

## Historical Analysis of the Role of Female Circumcision in the Construction of Gender Roles, Values and Relations among the Agikuyu People in Kenya

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### Abstract

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Many written documents on female circumcision among the Agikuyu people of Kenya examine the practice from a health, education and religious view point, failing to shed light on the underlying reason for its persistence amidst all the opposition that has been evident since the nineteenth century. This paper seeks to fill that gap, by examining the role of female circumcision in the construction of gender values, roles and relations among the Agikuyu people. The paper further examines the colonial and religious impact on the practice of female circumcision and demonstrates that despite the influence from these directions and the spirited campaigns from activists to stop it, the practice has only reduced and not diminished because of the value attached to it by the Agikuyu. The study uses qualitative research design and purposive and snowballing sampling procedures. It uses open ended questionnaires and interview guide as instruments of primary data collection and employs historical methods and gender theories to analyze the data. The paper concludes that the persistence of the practice is due to its deeply rooted social perception and construction of identity and therefore a campaign against such a core cultural practice needs to be comprehensive and sustainable in the sense that enough time need to be taken to understand the underlying historical context, values, and meaning of the practice that goes beyond the physical operation.

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**Keywords:** Gender roles, Agikuyu, Female Circumcision, Kenya, History

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background Information, Aim and Assumptions

The Agikuyu people are Bantu-speakers who are speculated to have originated in the area around the Niger and Nile basin. Their expansion took place from Niger-Cameroon and the Nile region to South Africa before migrating upward into East Africa. The Bantu-speaking people entered the area around Mt. Kenya in about 1300AD. They assimilated and displaced the original inhabitants of this area, the *Thajicu* and further migrated into Aberdare ranges and Laikipia up until 18<sup>th</sup> century (Routledge, 1910; Lambert, 1956; Leakey, 1977). Here, they encountered the Maasai with whom they engaged in barter trade and as a result, there was a deep and long-lasting social interaction, which contributed greatly to the physical and cultural elements of the eventual Agikuyu community.

Muriuki (1974) states that the Agikuyu cultural practices were highly borrowed from Cushitic and Nilotic-speaking people whom they interacted during migration. Muriuki reiterates that a lot of cultural exchange may have occurred during the Maasai civil war at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when hundreds of Maasai refugees were taken in and adopted by the Agikuyu people, mainly those in Kiambu. Consequently, by the end of the century many Nilotic social traits such as male and female circumcision, age-set system, irrigation system, food taboos and consumption of cattle milk and blood had become part of the Agikuyu way of life. Henceforth, many Agikuyu people practiced male and female circumcision (*irua*), which marked transition into adulthood.

Whereas many societies view circumcision as a predominantly male ritual, various communities in the world also conduct the operation on females, which involves the cutting of a part or parts of female genital organs. It is an initiation rite that is deeply embedded in psycho-social, cultural symbolism, values, and norms of the society in question. In many African societies, the act symbolizes a female's assumption of new socially constructed roles and responsibilities, status and gender relations. Unlike in Europe, female circumcision is practiced in many regions in Africa. It is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa where over 50 percent of the women are circumcised (Assaad, 1980). The custom is practised predominantly in the Nile, Sahara, Sahel and Horn regions, where the overwhelming majority of women in Islamic and Judaic communities have gone through it (Lightfoot, 1990).

In West Africa, it is rampant in communities such as the Fulani, Ibo and the Hausa, while in East Africa it is widely visible among the Maasai, Samburu, Somali, Meru, Abagusii, Mbeere, Ngoni and Agikuyu communities. In Southern Africa, only a few groups practice it.

Various communities in Kenya have practiced male and female circumcision for centuries. The values and role of female circumcision among these communities have changed over time due to influence from different avenues. The establishment of colonial regime in Africa for example led to different understanding of the values, roles and power dynamics involved in female circumcision. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, European and American feminists described female circumcision as clitoridectomy (Toubia, 1994). This term has the implication of the physical cut of the prepuce or hood of the clitoris; an act that was believed to 'cure' female nervousness and masturbation. With the infiltration of westernization into Africa, the practice was subjected to heated debate and opposition that mainly came from Euro-Christian missionaries and health practitioners. In post-independent Kenya, opposition has come from the governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), women's rights movements and health practitioners. The practice was termed by such organizations as Female Genital Mutilation (F.G.M), which was meant to reflect the cruel and destructive operation of female genital organs. The term is also used to remind everyone of the negative effects of this operation on the girls' and women's human rights (Toubia, 1994; Bosch, 2001).

