

Circumcision Contestation Among African Christians in the Advent of a Rejuvenation of African Cultural Practices

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Abstract: Circumcision among many African communities is a vital and common rite of passage. Traditionally the rite was performed on both male and female teenagers but with the coming of the Europeans and the conversion of African communities to Christianity, female circumcision was discarded and eventually outlawed. Male circumcision survived despite European pressure. Many Europeans viewed circumcision as a psychologically hazardous exercise that was detrimental to the initiates' physical health and a waste of valuable time that could be better utilised economically. Missionaries associated circumcision rituals with paganism laced with many outdated practices, thus there was need to Christenize the rites. The missionary fashioned the circumcision rite of passage into what they felt was in line with Christian values. Most of the circumcision rituals were discarded. The circumcision rite changed from a communal affair to an individual family affair. In the beginning of the third millennium, the church took started organizing circumcision camps for boys in churches in a bid to align the traditional practice to Christian values. This became the norm as the Kikuyu community's cultural practices had overtime been inclined to the Euro Christian culture. At the same time a rejuvenation of Kikuyu culture was taking shape. The rejuvenation was given the impetus it required by the promulgation of the 2010 Kenyan constitution. From then on Kikuyu elders started organising their own circumcision camps targeting teenage Christians that were also targeted by the church. This has caused discontent among Kikuyu Christians necessitating a search for possible remedies to the contestation in a bid to have a spiritually fulfilled Kikuyu Christian.

Keywords: Circumcision, Culture, Female Genital Mutilation, Rituals.

1. Introduction

Rites of passage are rituals that accompany individuals as they transit from one social stage to another over time (Kimani, 2015). They are a significant part of life in many communities. According to Gatenjwa (1988) rites of passage are traditional performances with communal meaning to those who believe in them moving an individual from one social status to another. Rites of passage can therefore be said to be crucial ascension stages in the social development of an individual. Among many African communities, birth, initiation, marriage and death rites of passage are the most pronounced. Circumcision and marriage in particular are arguably the two most significant rites of

passage in many communities. Many African communities practice male circumcision. According to Marck (1997) circumcision among the Bantus is an ancient practice. According to him Bantus who don't circumcise abandoned the practice somewhere along their history because there is resemblance of the practice among Bantus living thousands of miles apart. The Kikuyu who are a Bantu community are an example of an African community that has practiced circumcision for many years.

2. Circumcision Among the Kikuyu

Among the Kikuyu, circumcision is not only a transition from childhood to adulthood but it has both physical and spiritual implications. Leakey (1977) observes that among the Kikuyu circumcision is the most important rite of passage propelling the candidate upwards from childhood into adulthood. Only through undergoing the rite will a member of the community be regarded mature irrespective of their age. It is after undergoing the rite that one is given the right to marry, own property and hold leadership roles both at the family and community level. Kenyatta (1938) avers that it is after circumcision that an individual is allowed administrative, political and societal duties. Gatenjwa (1988) collaborates this when he says that an individual remains a child to the society until he is circumcised irrespective of his physical size or age. Kimani (2015) confirms this assertion arguing that among the Kikuyu an uncircumcised person is confined in perpetual childhood.

The rite of circumcision among the Kikuyu is almost as old as the community although its origin is not properly documented. Some scholars however believe that the Kikuyu borrowed the rite of Circumcision from other communities, probably Cushite or Nilotes like the Maasai during their migration. The Kikuyu community has had a long relationship with the Maasai and interacted in trade, intermarried and socially borrowed from one another in the pre-missionary era. Waweru (2011) and Peterson (2016) observes that the name Ngai (Kikuyu name for God) was borrowed from the Maasai Enkai. This is evidence of the extent to which the Kikuyu and

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the Maasai interacted. God among the Kikuyu is revered and the fact that they could borrow His name from the Maasai means that they were close. There is also evidence of two circumcision systems, *Gikuyu Karinga* (circumcision in the Kikuyu style) and *Gikuyu Ukabi* (Circumcision in the Maasai style, (Kabetu, 1947). This suggests that the Kikuyu could have borrowed the rite from the Maasai.

