



ROLE OF TRADITIONAL CIRCUMCISION IN FORMATION OF MASCULINE GENDER IDENTITY IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *Traditional circumcision is considered an important rite of passage that marks the transition from boyhood to manhood. It is often seen as a way to initiate young males into adult society and convey societal expectations of masculinity. Based on the Ubuntu philosophy, the study employed a qualitative exploratory design and semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using thematic decomposition analysis. The study purposively sampled 30 respondents from Bukusu (Kenya), Aembu (Kenya) and Lemba (Zimbabwe). Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that traditional circumcision of men served as a mechanism for imparting societal values, beliefs, and responsibilities to young boys, reinforcing cultural norms and expectations of masculinity. Through this process, boys were educated about their roles and responsibilities within their specific community, which may include aspects such as being a provider for their families, protecting their communities, and upholding cultural traditions. This study recommends engagement in respectful dialogue and collaboration between western perspectives and African communities for a better understanding of the cultural significance of circumcision while addressing health and safety concerns.*

KEYWORDS: Traditional, Circumcision, Masculinity, African, Curriculum.



BACKGROUND

African culture and African traditional life depict gender as being masculine or feminine in a certain society that shapes the opportunities one is offered in life, the roles one may play, and the kinds of relationships one may have. In Africa, like other societies, gender roles are nurtured roles and responsibilities conferred on either gender as a result of the social constructs of respective societies (Onyioha & Nwagbara, 2009). Mfecane (2016) defines masculinity as practices associated with being a real man. Wood and Jewkes (2005) argue that masculinity is socially constructed and cannot be exclusively relegated to biological characteristics. According to Schrock and Schwalbe (2009), people attain masculinity through established “manhood acts” which are read socially as representing manliness in a particular historical period. Masculine norms have been stated as a significant factor that encourages men to engage in restrictive emotionality, which is conceptualized as the state of being unable to express one's feelings and/or difficulty in finding words to express one's emotional state due to fear (Thompson & Bennett, 2017).

Initiation as a rite of passage is one of the ceremonies practiced by African communities for one to attain masculinity. Rites of passage are valued deeply by the cultures observing them and are key to passing down cultural, social and sometimes religious teachings and traditions – including about gender, relationships and sexuality (Khuzwayo et al., 2020). The chief significance of African rituals is that they were performed in the community; they constituted a social integrating force and actually initiated the social order (Johnson, 2018).

A major form of initiation is circumcision. This rite of passage indicates comprehensive transition from childhood to adulthood for the initiate. Amy and Abdallah (2013) express that rites of passage “have the purposes of transformation,” transforming from an old phase to a new phase of life, be it a change from the living to an ancestor or young to childhood. Male circumcision is one of the oldest and most widespread surgical procedures in the world. Globally, it is estimated that 30% of all males above the age of 15 years are circumcised (Weiss & Polonsky, 2007). The circumcision process is painful and risky. According to Apalkova et al. (2018), the expectation of the society makes men think of themselves as risk-takers, thus leading to the probability of engaging more in risky behaviors that could lead to injury and death than women. Traditional male circumcision continues to be an important practice in many African societies and constitutes one part of the ritual initiation into manhood. Significant stigma is attached both to failed initiates and uninitiated people (Froneman & Kapp, 2017). The initiation ceremonies at times involve painful circumcision and/or body scarification (Wong, 2016). A male child must undergo the circumcision rite as a transitional period into manhood, and the expectation thereafter is to become a father (Manona & Hurst, 2018). Froneman and Kapp (2017) express that the ritual is a test of manhood, and pain and bravery are essential components of this test. According to Mukimba (2020), male ritual circumcision remains one of the most important and outstanding African rites of passage because of the vital elements associated with it.

Mfecane (2016) explored the distinction meanings of “Indoda,” a traditionally circumcised individual and its relationship with other masculinities, like “Inkwenkwe” (an uncircumcised boy) and medically circumcised men. He confirms that masculinity is centered on the act of circumcision, noting that even when a person who has undergone male circumcision neglects gender expectations, he does not lose the honor of being called a man.