Gachiri (2000) observes that female circumcision among Africans particularly the Agikuyu of Kenya persisted during colonial period and even after independence, while today it is increasingly done in secret. She estimates that by the year 2000, only 43% of the Agikuyu women were circumcised while 96% males were circumcised. It is therefore apparent that in spite of the passionate opposition from religious bodies, health practitioners, and international agencies to eradicate female circumcision in postcolonial Kenya, the practice is still persistent. This tenacity can be associated with the fact that certain communities are convinced that female circumcision played a significant role in the construction of gender roles and relations. It is against this background that this paper seeks to explore the role of female circumcision in instilling gender roles, values and relations in the African context, and specifically among the Agikuyu community in Kenya.

The paper's main objectives are: first, to find out the role of female circumcision in the construction of gender values, roles and relations among the Agikuyu people, and second, to establish the historical factors contributing to reduction of female circumcision and the underlying reasons for its persistence in the community despite the effort to combat it.

This discussion proceeds under two main assumptions: that female circumcision among the Agikuyu played a significant role in social construction of identities, roles and relations; and that the indigenous social construction of identities, roles and value has significantly contributed to the persistence of female circumcision among the Agikuyu.

## 1.2 Scope, Justification and Significance of the Research

This research was carried out in the Southern part of Kikuyu land, that is, South of Chania River (initially referred to as Southern Kikuyu land in the colonial days), and currently Kiambu County. Kiambu area is presently divided into five divisions namely, Kiambaa, Limuru, Githunguri, Kikuyu and Lari. Given the complexity and the expansiveness of this proposed area, it was necessary to narrow down the research locale into a manageable research area. Therefore, two locations were randomly selected from every division using a simple Random sampling table.

The Agikuyu people of Kenya were picked for this research because they occupy a unique geographical position, which made them to be among the first communities to interact with Europeans. This resulted to a process of active cultural interaction which might have brought changes in this highly valued cultural practice. This cultural interaction requires a serious historical analysis to find out why this practice has persisted despite the opposition towards it. This research paper is also justified on the basis of the approach, because it is a fundamental departure from health, educational, religious, anthropological and feminist studies as it employs a historical method to analyze the data, and this certainly helps to gauge the transformations through history. This method involves an intellectual evaluation, conceptualization, and colligation of data in a descriptive, logical, and chronological manner. The paper therefore gives a historical context to the subject of female circumcision.

This research is significant because it sheds light on the rationale and historical context of this deep rooted cultural tradition in Africa. This will subsequently enable people to understand the reason why the practice has persisted in some societies and will certainly help them to make informed decisions, come up with proper policies and better ways of eradicating such a practice which will be readily acceptable to the communities concerned.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper broadly uses gender theory by Bem (1993) as a comprehensive tool of analysis when dealing with issues of social relation of sexes. Sandra proposes three lenses (androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism) that operate to affect the thoughts, feelings and behavior of an individual in the society. She argues that the social perception of male centeredness (androcentrism) that privilege male experience and "others" female experience and the perception of male-female differences as superimposed on them by the society (gender polarization) are legitimized and rationalized by the lens of biological essentialism that treats the male and female differences as natural and inevitable biological natures. Therefore during the enculturation especially through the initiation rites, the individual internalize this asymmetrical division of power relations that is created to them by the society as natural and inevitable. As a result, a cultural connection is thereby forged between the biological nature (sex), and virtually every aspect of their social experience including social roles, emotional expression, sexual relations and desires. This paper considers female circumcision a symbolic practice that functioned as a rite of passage for girls from childhood to adulthood. The custom placed women in new roles, new social relations and expectations that they were expected to internalize as part of their biological self. During the process, a gender hierarchy was created by the society in accordance to their biological differences from men.

Gender relations in this case are the ways in which social categories of male and female relate, share power, and participate in the whole range of social organization, activities and in sexual behaviors.