The value of circumcision to the individual and the community among the Kikuyu cannot be fully expressed in words. Mbiti (1970) argues that circumcision connected the African with communal living, it makes the initiate a part of the community. To him the seclusion during circumcision is a symbolic death in which the individual goes to the spiritual world and is then reborn as an integral part of the community. Waweru (2020) identifies initiation as one of the four major rites of passage in which God is involved in the African life style.

The coming of the missionaries to Africa spelt doom to the social cultural practices of the African communities. The thinking of the Western community as reflected in the modernisation theory had it that communities were underdeveloped because they were bogged down by their ties to primitive cultural practices. The thinking was pegged on the rapid technological and economic development that was being experienced in Europe in the 18th and the 19th century. This was attributed to European culture and thus the culture was seen as the pinnacle of cultural achievement and social-economic development.

Non-Western societies like the Africans were said to contain barbaric and primitive attributes which inhibited economic growth and development (Ukwandu, 2017). It was for this reason that the non-Western communities needed to be guided into following the route taken by the Western world so as to develop. This involved reshaping their traditional cultures or adopting the European cultures. An outstanding component of this culture was Christianity. The type of Christianity introduced to Africa was a part of the modernisation process. Mbiti (1970) observes that the Christianity brought to Africa by missionaries from Western Europe and American is not the New Testament Christianity.

Europeans from Europe and America found God in Africa. They found religious communities and as Waweru (2020) observes, Africans to date are incurably religious. To them, Life is meaningless without religion. Similar sentiments are expressed by Adamo (2015) when he says that God has throughout history revealed himself to all humanity but in different ways, time and geographical location. The missionaries ignored this view and sought to annihilate African culture and religion although it was ingrained in the Africans way of life.

Africans welcomed Christianity but from the onset tried to practice the new form of religion from their religious perspective. Unfortunately, the missionaries would not allow it because they did not understand the African religio-cultural background. Waweru (2011) observes that European missionaries did not try to appreciate or understand African culture. There is however, evidence that Christianity in other

continents transformed and was transformed by the cultures and religious background of the host communities (Judith, 2002). This opportunity was not accorded African Christian converts.

There was no room for negotiation on religious matters between the missionary and the Africans. Mudimbe (1988) observes that the missionary didn't negotiate with the pagan. Nthamburi (1995) documents the challenges faced by Kimbanguists of Zaire. They tried to practice Christianity from their spiritual understanding but the Catholic missionaries with the help of the Belgium government attacked the Christians with a lot of brutality. Some were imprisoned while others were separated from their families.

In Kenya Christianity was brought by the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century but they failed to leave any spiritual mark. Only Fort Jesus remains as a monument of their presence in the coast. Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann would in 1844 set camp in Rabai and although their progress was slow, they managed to plant the seed of Christianity in Kenya. From there Christianity spread in the country and today, it is the biggest religion by population with 85.5% of the population asseverating to be Christians, (Cowling, 2023).

Among the Kikuyu, Christianity reached Kabete in 1900 when Rev. A McGregor of Church Missionary Society (CMS) set camp there with a mission to evangelize among the community, (Gitau, 1989). The Anglican seed was planted and from there, it spread to Weithaga in 1904, Kahuhia in 1906 and by 1910, Kigali and Kabare Anglican missions were established. Here, the missionary found a religious community that worshipped a monotheistic God and with many aspects that were akin to Christian worship. The Kikuyu on the other hand found similarities between their beliefs and those of the new religion and took up the religion, (Kibicho, 1980).

The missionaries however had come to Africa with mind-set that the Africans had no religion, they were pagans or heathens who practiced ancestral worship (Mugambi, 1989). As such the missionary did not negotiate with the pagans but yearned to convert Africans into their religious practices in totality (Mudimbe, 1988). Kikuyu practices had to be discarded and be replaced with the new Christian practices. Among the practices that were targeted was circumcision which was administered to both boys and girls in their teenage.