Mshana et al. (2011) carried out a qualitative study to explore traditional circumcision practices among the Kurya in Tarime district in Tanzania as part of a national situation analysis prior to initiating a national MC program. The study collected data through key informant interviews and focus group discussions for data collection. They express that traditional circumcision is highly valued as an opportunity for young men to be educated in a secluded location about manhood-related life skills for them to develop into men. Prusente et al. (2019) assert that male circumcision plays an integral role in the identity development of young men as it is viewed as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.

Siweya et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study to determine the notions of manhood in traditional male circumcision by African adolescent boys in Ngove Village, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study purposively sampled 20 adolescent boys. Data was collected using semi structured interviews and analyzed through interpretive phenomenological analysis. The study concludes the integration of both traditional male circumcision and medical male circumcision with specific tactfulness and respect of the notion of manhood value embedment in the process to gain cooperation of the local community members affected.

In Uganda, a qualitative study was carried out by Omukunyi and Roman (2022) to gain understandings into how families in the Bugisu sub-region conceptualize masculinity in response to safe medical male circumcision (SMMC) as promoted by the Ugandan government. The study collected data using semi structured interviews from cultural leaders, clan leaders, traditional surgeons, medical officers, 2016 initiates, focus groups and the key informant. Data collected was transcribed, interpreted, coded, categorized, and findings were generated using Atlas Ti software. The results revealed that attempts to abolish traditional male circumcision have evoked resistance, with most holding firmly to traditional male circumcision as the only means by which Bamasaaba boys can acquire the status of manhood.

In South Africa, Ndou-Mammbona and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2022) conducted an ethnographic study to explore and discuss Vhavenda traditional initiation schools to be used as panacea for HIV and AIDS management in the Vhembe district. The study purposively sampled nine key informants drawn from a cohort of Vhavenda traditional healers and leaders. The study made use of semi structured face-to-face interviews to collect data which was analyzed using ethnographic content analysis. The finding pointed out that Vhavenda traditional initiation schools positively affect the management of HIV and AIDS. Initiation schools are centers for cultural education and the formation of a cultural identity. During the initiation process, initiates are taught social norms, customs and values which will serve them well in adulthood. They are also taught matters of sexuality, courtship, marriage and respect for others.

The Bukusu people are one of the seventeen Kenyan tribes of the Luhya Bantu people of East Africa residing mainly in the counties of Bungoma and Trans Nzoia who firmly believe in circumcision as a rite of passage and have upheld the culture for decades. Most Bukusu people do believe that all young boys at the age of 12 years have to undergo male circumcision (Baraza et al., 2019). Circumcision takes place in broadcast and the initiates are not supposed to squinch. Bukusu circumcision, popularly known as Embalu, is held every year. For the Bukusu male to become a man, he has to fully go through the Embalu process.

In Zimbabwe, Mlauzi (2017) explored with the aim of understanding the concept of manhood in the context of Lemba speaking people as well as investigating the significance of carrying out their tradition male circumcision rituals in Gwanda district in Matebelele. To enhance a



deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the Lemba with the ultimate goal of gaining an understanding of their perspectives regarding the biomedical approach of MMC for HIV prevention, a qualitative approach was employed. The study purposively selected a sample of 100 participants. Data was collected by utilizing individual interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, and any literature that was relevant to this study. The findings have revealed that circumcision is an integral part of a rite of passage to manhood, although, originally, it may have been a test of bravery and endurance. Circumcision is also associated with factors such as masculinity, social cohesion with boys of the same age who become circumcised at the same time, self-identity and spirituality.

Currently, most of the traditions are slowly being wiped out with westernization. Circumcision is no longer an identity but a medical aspect to prepare boys to join secondary school and to help reduce the spread of HIV. A report by UNAIDS (2016) called attention to the circumcision of males as one of the five Joint United Nations Program on HIV prevention.