Gender in this paper is therefore treated as a symbolic social-cultural construction of male and female values, roles and power relations (Amadiume, 1987; Aina, 1996). This means that although there is a very thin line between gender and sex, the concept of gender goes beyond the biological differences between men and women. It is used in a dynamic and historical form along which, power, prestige, roles and social negotiations are organized and given meaning by the society. Female circumcision should therefore be understood and conceptualized as a symbolic rite of passage that culturally constructs women's roles, values and gender relations, which goes beyond the physical cutting of women's genitals (Anfrend et al 2004). This research argues that the traditional meaning and purpose of female circumcision rite among the Agikuyu has been moderated and redefined as the community interacted with foreigners, particularly the Europeans. However, although these transformations have reduced the magnitude and frequency of female circumcision to a great extent, the practice has persisted, sometimes in hidden places.

## 2.2 Research Methodology

### 2.2.1 Research Design and Target Population

This paper uses a descriptive research design which helps to qualitatively give a narrative description of the state of issues discovered from the research. A survey was considered relevant for the research as it is an efficient method for collecting descriptive data regarding current practices, conditions, and needs of a given society.

The target research population of this study involved both male and female respondents who were residents of Kiambu during the colonial and post-colonial times, and who were knowledgeable on the cultural practice of female circumcision.

### 2.2.2 Sampling Technique

The snowball sampling technique was used to locate key informants such as circumcisers, and government and church leaders.

Purposive sampling procedure was employed in selection of categories of respondents who included elderly men and women aged 60 years and above, circumcised males and females aged between 35 years and 60 years, circumcisers, church leaders from different churches to give the Christian understanding of female circumcision, and, government chiefs and headmen and /or their relatives to provide information on government campaigns against female circumcision. However, the exact number of the respondents was determined in the course of research because only those with relevant information on the practice of female circumcision were interviewed. Simple stratified sampling technique was used to get equal number of male and female respondents.

### 2.2.3 Research Instruments

In order for the researchers to elicit useful and reasonable responses, two categories of interview schedule were used. The study applied structured interview schedule and an in-depth interview guide. A questionnaire guideline with open ended question was also used.

### 2.2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Both primary and secondary data were gathered to inform this study. The primary data included the archival and oral information. Social-cultural profile, annual reports, and handing over reports on Kiambu district were obtained from the Kenya National archives. Since such documents had weaknesses due to their bias and subjectivity of the producers, the researchers corroborated them with other primary and secondary data. This helped to eliminate any kind of subjectivity and unreliability that was detected. Both female and male residents of the area were interviewed and the open-ended questions used helped in accommodating as many ideas as possible. Interviews were tape-recorded for easy transcription and this was done with the consent of the interviewer. The researchers took notes of most important information yielding from the oral interviews. The information was then confirmed with other sources in order to establish any distortions. By so doing it was possible to get significant information that helped to reach certain conclusions. Information from written secondary sources such as text books, journals, and published and unpublished research was also utilized.

### 2.2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Having established the authenticity of the sources of information, the research employed a historical analysis and interpretation of the data collected. This involved a rational criticism, data evaluation, data contextualization and colligation of the events. The recorded interview (in Kikuyu language) was transcribed and translated into English by the researchers who are Kikuyu speakers. It was also compared with other sources of information in order to verify their validity, and finally the data from various sources was corroborated chronologically. Data was then interpreted within the Bem's (1993) concept of gender

## 3. Discussion of Findings

### 3.1 The Role of Female Circumcision in the Construction of Gender Values, Roles and Relations

From the research it was evident that traditionally, Agikuyu people highly valued both male and female circumcision (*Irua*) as a symbolic rite of passage that played a significant role in defining the gender roles and relations. In this setup, socio-political and economic systems were based on three most important units: the family (*Nyumba*), clan (*Muhiriga*) and age group (*riika*), which formed the basis of the Agikuyu community's core cultural practices, particularly that of circumcision which placed individuals in specific age groups. Thus, for any individual adult to fully participate in these community activities (at Family, clan and age group level), he or she was expected to be circumcised (Leakey 1977; Cagnolo 1993). However, it is important to note that from birth, the Agikuyu boys and girls were treated differently and they were given different opportunities for development. These different treatments promoted certain behaviors and self-image that recreated preconceived cultural stereotypes about gender. Gecaga (2004) indicates that children learnt socially constructed identities from infancy through child games, role-playing and informal instruction where they imitated their parents. Boys played the role of a husband or the father such as building houses with wood, leaves and soil, while girls played the role of a wife or a mother such as pretending to cook food with soil and carrying babies made from old clothes. The rite of circumcision buttressed these existing unequal opportunities to both male and female gender.