To the missionaries and the colonialists, circumcision had negative effects on the initiates and the community. According to Gathogo (nd), they argued that female circumcision was punitive, injurious, un-Christian and medically unnecessary. For the boys, they averred that it was psychologically harmful and a waste of valuable time that could be used for other economically viable activities. Kimani (2015) observes that to the missionary, circumcision was mutilation of the body. As such the Europeans employed great efforts to eradicate this process but it was a challenge because it was well entrenched in the communities' system. Peterson (2016) has documented the struggle between the Kikuyu and the missionary on the practice of circumcision particularly on female circumcision.

Waweru (2011) argues that circumcision was the most important initiation stage to the Kikuyu people. It was therefore difficult to eradicate. On realising the challenge of eradicating

this practice, the missionaries opted to patronise it. Karanja (1999) observes that in Kabare mission, two women were selected to circumcise the Christian converts but under the supervision of the church. Without Biblical support female circumcision was eventually Christened Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and outlawed by the constitution. Today, it is very rare among the Kikuyu community.

Boys' circumcision however survived. There was enough backing from the Bible both from the old and the new testament. God himself instructed Abraham to have himself, members of his family and even the foreigners born in his house or bought with money circumcised in Genesis 17: 10-14. This was an outward sign of God's people and those who failed to be circumcised were cut off from the people of God. Failing to get circumcised had dire consequences as recorded in Exodus 4: 24 -26 where Zipporah saved Moses from God's wrath by circumcising her son and touching Moses' feet with the foreskin.

The Gospels document the circumcision of Jesus on the 8th day. It would thus have been difficult for the missionaries to find a Biblical or Christian basis of eradicate the custom. They nevertheless decided to control the custom and fashion it in a Christian way. Kimani (2015) observes that the British in Kiambu developed a strategy where boys' circumcision would be allowed under the auspices of the church. This gradually gave the church the mandate to organize circumcision for the Kikuyu boys and for many years the church has taken up that role and many Kikuyu Christians have had no problem with it.

With the church leading in circumcision rites, the accompanying rituals died. The dances and the communal participation were left out of the ceremonies. Without the ceremonies accompanying the circumcision, many parents organised for the ritual to be performed at the individual level. Many Kikuyu children attend formal school and eventually circumcision was organised along the school holidays and December being the longest holiday was preferred because it would offer the boys enough time to heal. It was also a transition period where boys would be moving from primary schools to secondary schools. This catered for the concept of maturing physically, spiritually and socially.

The traditional form of circumcision died a natural death when the church and the state suppressed the traditional rituals. Individual parents privately organised for their children's circumcision which now shifted to the hospitals. A suitable sponsor, preferably an elder relative or family friend who has distinguished himself as morally upright in the eyes of the youngster's parents would be identified. He would take the boy to the hospital for circumcision and walk with him through the healing process at home. The initiate would be trained on the society's expectations of him, his rights and responsibilities during this period.

Sometimes neighbours and friends would organise to have their children initiated together but circumcision among the Kikuyu became an individual affair. The issue of age groups and age sets was outlived. However, the boys circumcised in the same period sought one another after the healing period and often shared in many social activities. Young men in the

villages would also visit the initiates and advise them. They often teased the boy as a form of initiation to adulthood and in some cases they would demand tokens such as chicken and cigarettes as a way of welcoming the initiate to their guild. The young men would also be accompanied by girls as a way of encouraging the initiates to start looking for friends from the opposite sex.

Although circumcision has been individualised, there is feasting and merry making at the family level. Friends and relatives of the initiated boy's family often flock the home to celebrate the milestone. Uncles, aunties, cousins and other relatives visit the home daily with presents for the initiate. The family prepare enough food and those who can afford slaughtered a goat for the celebration. Because traditional wine was forbidden by the church and the government, tea was used in place of the traditional brew muratina. The reason the after initiation party is commonly referred to as *cai wa mwana*, literally translating to tea for the child.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the church involvement in male circumcision increased. Organized circumcision camps for the rite of passage became a part of Christian activities in the church's calendar. The lads are assembled in a facility such as a school for a week or two where they undergo the rite of passage and are mentored on Christian moral values. The forum is a reprieve for many parents because it takes away the organising part and especially the search for a suitable sponsor. In the church camps the initiate is guided by the church community and facilitators chosen by the church leadership. He will also make many new friends and it is hoped that the initiates would help one another to navigate the challenges of teenage together.