Western culture has seen a shift in traditional African gender roles and values. This shift has caused many African men to feel disconnected from their cultural roots leading to a sense of disorientation and devalued masculinity. In addition, western influences have become more prevalent in Africa. Traditional sources of income are becoming less reliable causing serious economic hardship and limiting African men to providing for their families and communities. This has further weakened their sense of power and identity, further reducing their sense of manhood.

The discussion on masculinity and femininity has received a lot of attention on the importance of mental health among the African population. Identity development has been extensively reviewed within psychological research on various aspects of lived experiences (Waagen, 2022). This study attempts to examine the curriculum of African traditional circumcision that influences the construction of masculinity within selected African communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was based on Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu philosophy is a humanistic ethical philosophy stemming from Bantu languages, primarily spoken in Southern Africa. It emphasizes qualities such as compassion, empathy, and interdependence as key aspects of human existence. Ubuntu philosophy is deeply rooted in African traditional customs and practices, including traditional circumcision rituals. In many African societies, traditional circumcision is a rite of passage that marks the transition from boyhood to manhood. It is a significant event that represents the formation of masculinity and the development of responsible and respectable behavior in males. Ubuntu philosophy plays a vital role in shaping the curriculum and teachings associated with traditional circumcision. It underscores the belief that a person's identity and well-being are deeply intertwined with their relationships, community, and cultural heritage.

Within the context of traditional circumcision and masculinity formation, the Ubuntu philosophy provides insights into how the practice is rooted in communal values and the collective identity of African societies. In terms of communal belonging, traditional circumcision ceremonies often serve as rites of passage that connect young men to their community, reinforcing their sense of belonging and identity within their cultural group.



Ubuntu provides a cultural framework for understanding the significance of traditional circumcision in shaping masculinity. The practice is often seen as a means of transmitting cultural values, norms, and beliefs related to gender roles and responsibilities within the community.

Ubuntu emphasizes the collective responsibility of community members in supporting and guiding the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Traditional circumcision rituals involve the active participation of community elders and mentors who provide guidance and teachings on expected social roles and behaviors for men.

Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of emotional and social development in the formation of masculinity. Traditional circumcision rituals often incorporate teachings on emotional resilience, self-discipline, respect, and community engagement, shaping the social and emotional aspects of masculine identity.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research approach, phenomenological research design. Qualitative phenomenological research allows for a deep exploration and understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals. It seeks to uncover the meaning individuals ascribe to a particular phenomenon, shedding light on their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. The target population focused on traditionally circumcised men selected from Bukusu (Kenya), Aembu (Kenya) and Lemba (Zimbabwe) who are all Bantus. Circumcision rites among Bantu men vary across different Bantu cultural groups and regions in Africa. Circumcision holds significant cultural and social importance and is often viewed as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The study followed a non-probability sampling methodology in selecting the participants. Specifically, the study adopted a purposive sampling technique where the researcher is concerned with data-rich samples that would adequately help in answering the study's research questions. This is a sampling method in which samples do not have the same chances of being selected for an investigation; hence, the participants were selected depending on the researcher's intuitive decision-making regarding their suitability to elicit information of interest to the research study. Purposive sampling was especially useful for selecting participants with characteristics of interest to the researcher in answering the study's research questions. As the unit of analysis, the study chose 30 participants, 10 from each community. The samples consisted of three (3) newly initiated men, three (3) elderly initiated men and four (4) professionals involved in the initiation process from each community. The study adopted the in-depth one-on-one interview as a method of collecting data which was collected from September 2022 to January 2023. The researchers ensured validity by presenting the interview guide for checking by experts at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Department of Psychology. The researchers also presented preliminary data collected and analyzed to the respondents so that they ascertain that they were a true representation of the phenomenon of study. For reliability, the researchers used research assistants who were known within the area of study; hence, most respondents were willing to provide necessary information. Data was also audio recorded where it was replayed in places of seeming uncertainty of the actual words from the respondents. Lastly, data was transcribed, coded and themes extracted on curriculum.



Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya. Each and every participant provided written consent, were guaranteed anonymity, confidentiality, and were informed of their right to withdraw or not to respond. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. The recordings and transcriptions were well secluded in password-protected files that only the researchers could gain access to. The participants were made aware that the findings of the study would be made available to them if they so desired and that an article from the study would be published in a journal.