Through the main elements of circumcision such as intensive preparations, actual operation, ceremonial songs, dances and recuperation, certain gender values and roles were instilled into the initiates. For instance, Ngumo Muraya (Oral interview, 7/11/2012), stated that the recuperation period was the most significant time for training the initiates on the expected gender roles, values, and relations. Girls were taught how to control their sexual desires and how to relate well with the opposite sex and relatives. They were also taught how to be attentive to their husbands, children, and relatives; to be hospitable and perform domestic roles well, while boys were taught to be responsible family providers, protectors and community leaders. Boys were in addition instructed that their sexual activity was very important in ensuring the continued flow of the society through marriage and procreation. The process of circumcision therefore tamed the initiates into internalizing the asymmetrical division of power relations modelled by the society as natural and inevitable (Bem, 1993).

Margaret Njeri (Oral Interview 11/11/2012) pointed out that when a girl approached puberty, a goat's leather inner cloth known as *Mwengu* was made for her to cover her private parts. This was meant to show that girls' sexuality was valued and was highly protected as opposed to boys who did not cover their private parts. The girl was also given a form of necklace (*Muguongo*) and a bangle (*Bangiri*), as a sign of beauty as she grew up. The parents would notice the girl's adolescence physical changes such as the appearance of the breasts and immediately they could begin preparation for circumcision. It was a taboo for a girl to get her first menstruation before circumcision (Karanja Gitaru, Oral Interview 6/11/2012) and if this happened, she had to be cleansed by a sacrifice of a goat (Hobley 1922; Cagnolo 1933). Prior to the circumcision occasion, a mark (*Ndugira*) was cut on the girl's ears to mean that after a while, her ears were to be pierced (Lambert 1956:86). Ear piercing was significant because the pain involved prepared the girl to endure circumcision. These physical symbols such as ear piercing seemed to be long lasting signs of a girl's change of status and ability to perform certain roles and responsibilities. Cagnolo (1933) highlights that a day before the rituals, the girl was sent to her maternal uncles to inform them of her impending ear piercing, showing her readiness for the subsequent process of circumcision. Her maternal uncles were significant in the circumcision process because they were deemed to sanctify and anoint both boys and girls.

The parents also identified a sponsor (*Mutiri*) for their daughter who was normally a clan member either a newly married woman or a circumcised unmarried girl, of good repute, generous and respectable. Henceforth, the girl referred to the sponsor as 'mother', a confidant, and a mentor (*Wakiri*). Her responsibility was to mentor the girl and encourage her to endure the circumcision process (Lambert, 1956). In the preparation for the circumcision ceremony, the sponsor extensively taught the girl the qualities she was expected to show such as etiquette, self-discipline, self-control, and self-conquest. She also encouraged the girl to learn the art of bearing pain silently as a sign of being a 'good' woman (Cagnolo, 1933). These observations by Cagnolo were confirmed by Ruth Waitthera from Kiambaa (Oral Interview, 10/11/2012), who said that the girl was in addition taught how to tighten their indispensable inner leather garment and a petticoat-like apron (*KuhatiraMwengunamuthuru*). This cautious behavior was to prevent girls from engaging in premarital sex.

Most elderly men and women among the Agikuyu regarded uncircumcised women as valueless, cowards, immoral, and unruly. It was also believed that women were not intended to enjoy sex or show any sexual desires; their duty was to procreate and satisfy their husband's sexual needs, and this warranted the removal of the clitoris which was seen as a source of sexual pleasure. The infliction of pain on the girl's genitals was an unforgettable painful experience and it was seen as important for the girl's acquisition of certain values. Essentially, Agikuyu women were conditioned to believe that motherhood, domesticity, and submissiveness, which were emphasized during the circumcision process, were part of their life.

With regard to male circumcision Kenyatta (1938) and Routledge (1910) indicate that the boy's sponsor informed him of the expected increased public roles and responsibilities. In addition, boys were instructed on how to be sexually active in order to sustain polygamous marriage arrangements ahead of them. (Routledge, 1910). Joseph Mwaura (Oral Interview, 24/11/2012) confirmed that no Agikuyu male was considered total if he was not polygamous and had a number of children since many wives and children were considered a sign of wealth. Male initiates were therefore instructed to be committed to their sexual activities as opposed to women who were supposed to suppress their sexual desires. The boys were also taught that women were essentially homemakers, while men's obligation was to provide for the family and protect the home. Men were also taught good leadership qualities and military tactics.