Njoraa (2022) asserts that the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) started the church based circumcision camps in 1998 in order to protect the youth from alcoholism and drug abuse. According to her, the church has the capacity to fight immorality among the youth in schools and in the society. The church is able to integrate positive traditional practices with biblical teachings resulting to well organised mentorship program for the youth. This in itself would help in the development of ideal moral values for a mature Christian youth.

According to Njoraa (2022), Kenyan youths are faced with developmental challenges such as low self-esteem, drug abuse, illicit sex, bullying and lack of respect for authorities. According to her this is due to lack of a comprehensive program for rites of passage where the youth would be monitored. There is however lack of uniformity in the structure and curriculum of the rite of passage in the church. Each parish develops their own structure making it difficult to monitor the effectiveness of the program. The lack of follow up on the youth from the church creates challenges in the life of the initiates as they are left alone to manoeuvre their way through life. In spite of this Njoraa (2022) observes that the church organised rites of passage have improved youth-parent relationship, youth-teacher relationship, self-esteem, healthy friendships and a commitment towards life goals.

3. The Contestation Among Christians in the Advent of Resurgence of Kikuyu Cultural Practices

From the beginning of the 21st century African cultural practices among Christians have been rejuvenated. Christians have been going back to their traditions as a matter of necessity. Nyahela (2015) observes that Christians secretly go back to their traditional practices when they encounter perplexing situations. This is echoed by Mokhoathi (2020) who argues that many Africans are publicly Christians but revert to their traditional practices in private. This is not surprising because as Gathogo (2017) affirms, Africans who convert to Christianity consciously or unconsciously continue with their traditional rituals. This could be explained by the extent to which cultural practices are ingrained in the people's way of life. Kivel (2013) concludes that these visions are so intrinsic in human beings that they cannot be obliterated by years of domination.

Among the Kikuyu, rejuvenation of cultural practices has been characterized by the re-emergence of traditional groups such as *Kiama kia Ma*, *Gwata Ndai*, Kikuyu council of elders, *Mungiki* among many others. Their call on the members of the Kikuyu community is a return to the traditional way of life. These groups associate the social economic challenges facing the community to the people's departure from their culture. The groups have infiltrated the Church and as Omondi (2023) observes, *Kiama kia Ma* has penetrated the Anglican Church Leadership to the level of the synod. This groups are calling upon the community to go back to their culture with the slogan, *tucokie ruui mukaro* translated to mean let's take the river back to its course.

Among the targeted cultural practices is circumcision. As aforementioned the ritual of circumcision among the Kikuyu has never been quashed. The missionaries tried to stop it and when they couldn't, they opted to fashion it in their style under the patronage of the church. Kikuyu elders now want to control the custom, but the church which has been organising it feels that it would be retrogressive to let the elders lead in such a crucial rite of passage.

Kikuyu elders argue that the church shouldn't control the custom because it is a Kikuyu religious practice and not a Christian practice. According to them, circumcision has no religious value to Christianity. Circumcised and uncircumcised Christian are equal but this is not the same among the Kikuyus. In an interview conducted among Anglican Christians in Murang'a South diocese, Christians who have taken up Kikuyu cultural practice argued that it was wrong for the church to control circumcision because not all priests have undergone the rite citing female reverends.

Christian circumcision camps overlook vital procedures in the circumcision of the boys. A lad needs to inform male relatives of the impending ritual and it is paramount that the maternal uncle knows and blesses the child as he undergoes the rite. The lad must also be accompanied by a male relative or sponsor when being admitted to the camp. The elders however argue that the church admits boys brought into their camps without questioning whether the young ones have informed the relatives. To the elders, single mothers have taken the church shortcut without considering the social-spiritual impact on the

boy and the family.

The elders insist that circumcision is not a one off ceremony of cutting the foreskin but an elaborate ritual that involves the whole community including the dead. It also connects the initiate to nature as the blood and the foreskin literally go back to nature. This is collaborated by Mbiti (1970) who says that circumcision among Africans ritually connects the initiate to communal living. He further says the seclusion of the initiate is a symbol of dying and going to the spiritual world and then being reborn. To the elders, circumcision begins long before the actual operation and continues long after the boy has been circumcised.