RESULTS

The aim of the study was to examine the role of African traditional male circumcision in the construction of masculinities. The results of this study are presented in terms of themes that arose from data analysis. The themes that are reported on were those that highlighted the role of African traditional male circumcision in constructing masculinities.

Being a Man

It seems that one had to go through circumcision in order to be considered a man by the communities. The participant emphasized that the circumcision exercise was highly regarded. The main aim was to reinforce a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic or tribal group, as it is often a practice that is specific to those communities. Participants said:

“In my community, you are recognized as a man only after circumcision. Even if you are 40 but not circumcised, to us, you are still a boy.” (Participant B01, September 30, 2022).

“Be circumcised and you are considered as a Lemba man.” (Participant A04, October 25, 2022).

“After seclusion when the initiates rejoin their relatives, they have new personalities as they have lost their childhood and become men.” (Participant L08, January 03, 2023).

While the practices differ from community to community, the key meaning and functions of these rites are common. They serve to affirm/provide identities and social belonging, moral personhood, as well as individual and social wellbeing (Cerchiaro & Odasso, 2021).

Gender Qualities

The participants reported that the traditional circumcision rituals reinforced gender roles and expectations within a given culture. They may emphasize qualities such as courage, strength, leadership, and the ability to provide and protect. The participants revealed:

“When the initiates perform ‘Khukoya’ meaning fetching water for brewing local beer. This marks the end of him fetching water for the family—a role that is meant to be feminine.” (Participant B02, September 30, 2022).

“The seclusion period lasted between three weeks to a whole month. Initiates were instructed by their elders and on some occasions, knowledgeable elders could be invited to mentor the initiates accordingly.” (Participant L05, November 04, 2022).



“The younger men visited the initiates, took them into the forest or bushes, and drilled and sharpened their hunting skills. They shared with the initiates some basic principles on how to adapt to the new status.” (Participant A08, November 31, 2022).

For most participants, becoming a man was demonstrated in the ability to identify visible characteristics. The initiates were expected to demonstrate physical and emotional strength, leadership qualities, and adherence to cultural values. This contributed to the formation of specific notions of masculinity in those communities. The primary activity which is circumcision meant a higher status and assumption of responsibilities of manhood. After that, they were expected to share in the privileges and duties of the community. One of the participants had a view that;

Another participant mentioned that:

“A real male (njamba) is the one who had endured the process of facing the knife. If one had been circumcised, he would have nothing to worry him in life. He commanded respect as a man and would endure any situation in life” (Participant A01, Personal Communication, September 22, 2022).

Courage

According to most participants, the function of pain is a necessity for masculinity. Circumcision process is often associated with physical endurance and courage. It may involve undergoing pain and challenges, demonstrating a young man's ability to withstand hardship and display bravery. Participants narrated:

“To be a man is to be able of keeping things though they are difficult, and painful, because in life, you may encounter difficulties, but it is not every time that you should destroy, because events come and passes” (Participant A04, October 25, 2022).

“In the morning of the circumcision when the mud man is ready to smear the initiate, he will look straight into the initiate’s eyes, take a small measure of mud from the lamp at the feet, gently hit the initiate with it and say, Eyino eli embalu eyefwe ekhalakhale, Eyama mwiala wa mango. Wamwene wafukilile, omundu sekarurekho ta. Nono okhoya wema enyanga yama ebukwe. Ekwe mumbo nebasikhukinginya busa (This is our old circumcision tradition from mwiala wa Mango. Since you have accepted to take it yourself, and no one forced you into it, you must stand the cut until the sun rises, from east and sets in the West.)” (Participant B10, January, 05, 2023).

This aspect of the ritual can contribute to the construction of masculinity based on physical strength and resilience. The bodily sensations, pain, healing processes, and the significance of these experiences shaped the perceptions of masculinity. A man was supposed to be patient and courageous. Participants revealed that the process itself was challenging and demanding, requiring individuals to exhibit emotional resilience and strength. Going through such an experience contributed to the development of coping mechanisms and emotional fortitude, shaping individuals' perception of themselves as resilient and capable. Successfully completing the traditional circumcision process brought about a sense of achievement and social validation. Within certain cultural contexts, being circumcised was seen as a symbol of masculinity and maturity.