This gender stereotype that tended to suppress women and to favour men in matters of sex and societal activities is what Bem (1993) refers to as androcentrism, and it seems natural and impervious to change in patriarchal societies.

It was further ascertained from the research that during circumcision the young girls were decorated with beads, white chalk red ochre, and feathers. The girl was also given gifts and was lifted high on shoulders and everybody danced and praised her beauty and courage. Joseph Mwaura (Oral Interview, 24/11/2012) stated that the Agikuyu girls looked forward to circumcision ceremony for the favors, gifts and recognition that accompanied it, making the operation psychologically bearable. According to Mary WairimuMukura (Oral Interview, 3/11/2012) girls were more attractively decorated than boys. The beautification and painting of the girls skin was meant to cultivate an outward physical sign of a feminine essential sexual nature. The physical attractiveness implied ability to seduce and power of fertility perceived to be obtained by circumcised girls above the uncircumcised ones and men. Subsequently, the girls learnt to value their appearance, by managing themselves as ornamental objects while boys valued themselves as having physical strength (Bem 1983). The emphasis on girls' physical attraction also meant there was social control of female sexuality in a certain direction which placed a strong importance on female sexuality that had more to do with procreation than pleasure. Circumcision in the traditional Agikuyu setup was therefore regarded as a prerequisite to courtship and marriage. The physical cutting of the sexual organ was understood as commissioning the female genital organ to carry out its purpose of fostering more life

The circumcision day was one of the most important days in the history of the Agikuyu community; it was an occasion of celebrations, jubilation and solidarity for the entire family and the community at large. Mary Wamoro, a circumciser from Ndeiya observed that:

The family and the community looked forward to circumcision day because it was time of joy, happiness and feasting. There were many visitors, feasting, dancing and freedom was in abundance. It was a time when requests were honored, people obtained special treatments and granted favors (Oral Interview, 24/11/12).

Both boys and girls went to the river naked, girls being in front of boys (Kenyatta, 1938:146).

This nudity was not socially accepted except during this time because it signified that the candidates were ready to endure pain and shame (WanjiruNdung'u, Oral Interview, 7/11/2012). Virginity for young girls among the Agikuyu was highly valued, and if it was discovered that a girl was not to a virgin, her parents paid an extra fine during circumcision to prevent the occurrence of any bad omen. For those who were still virgins, women celebrated their purity, courage, and endurance by praising them loudly for everybody to hear (Mary Wairimu, Oral Interview, 3/11/2012). However, boy's virginity was not emphasized. In this way, male sexual experience was treated as normal and as a sign of good health and strength, (NgumoMuraya Oral Interview, 7/11/2012), showing that circumcision and the accompanying practices and lessons served to entrench gender polarization (Bem, 1993).

After the physical operation, the initiates were taken to rest in the seclusion hut (*Kiganda*) that was built purposely for the initiates' recuperation. Here, the initiates were supposed to stay for eight days. The hut was built in a home of an elderly man (*mutunyi*) and every parent of the initiates was expected to supply plenty of food to this hut (Margaret Njeri, Oral Interview, 11/11/2012). On the eighth day, the feast called– *Kumithiaor mambura*, was finally conducted to officially let the initiate's out of recuperation hut. A goat was slaughtered in his or her honor and as a sacrifice to God for the successful initiation process. At this stage the youth fulfilled all the prescriptions and proscriptions concerning the circumcision ceremony. He/she was now acknowledged as a full member of the society. Circumcision also transformed the status of the parents. The mother who had had her first child circumcised was moved from the low hierarchy status called *Kang'etto* a more authoritative *Nyakinyuaage* group (Mary WairimuMukura, Oral Interview 3/11/2012). She gained respect and dignity in the society and could be allowed to attend certain religious functions, such as when making decisions for the appropriate time for a certain social ceremony. On the other hand the father advanced into elderhood and henceforth participated in community's decision making.

