weapon against colonialism. They jailed him for several years and therefore since that period Christianity was shaken. (Joseph Simiyu O.I., 14/12/2019).*

Some respondents saw as there is no need to be circumcised in the church because of lack of enough teaching they were getting. A class eight responded that, to be circumcised in the church just involved cutting of the foreskin which did not involve the practices that are done at home. The church excluded the lubito which was very key in traditional advice of the initiated. The following written quote relates this:

*I did not go to be circumcised in the church because. I knew there was no enough counseling. I wanted to get more teachings about manhood that was not given in the church. (Joseph Wabuke O.I., 12/11/2019).*

Other respondents showed the feeling of going to be circumcised in the church because of how the church organizes the program of male circumcision. The church facilitates the cost of hiring the premises a good sign of commitment despite parents paying little fee for circumcision. The church contributes a lot to top up on what parents pay to ensure the success of the program. Some said they also accept church circumcision because of being and coming from Christian families. The class eight boy narrates in the quote below that he was circumcised in the church;

*I was circumcised while in class six at the age eleven years in the year 2016. I was taken to hospital by my brother and my cousin. The hospital was a clean place and all costs was paid by the church. (Joseph Wabuke O.I., 12/11/2019).*

Those circumcised at the a hospital do not have mentors but people as volunteers are there to mentor and guide them. The guidance and mentorship is equal to that at home which was good to me. Related in the quote below:

*Myself I did not have a mentor but people around gave me guidance o what to do and to do. They people were from the church. (Natembeya Wafula, O.I., 07/11/2019)*

Today however when compared with traditional male circumcision, every initiated person must have his own mentor unlike today which is totally different. The quote;

*The initiates in the past stayed together in one home with each having his own mentor. They used to eat together and together unlike today. (Andrew Makhakara O.I., 13/11/2019).*

### Modern Science

Traditional male circumcision was done specifically from river to home but today circumcision from the findings hospital is major source where circumcision takes place. It is the place circumcision takes place as well as where

treatment for the wounds of the initiates takes place. However, the findings of the male students narrated getting circumcised and recuperating in the hospital which is the comparative with the church supervised male circumcision. It is possible that further research would be done in the location where the practice was reported. Reports from even those that were circumcised quoted hospitals to be safe and handled by qualified practitioners which help to reduce chances of contracting HIV/AIDS. According to respondents the hospitals acted as place of safety. Despite that, it is still questionable the safety of medical male circumcision offered hospitals in Kenya. For example the research showed that 19% of the medical cases as compared to 24% of traditional male circumcision among the bukusu people of Bungoma County were healed by 60<sup>th</sup> post-operative day.

From the findings about Bukusu people of Bungoma county it contrasts with other findings from other bodies like RTC on male circumcision that done in Kisumu. According to (Bailey et al, 2008) wounds were healed by 30<sup>th</sup> day after circumcision process. Those that preferred to go hospital was for the fact that wanted to avoid some risks that may arise during removal of stitches. Traditional circumcisers were trained on to remove stitches but got advice on dressing of the wounds and removing of stitches in a one-off interaction with the doctor during the operation.

### **Changes in Gender roles**

Male circumcision ritual allows one to acquire male gender identity. The new male gender identity from the findings accompanied with moral expectations for example the norms and accepted behavior in the society that differentiated a newly circumcised to a mature person. Once a person has undergone circumcision, the community grants him more responsibilities that includes being responsible like the father rather than small household chores According to Hergoz's (1973) he said that, every new stage comes with new responsibilities which was shown the article findings. One of the respondent said, the newly circumcised person was supposed to follow strictly what adults do or behave in the society. It was the requirement of every initiate to follow social values, to affirm and to disapprove the behaviour of the adults as pointed out from social learning theory (Thorne, 2004). From social learning theory (Ryle, 2014) it emphasizes in the use of punishment to disapprove unacceptable behavior and to praise/ reward the initiates for acceptable behaviors.

Mature people in the family may use good words on what is acceptable. The circumcised must be able to see the difference between boys and young people and know to respond and act. As it is pointed out in the social learning theory learning is through imitation and observation. (Ryle, 2014). From the findings, it suggests that young circumcised people learnt gender roles not through verbal communication. It is now demonstrated from the findings that male circumcision was a very important institution for socializing young boys into male gender. According to the re searcher researcher Tang and Tang, (2001) showed that

socialization of gender roles and role differentiation is maintained through prescriptions of social norms. The main agents of socializing shown in this article were the peers, circumcisers, and the church leaders.