Kikuyu elders therefore organize their circumcision camps purely for Kikuyu boys. The ceremonies are organized to replicate the traditional Kikuyu circumcision practices but in a moderate way. Most of the accompanying rituals such as *muhiro* and *mumburo*, dances that were undertaken by boys in preparation of circumcision are ignored. However, there are those that are adhered to like being taken to the camp by a male sponsor and informing the family members including maternal relatives. A virgin should be in the party of the people who will bring home the initiate as blessing for the future of the initiate in family life. Upon arrival the father is expected to slaughter a ram and invite the maternal uncle and other relatives to bless the young man in an elaborate ceremony called *ithemba*.

Family, friends and relatives present the young man with many different kinds of presents. These could include live animals, money or objects that the young man is expected to use. Of the many presents given to the boy, the most important are a stool, a spear and a shield presented to the young man by the father. The spear and the shield have since been substituted with a pen and a book respectively as they are the weapons the man will use to protect his family and to acquire wealth for the family and the community. The stool signifies maturity. The boy can now discuss important issues with the father which fosters better understanding between father and son. The sponsor is from then trusted to guide the young man into a mature Kikuyu man.

At the same time the church continues to organise circumcision camps for the boys. According to the church, circumcision is a very crucial stage in the development of the Kikuyu Christian and must be handled with great care. The church has established structures to cater for the young minds' development particularly on moral and Christian values. The church feels that letting the young in the hands of the elders would be akin to risking the youths' future. This demonstrates the level of suspicion between the church and the elders. The church further organises mentorship sessions for the girls and issues certificates for the boys and girls at the end of the session.

Both the church and the elders target the same youth for their camps. This brings about an unhealthy competition as each camp campaigns for members. It is important to note that the circumcision for boy among the Kikuyu is now aligned to the school calendar. Boys are usually circumcised in the December of the year they finish the primary school course. This is because the December holiday is long and avails the lads enough time to heal. It also coincides with a milestone where

the young man transcends to the next level of education. This involves a change in the education institution as well as the social status.

Apart from targeting the same group of people during the same period for the same ritual, there are a lot of similarities between the two competing groups. Both groups offer the service at a fee. It will cost each boy around 8,000 Kenya Shillings to undergo the rite in both camps. The length of stay in the camp is between 10 and 15 days and the rites are performed by trained medical personnel in the camps which are usually school premises.

The two camps hold learning sessions for the boys guided by professionals and motivational speakers. There are also lessons from the Bible as both camps require the initiate to carry one. Other topics such as hygiene, human growth and development, life challenges, boy-girl relationships and family life, value of education and working hard are part of the curriculum offered in the circumcision camps.

Elders' camps emphasize on family affairs. The child is encouraged to know their relatives and to treat them with the respect they deserve. They are trained on Kikuyu values and how to apply them in the modern world. The church on the other hand emphasizes on the Christian values, salvation of the soul and the life everlasting. The concept of Christian brotherhood carries more weight than blood relationship.

In such a scenario a contestation ensues between the church and Kikuyu elders. The two are pulling on the same Christians who look upon them for guidance. This forms a basis for divisions among Christians who have fellowshiped together for a long time. The children are also caught up in the quagmire although their opinion in the matter is usually limited. As the parents struggle with the dilemma the lads await their parents' verdict which sometimes separate youth who have grown together in the same village, school, church and community.

4. Consequences of the Contestation

The immediate family's harmony is the first casualty of the disagreement of the choice of the circumcision camp for the youngster. Sometimes the man will decide that his son will be circumcised in the elders' camp but the wife prefers the church camp. Both the mother and father have roles to play in the circumcision of their son. The celebrations that follow will also involve both parents and their families. As such once they disagree on the choice of the camp, the effect spreads beyond them into the extended family. Circumcision among the Kikuyu is a family affair. When the family disagrees, then the expected blessings, training and the values to be acquired are affected.