From the research, it is clear that the gender distinctiveness that was created through the rite of female circumcision provided a social platform through which women were subordinated and underprivileged. It presented a set of gender hierarchical notions and roles which under-privileged women and privileged men's experiences (Parsons 1951, Parpart et al 1989).

Although the traditional circumcision gave the circumcised women powers to negotiate social space with their male counterparts and some economic and political privileges above the uncircumcised women, men enjoyed more socio-economic and political privileges than the circumcised women, such as the right to own property and land inheritance (WangariNgenia Oral Interview, 13/11/2012). Generally, the main purpose of female circumcision was to confer upward social mobility within the women's age groups, ability to nurture a family and new power to relate with men, while male circumcision was aimed at making a good husband, a provider, protector, and a community's warrior out of a boy (NdunguKungu Oral Interview, 8/11/2012). This gender hierarchy between male and female created through the rite of circumcision was later reinforced by the establishment of colonial rule and policies, which privileged the male at the expense of the female by the fact that the male got access to western education before the females who remained home makers even with the inception of the foreign rule.

### 3.2 Factors Contributing to Reduction of Female Circumcision among the Agikuyu and the Underlying Reasons for its Visible Persistence

As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a considerable cultural interaction between the Agikuyu people and the Europeans. The official establishment of the colonial rule in 1895 was followed by the introduction of new economic and socio-political system (Roland and Gervase 1967). The new colonial system entrenched capitalist economy and Western "civilization" through the mission of Christianity and formal education (Tignor 1976, Sorrenson 1967). These operated alongside the previous Agikuyu traditional system. These colonial capitalistic economic interests were achieved through land alienation, taxation, forced labour, and introduction of commercial cash crop farming. Given that the Agikuyu people relied heavily on land for subsistence agricultural farming, land alienation was very detrimental to the community's economic sustainability and maintenance of cultural practices such as female circumcision (Huxley, 1935).

Under the colonial rule, the indigenous institutions were reinterpreted to the detriment of women. Female circumcision, which, was used to acknowledge various roles, values and gender relations was reinterpreted according to Christian morality and western ideology (KNA DC/MKS/ 1OB/12/1, 1925).

The missionaries and the colonial administration were campaigning against this cultural practice and eroding it. In the first two decades of European rule in Kikuyuland, the Agikuyu people found it increasingly difficult to make an independent choice with regard to their traditional customs. The prevailing colonial conditions put the Agikuyu people and specifically women in a compromising situation (KNA DC/FH/312, 1920-50). The European had begun to disregard the Agikuyucultural practices and this meant that the gender roles and relations which were fashioned during the initiation rite of circumcision could also be altered significantly. In addition, the colonial land and labour policies compromised the traditional Agikuyu men and women roles in the sense that majority of the Agikuyu people were pushed out of their fertile land into reserves and squatter land (Wamue 1999). Here, they could not have enough land to cultivate supplies and foodstuff to support their families and for use during the initiation ceremonies. Furthermore, men were forced to leave home to go and seek labour in settler's farms and in urban areas while women were left to take over and perform the roles that were traditionally instilled to men during the initiation. Ultimately, a new gender division of labour began to emerge. The involvement of the Agikuyu men in the European wage labour made them to consider themselves superior to women, in a way different from the pre-colonial period (Kimani Mathenge, oral interview 15/11/2012). Muthongo Rungwe one of the informant from Limuru (oral interview 15/11/2012) observed that food production and distribution reduced significantly during colonial times and the mode of feasting during the circumcision period began to shift from traditional Agikuyu cuisine such as (millet and sorghum porridge, arrowroots, meat and milk) to newly introduced exotic crops such as maize and wheat flour, rice, beans, English potatoes, tea and coffee.

The colonial government also dismissed the rite of female circumcision because it was time consuming, expensive and interfered with the labour supply, while the missionaries and the European medical practitioners condemned it (KNA DC/KBU/11/1/28, 1937) because they perceived the practice as immoral and uncivilized health hazard. The interference with circumcision by foreigners in Kikuyuland was however strongly resisted. From this research, it was clear that the colonial policies were hard choices for the Agikuyu people and this resulted in a reaction of fear and anxiety that provoked the organization of protests against the colonial rule. For instance, the male dominated nationalist movements used the colonial ban on female circumcision to mobilize people to protest.