Male circumcision is depicted in the findings as a traditional cultural practice that has changed and continues to change. The church, hospital, urbanization, modern science and technology western education emerging as drivers of these changes in the male circumcision. The practices that were adopted by the church do contrasts with those that done in traditional past. Young men today that adopted traditional practices as described by Wanyonyi have further modified them to fit their context.

### **Comparison between Traditional and modern/current bukusu circumcision**

#### **Preparation**

Traditionally, the candidate to prepare for circumcision, he was supposed to notify his father that he was ready for circumcision. The father would put hot charcoal on his toe to prove if indeed he was ready. If the candidate could not move his toe or cry, the father would accept and let the candidate procure the bells (chinyimba) and bracelets (Virere). From there he would now begin to practice how to play the bells most especially at night in the company of other candidates who were also going to be circumcised that year. But today most of these practices are not done, like the father nowadays does not put charcoal on the toes of the candidate, also some candidates are just called out of the house and circumcised or taken to the hospital where circumcision takes place. They don't play the bells at night with other candidates. The playing of chinyimba builds the masculine of the candidate as well promotes socialization with others.

#### **Khulanga**

Traditionally, the candidate had to call relatives, friends, and neighbors to come and witness his circumcision. He would move around the villages with bells and a whistle visiting homes to remind them of his circumcision this was for unity and togetherness of family members. Today, circumcision as a tradition in Bukusuland is becoming less vigorous as westernization is becoming more entrenched. Initiates no longer go round villages calling on all the relatives because of the expenses involved and the energy that those movements entail. Population increase has made this difficult. Initiates simply call on the close neighbours and relatives and do not have to make long journeys to the maternal uncle. This is less pompous.

In modern times, ceremonial animals are also not slaughtered. Instead, the cattle are preserved for sale to cater for the initiate's school fees or for marriage in future. This is because schooling these days is regarded by the Bukusu to be more important than circumcision itself. Lubito or counseling that is part of the traditional initiation is discarded by many initiates after hospitalization. They do not go for seclusion which is an important aspect of training for the youth to be adults and yet Lubito in



traditional initiation is a crucial moment that every initiate must go through.

Those who have gone to school have mostly tended to cut links that they may have with traditional culture and have therefore, shunned traditional way of circumcision. According to Andrew Makhakara, the educated Bukus and their children as well as Christians opt for clinical circumcision. This has tremendously reduced the number of those who face traditional circumcision. The School calendar dictates the time at which Embalu takes place.

### Circumcision process

Traditionally, embalu (circumcision) was an open air performance which took place in a number of places and not restricted to buildings. Performances usually started at the homestead of the initiates with a movement to the maternal uncle's home specifically to notify them of the pending ritual and to receive blessings and presents. There were three times that the performances moved from the homesteads to the river.

The first movement to the river was when the initiate brought water for brewing his own beer. This was to prepare the initiate for future chores as an adult. The second movement to the river was the night preceding the morning of circumcision. This movement was made to the river to symbolically plunge the initiate, into the spiritual world, and through the mudding which was not washed until after seclusion. When he made the third trip to the river, it was to wash off the mud and to symbolically return to normal life-this time as an adult. Today, its vigour and vitality is waning. Not every Bukusu is circumcised traditionally and some of the traditional circumcisers are opting for modern devices like western scissors instead of the traditional knife.

Chebukube cites a number of factors that have necessitated these changes: Christianity has widely spread in Bungoma County and other parts of Kenya. Christians have insisted that Bukus be circumcised in hospitals. It has minimized the role of performances such as dancing to the maternal uncles' home and dancing to the river. There is no mudding done for Christian candidates. In some cases, the circumcision songs have been replaced by Christian songs making Embalu lose its traditional impact. With Lubito which refers to seclusion of initiates when they are counseled, the pastors are invited to do it the Christian way using the Bible.

### 3. Conclusion

From the study findings, there have changes to traditional Bukusu circumcision brought about by way people live nowadays. Such changes have been influenced by poverty, education, church, modern science and urbanization. Poverty has made it impossible for candidates to move around the community calling relatives, neighbors and friends to come and celebrate. Also, animals can't be slaughtered from both the uncles place and fathers place because the candidate might lack school fees when the schools. Education has made it impossible for the culture

to be practiced any time of the year. The culture is restricted to august when the schools have closed.

### 4. Recommendations

- Though a number of scholars have written about *embalu* rituals, these rituals provide many other avenues where scholars can conduct more research.
- The researcher recommends for future scholars to research on social significance on single instruments especially Namwima among bukusu communities.
- Future scholars to investigate on the role of traditional circumcision in the spreading of HIV/AIDS.
- To research on the role of Bukusu traditional circumcision in enhancing tourism in the western part of Kenya.
- To research on factors that has affected traditional male circumcision in the modern society.

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