Passing of Knowledge

It was evident that traditional circumcision ceremonies often incorporated oral traditions and storytelling as a means of transmitting knowledge. Elders and experienced men shared stories, myths, legends, and narratives that illustrated important lessons about masculinity, identity, and cultural values. These stories served as a powerful medium for conveying cultural knowledge, passing down wisdom, and shaping young men's understanding of their roles as men. The initiates were taught on cultural values, beliefs, and rituals surrounding masculinity. Participants remarked:

“Older men are the competent ones and give guidelines. You do not even ask that question, ‘Why do I want to do this?’...Because sometimes as much as it is performed to you, you do not have ownership of it...you have no authority over who comes and who does what...” (Participant B06, November 04, 2022).

“As an elder was winding up, he said, as you go back, you will not be sent on errands always, but now sit with your father and elders and talk and share a lot”. (Participant A01, September 22, 2022).

Bravery

The boys to be initiated were taught that they were now entering into adulthood and abandoning the childish ways of life. They were taught on how to actually abandon the company of the uncircumcised including the games they used to play with them. Bravery was inculcated in that, as men, they were supposed to face the knife without any fear. Some songs sung on the eve of circumcision mocked those that would run away from the knife and praised those that would face it courageously. One participant highlighted:

“The initiates were taught about their new status of life. This was marked by responsible behavior symbolized by the initiates holding their genitals to facilitate healing of the wound. They kept remembering that they were circumcised and self-care, which included discipline, was important. Eating food without salt taught them about self-control and self-restraint. They were taught about sexuality management, like they were not to joke or play around with girls or even rape them. They were to restrain themselves till the time of marriage. They were taught on how to avoid vices like drugs and substance abuse including how to take alcohol responsibly. They were taught that they have become security providers referred to as “njamba,” literally meaning a strong male who would also defend the community from attacks. They were taught on how to take care of livestock and about the major elements of the Aembu culture. They were reminded on the expectations by the society about their behavior and later how they would take up marital responsibilities by sustaining a family through providing for it” (Participant A07, Personal Communication, November 30, 2022).



Values

The participants mentioned that weight was put on values. The initiation processes incorporated values to the initiates. These included family values and community values that included social and religious values. On the family values, respect was highly taught. This was from the fact that the initiate involved the family in the whole process of initiation. Participants declared:

“The initiate had to uphold the values of the family. The family included all the relatives in the extended family and not only for the nuclear family. How can the initiate not propagate family values and he was part of it? How can he run away from the family values and they were involved in his circumcision? He must be respectful, generous, participate fully in family affairs and defend the family name. He needs the family and therefore circumcision does not cut him from the family but makes him more part of it. It was generally expected that the newly initiated young men were to stay close to their grandfathers for more education on family values and how to prepare for marriage.” (Participant B04, Personal Communication, October 04, 2022).

“Though circumcised personally, the circumcision was not merely for the individual. He had to unite with other members of the community who sang for him and celebrated him when he was being circumcised. Was he cut without other people being present? He must do good things that the community does, like hospitality, generosity, respect for strangers, create wealth for community, be honorable, participate fully in communal activities, respect and care for the weak, help the needy and be kind to everyone. Cultural elements and religious norms were also taught as well as some gestures of respect and conduct, like talking to the elders with composure” (Participant L10, Personal Communication, January 12, 2022).

“The adult initiates were taught to fear the deity. They were taught to be righteous since an immoral life would attract punishment from The Supreme Being. They were to avoid any taboo that had severe repercussions in life. A morally upright life was rewarded with blessings and prosperity and therefore it was a must for everyone. Being circumcised didn't mean that anyone would do whatever they wanted. They had to follow the social values so as to coexist with others with peace” (Participant A04, Personal Communication, October 25, 2022).