According to Karanja Gitaru (Oral Interview, 7/11/2012), men actively resisted the ban on female circumcision and refused to marry uncircumcised women. This in return put a lot of pressure on the Agikuyu women who also resisted the ban due to fear of victimization, poverty and lack of support by their male counterpart (KNA PC/CP 7/1/2, D.C/ FH to PC/CP 1920, and KNA ADM/15/8/2 in MA/1/13).

The penetration of foreigners into Kikuyuland thus meant that European missionaries inculcated new western ways of life and values through their activities such as Christianity, western education, and medicine. They prohibited the Agikuyu traditional practices and related ritual ceremonies (KNA PC/CP/8/1/1, 1928) by separating the Agikuyu circumcision physical operation from the rest of the ritual and instructional process. The Christian missionaries stressed on the Christian values entrenched in the Victorian ideology, Western sexuality, and nuclear family. They also emphasized on domesticity, and motherhood for girls and that a good woman remained in the house as diligent wives and mothers while men dominated the public field as a central component of a civilized society. This missionary conception of gender roles and values considerably strengthened the existing tradition gender asymmetrical roles that were instilled through female circumcision. However, missionaries undermined those who were circumcised and perceived them as uncultured and uncivilized, and favoured those who did not circumcise their daughters. The uncircumcised women therefore enjoyed education and leadership privileges in the missionaries' schools and churches (Njeri Wamang'ara, Oral interview 18/11/2012).

After independence there was effort by the government to help combat female circumcision since its dangers were beginning to sink into the minds of Africans, especially the western educated. For instance, in 1967 president Jomo Kenyatta sent the police and chiefs to arrest all the circumcisers, who were beaten and spent nights in chiefs' camps but when they were released, they swore to circumcise more extensively than before (KNA PC/CP/614/2 1920-1921). In addition, in 1979 and 1982, president Moi denounced female circumcision as a harmful practice. Moi issued a presidential decree to make female circumcision a criminal offence and warned that those who would be caught circumcising girls would be prosecuted (Lightfoot-Klein 1989).

However, despite such sanctions and a growing body of information about its health and psychological implications the practice persisted (Thompson, 1985). It was increasingly done in secret, making it a complex cultural symbolism that went beyond the physical operation into socially constructed meaning.

Thus by 1960s, the Agikuyu people still highly valued female circumcision as a cultural transitional symbol from childhood to adulthood (Ng'ang'aTiiru oral interview 10/11/2012). Majority of the parents insisted that their daughters must be circumcised since it was in accordance with their culture. They feared that failure to circumcise could lead to discord in society and in the extended family. They also feared losing friends, relations and age-group privileges and dowry. The young girls were still attracted to the practice due to pressure from the relatives and peer group, the expected social privileges and relations, and the need to get a husband. These girls were also longing for the social approval and affirmation that accompanied female circumcision (NdegwaMuita, NdunguKungu and MuthoniKahindi, Oral interviews 13/11/2012). Men on the other hand continued to favour female circumcision on the ground that it made women mature and controlled their sexual desires. They believed that circumcised women remained virgins until marriage and faithful to their husbands after marriage. Consequently, circumcision continued to persist and continued to strengthen the place of men and women in different gender positions (FlorahWatetu, Oral interview, 22/11/2012). In this case, although the traditional gender roles and relations put women in a disadvantaged social position than men, the loss of these circumcision aspects made the women social status even worse than before. According to Eunice Gitau (oral interview 10/11/2012) the main disadvantage of this loss was mainly because there was no effective alternative rite of passage put in place to cater for the prevailing gender imbalances.

This research also established that the male chauvinistic reasons, social construction of identity, and the mythologies connected with female circumcision sustain it despite the campaigns against it. The indigenous socio-cultural meaning of female circumcision played a very significant role for its persistence even after independence. According to Zachary Wambugu, Joseph Kangethe and Hezron Kang'ee (oral interviews, 18/11/2012) women's fear of victimization by the elder women who have gone through circumcision and men who do not want to marry uncircumcised women, plus peer pressure and lack of proper information on the reasons and consequences of female circumcision account for its persistence to the present.