Youth who undergo the rite of passage are directly affected. Both camps claim to be the better option for the young men and when this is inculcated on the young minds, they believe they were circumcised in the right way, eventually those who are circumcised in the church equate those in the other camp with sinners while those who underwent the operation with the elders feel mature and more patriotic than their counter parts. The stage at which circumcision is undertaken is very crucial in the future of the young men and the choices they make effect their future. When the seed of hatred and mistrust is planted in them,

it might remain in them forever.

In the study conducted among Anglican Christians of the diocese of Murang'a South, it was realised that after the rite, the youth no longer relate freely. The two camps manifest themselves as each keep to themselves and refuse to share their experiences with their counter parts. According to the youth who went through the Church camp, youth circumcised in the *Kiama kia Ma* camps become secretive. They use a language which only them can understand when talking about serious matter. They also develop pride as they feel they are the real men as compared to those who underwent the rite in the church. It is like they have some secret knowledge that makes them superior to their counterparts.

The youth circumcised in the Church camps accuse their counterparts for straying from the Christian path. They do not lead in worship and will not lead in communal prayers even when impelled to do so. They also don't clap their hands when singing and even their singing is not Christian. They prefer their Kikuyu names to their baptism names. They also worship facing Mount Kenya which from a Christian perspective is tantamount to idol worship.

Girls are also not spared in this strife. It is at this age that boys and girls interact and develop relationships. The issue of who was circumcised where has filtered in to these relationships and often, the girls will be chided by the members of different camps depending on the choices they make. This creates some form of antagonism among the youth and the rift created between the youngsters can be very long lasting.

Church elders were also found to be in a dilemma. Some elders go against the church's advice to have their children circumcised in the church camps preferring the elders' camp. This is mainly brought about by fear spread by propagators of the Kikuyu traditional forms of circumcision. The camp warns of dire consequences for failing to perform the necessary rituals in circumcision and this propels the elders to take the choice. The church expects all the adherents to follow the church option and the elders with a different opinion are seen as backsliders. This effectively creates a barrier between the church leadership.

The greatest loss however is on the church. Christian brotherhood is threatened as the issue of us versus them is manifested in the youth. Christians who have grown up together in Sunday school and fellowshiped and worshipped together find themselves in opposing camps which directly affects their fellowship. The unity of Christians to the Anglican Church is paramount. Any threat to this unity must be mitigated at the earliest opportunity.

5. Conclusion

The role of the church in instilling positive values on young Christians cannot be underscored. This noble calling has however not been well received by the beneficiary of the act. Many feel that the church is investing on the circumcision of boys for monetary gain. Macharia (2021) says that in pursuit for particularly money, African Christian leaders have embarked on oppressing, exploiting and enslaving those who are ignorant or are economically unstable. It is wanting that the church issues certificates for the initiates because the

certificates have no value. The church should re-examine the value of circumcision among the Kikuyu lads holistically.

The value of circumcision as a rite of passage must be evaluated by both the church and the community. The leadership of the camps should interrogate the purpose of circumcision and ask themselves whether the same is achieved through the process they guide their candidates into. Njoraa (2022) points a church organised circumcision camp as an avenue of training initiates in church values and life skills. This to the elders is insufficient as circumcision rituals are not an individual but a communal affair. Such tenets of circumcision according to the community must be put into consideration when groups decide to undertake to guide the rite.

The church must also develop elaborate and uniform structures for their circumcision camps. The programs, the syllabuses and the activities to be covered in each Christian camp should be well organised to bring about value and uniformity for the development of the youngsters. There must also be a follow up program for the initiates after the circumcision for as things are, the lads are in the camps for only two weeks after which they are released to the same elders the church mistrusts. Unlike in the elders' camp where the youth walk the future with their sponsors, in the Christian camp the sponsor and the initiate part ways immediately the camp closes. They might never meet again in life.

A dialogue between the Kikuyu elders and the Church is urgent as the strife between the church and the Kikuyu elders has a negative effect on the future of the youth both in the church and at the community level. The Kikuyu groups must interrogate the changes that have come up in the society. The concept of single families and individualism must put in consideration. The Kikuyu community leaves the children with the mother in the event of a failed relationship. As such there are many single mothers with boys who need to undergo the rite and an avenue for the mother and son to adhere to the demands of the society must be availed.

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