Critical Thinking

During initiation, the young men were taught that they were becoming adults and one element of adulthood was the ability to use the brain well. For this reason, they were educated on life skills that promoted critical thinking. This was commonly done by the sponsors and the young men who had been previously circumcised. Riddles, tongue twisters and rhetoric questions were among the methods used to teach critical thinking. A participant described:

“The young men were no longer children and they were supposed to think well. During relaxed moments they would be given some riddles and proverbs to interpret. At times they would be fined if they failed to get the correct interpretation. Care was taken so as to avoid the riddles and questions involved in childhood stages. For example, one would be asked if he can uproot a stump of a tree near their gate if told to do so by a lady he wants to marry. He was supposed to say no, since there are many other stumps in other places which he can't uproot” (Participant A07, Personal Communication, November 30, 2022).



The critical thinking skills were meant to help the young men to think before acting and to make the best choices of actions and words before committing themselves to doing something. This would help them avoid mistakes done in a rush that would later bring regrets in life. One participant said:

“Some decisions and actions require a critical move. If anyone does something wrong, he would later cry and make the whole family cry. Therefore, it was necessary to have the right intelligence to do things so that the outcome may be desirable for everything. This intelligence was cultivated through critical thinking skills. Examples from past stories about people who made mistakes on some occasions were also given to the young men and they were told to identify the mistakes. This would help them to avoid such mistake in life. A circumcised person was generally considered to be wise” (Participant L04, Personal Communication, November 04, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Traditional African circumcision holds a significant role in the formation of masculinity within African communities. This practice is deeply embedded in cultural and social systems, serving as a rite of passage for young boys transitioning into manhood. By undergoing circumcision, boys are initiated into the community as men, signifying their readiness for adult responsibilities, leadership, and the preservation of cultural practices and norms.

One of the key roles of traditional African circumcision is the transmission of cultural and societal values. The initiation process often involves an extensive period of seclusion during which boys receive instruction and guidance from older men within the community. They learn about their ancestry, traditional customs, and the expected behaviors and roles of men. This knowledge reinforces the cultural identity and helps shape the individual's concept of what it means to be a man within their specific community.

Additionally, the physical act of circumcision symbolizes a transformation from boyhood to manhood. African cultures often associate this ritual with strength, bravery, and endurance. The pain and physical challenges endured during the procedure are believed to prepare boys for the difficulties they will face throughout their lives. The scars left by circumcision serve as permanent reminders of their entry into manhood and are often seen as marks of honor and pride.

Furthermore, circumcision plays a role in establishing gender roles and expectations within African societies. Men who have undergone the ritual are viewed as protectors, providers, and decision-makers. They are expected to demonstrate qualities such as courage, leadership, wisdom, and responsibility. In many African cultures, circumcision is seen as a prerequisite for marriage and fatherhood, emphasizing the link between masculinity and familial obligations.



CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that in African tradition, men were initiated into masculinity through learning from other men, uncles and elders. The society dictated what was expected of a man and every man was eager to be well adjusted to his culture. Africa is a continent with diverse cultures, traditions, and belief systems. Circumcision practices also vary widely across different African communities. Many African communities view circumcision as an important cultural tradition that is integral to their identity and heritage.

However, with Western influence on circumcision practices, this may erode these cultural traditions and disrupt the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values associated with the practice. Western influence on circumcision practices in Africa has led to medicalization and standardization of the procedure, primarily for health and hygiene reasons. This shift towards medicalized circumcision may raise concerns about the potential loss of cultural significance and traditional practices. The tension between preserving cultural practices and adopting modern approaches is a complex issue. It can be argued that finding a balance between respecting cultural traditions and addressing health concerns through safe medical practices can help protect both cultural heritage and individual well-being. Engaging in respectful dialogue and collaboration between Western perspectives and African communities can lead to a better understanding of the cultural significance of circumcision and help shape practices that preserve cultural identity while addressing health and safety concerns.

This study recommends similar studies on other African communities that practiced circumcision as well as those that did not practice traditional circumcision in relation to masculinity formation.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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