In addition, the fact that female circumcision was a complex symbolic social construction of identity, rather than a mere physical cut of female genital organs, meant that it could not be abolished by a mere condemnation and hence it continued in secret. Thus, the separation of parts that formed the whole cultural practice by demonizing the ceremonial and instructional aspects of female circumcision by colonialists meant that the physical operation could persist without publicity. According to Karumba John and Eunice Gitau (Oral interviews 10/11/2012), at independence the intensive preparations, ritual celebrations, songs, dances, and instructions reduced considerably. Only a few family members and close friends were invited for the girls' circumcision on the circumcision day. The sponsor was identified and informed secretly by the girl's mother. Therefore what was left by the time of independence was a hurried physical cut, which took place within a short period, and was conducted in homes or in hospitals. The traditional circumciser, the doctor, a trained nurse or a trained midwife perform a minor trimming of the clitoris on girls in health facilities (Toubia, 1994). These secretive occasions of circumcision have a negative social impact because many girls do not have even the slightest idea of what is expected of them before, during, and after circumcision. For this reason, these girls experience a big shock and trauma when they are informed that they are going to be circumcised, unlike in the traditional set up discussed earlier. They also fail to understand the underlined meaning and purpose of female circumcision and all that they are told is that they are now mature girls. According to Mercy Wanja (Oral Interview, 7/11/2012), this hurried female circumcision in secret has had far-reaching harmful implications on the circumcised girls because, due to the excitement of feeling that they are mature, and having been taught very little on the expected responsibilities and sexuality, the circumcised girls engage more in premarital sexual relationships than uncircumcised girls. An increasing number of them drop out of school due to unwanted pregnancies, poor performance, or even the deadly HIV infection (*Mukingo*).

Since the 1970s feminists and advocates of bioethics, especially in the United States and in Europe, linked women's disadvantaged social position with the control over their sexuality (Toubia, 1994). The scholars condemned female circumcision strongly arguing that the practice has been used by the male dominated society to control women's production and reproduction ability. At the 1995 Beijing Conference on women, female circumcision was identified as a practice that spread HIV/AIDS by using unsterilized equipment.

The participants argued that for equality to be achieved, the fundamental women rights must be adhered to. They also stressed the importance of educating women on the health consequences of the operation (Gachiri, 2000). However, the supporters of female circumcision took offence at this argument that links the practice to HIV infection, claiming that even areas where female circumcision is not prevalent had high rates of HIV infections. Currently, it has been recognized that school education, parental guidance, and non-governmental campaign alone cannot eradicate female circumcision. Thus, the church, local women groups and non-governmental organization are working together to educate women on the reproductive health implications of female circumcision through organized alternative rites of passage that educate the community on change of attitude, belief, and indeed their worldview. However, these stakeholders may end up doing very little to reduce disparities such as unequal distribution of resources, and to promote equal participation of gender groups in the community's development. This could only be achieved by recognizing that women are a complementary gender group other than a subordinate gender group as ascribed by the society through female circumcision.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendation**

A campaign against a core cultural practice needs to be comprehensive and sustainable to succeed; comprehensive in the sense that enough time need to be taken to understand the underlying historical context, values, and meaning of the practice that goes beyond the physical operation. The dislodging of female physical operation from its complex historical and social-cultural context is what seems to make the practice persist in the face of controversy. Female circumcision should therefore be conceptualized within the context of social construction of identity in which gender disparity is manifested. Secondly, time must also be considered for any campaign mission to bear fruit. The reason why the Europeans did not succeed in abolishing female circumcision was due to inappropriate timing. Their campaigns coincided with the establishment of new capitalist economic system and political imperialism. During this time the Agikuyu people were experiencing a lot of economic problems and poverty. Thus, they were not ready to accommodate other external influence from both the missionaries and the colonial government because they perceived them as exploiters. Enough time would have been taken to understand the fundamental links between female circumcision and culturally ascribed values.

This could help to appreciate some positive aspects of the practice and get time to educate the community on the perceived negative aspects of female circumcision. Thirdly, the persistence of the practice is due to its deeply rooted social perception and construction of identity. Many of the women voluntarily undergo the operation in secret up to the present time because they wish to retain their cultural identity and have a negotiating social space with their male counterparts.

Finally, the researchers recommend that enough material resources should be allocated in the campaign so that those involved can work together with the community in order to come up with an alternative rite of passage that would secure for women health, sexuality, and that which would improve women's participation in the community development and their standard of living. This cultural hybridity could also be formulated in a way that it entails values that bring about equitable distribution of resources, equal gender power to negotiate space and impartial gender division of roles.

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