The Continuing Paradox of Traditional Female and Male Circumcision among Kuria in Northeastern Tanzania

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Abstract: Using participant observation, life histories, narratives, interviews and telephone conversations, this article explores reasons behind the failure of anti-female circumcision and anti-traditional male circumcision campaigns among the Kuria, an ethnic community based in Northeast Tanzania. Besides circumcision being central to attaining full personhood in the traditional society, undergoing this ritual has far-reaching socio-economic and political implications for both males and females, including gaining access to resources, political positions and socio-economic support. Despite fierce opposition to female circumcision from state and non-state actors, as well as social stigma, ridicule and sanctions against it, the practice, now in international language outlawed as female genital mutilation, goes on unabated. Similarly, despite the availability of modern health services for medical male circumcision, which has a high potential in limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS, Kuria boys resort to the traditional forms of circumcision. This article underscores the importance of understanding local discourse in a bid to eradicate circumcision with more informed means.

Keywords: personhood, rites of passage, circumcision, circumcision-set, Kuria, Lake Victoria zone, Tanzania

Résumé : À partir de considérations ethnographiques, cet article explore les raisons de l'échec des campagnes de lutte contre la circoncision féminine et la circoncision masculine traditionnelle chez les Kuria, une communauté ethnique installée dans le nord-est de la Tanzanie. Outre le fait que la circoncision joue un rôle central dans l'acquisition d'une personnalité à part entière au sein de la société traditionnelle, ce rituel a d'importantes implications socio-économiques et politiques tant pour les hommes que pour les femmes, y compris en termes d'accès aux ressources, aux postes politiques et au soutien socioéconomique. Malgré l'opposition farouche des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques, les femmes non circoncises font l'objet de stigmatisation sociale, de moqueries et de sanctions. Par conséquent, si la circoncision féminine est dénoncée dans le discours international, les mutilations génitales féminines se poursuivent sans relâche. De même, bien que des services de santé modernes soient disponibles pour la circoncision masculine médicale – laquelle a un fort potentiel pour limiter la propagation du VIH/SIDA –, les garçons Kuria ont recours aux formes traditionnelles de circoncision. Cet article souligne l'importance de comprendre le discours local si l'on veut éradiquer la circoncision par des moyens plus éclairés.

Mots-clés : Personnalité, rites de passage, circoncision, classe de circoncis, Kuria, zone du lac Victoria, Tanzanie

Introduction

In this article, I explain the parallelism of male and female circumcision in Kuria society and circumcision's associated centrality to social maturity in that society. This social importance had led to the persistence of the practice. Shweder (2000, 22) and the Public Policy Advisory Network on Female Genital Surgeries in Africa (2012, 20) have criticised evidence against female circumcision that purports to be based on "accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and balance." Moreover, Boddy (2016) has criticised the condemnation of female circumcision as being uncritical toward the practice of female cosmetic genital surgery. Critiques of circumcision, especially of females, are no longer self-evident (Esho 2012; Berg and Denison 2013). Scholars are now asking more questions about male circumcision as well (Egesah et al. 2014) and are studying the cultural importance of both of these practices. In what follows, I compare traditional female and male circumcision in Kuria society in Northeastern Tanzania and assess their cultural importance. Kuria people see circumcision as a rite of passage with social, political and economic consequences for both male and female youth. Undergoing circumcision with other initiates is central to the attainment of full personhood, which carries with it rights and responsibilities that can permeate every aspect of personal life. The ritual practice of group circumcision binds members of the group together for life, creating a bond that is akin to kinship with similar rights and obligations. This article argues that because circumcision remains central to Kuria social life, no amount of international and local intervention will eradicate it in the near term. Additionally, for young women, both circumcision itself and now the anti-circumcision efforts find a parallel place in the life cycle.

Some youth and their parents worry about health issues related to traditional circumcision and about the availability of contemporary hygienic circumcisions in

hospitals. Yet these concerns have not halted the much-maligned traditional practice that has social benefits for some individuals. Circumcisions benefit circumcisers, community leaders, the parents of the female/male youth involved, and in some respects, the youth themselves.

In this article, I first present relevant literature on historical circumcision rites and practices among Kuria people to shed light on their ideas about maturation and attaining full personhood. Next, I explain what is new about contemporary Kuria circumcision rites. New features include governmental and non-governmental pressures, parental preferences, peers' and elders' pressures, and new choices about where and whether to undergo circumcision. Following this section, I delineate issues pertaining to male and female rites, including the similarities between them and what they signify socially, culturally, politically and economically in contemporary Kuria society. In the conclusion, I highlight the paradox of the seemingly intractable circumcision practice.

Background

This paper follows the findings of an ethnographic study that I carried out in the Kuria regions of Tanzania from July 2008 to June 2009. This was part of a larger study involving Kuria marriage, gender and livelihoods. Kuria people reside predominantly in Tarime, Rorya, Musoma Rural, Serengeti and Bunda Districts in Mara Region, along Lake Victoria in Northeastern Tanzania. Kuria people are mainly agriculturists and pastoralists. Those who live in Rorya District, near Lake Victoria, also engage in fishing. The population of Kuria is about seven hundred thousand (Tearfund 2013, 31). People in the northern and central parts of Tanzania, including Kuria, practise both female and male circumcision on a wide scale (United Republic of Tanzania [URT] 2010; Tearfund 2013; UNICEF 2013), and male circumcision appears even more widespread, as the practice is present in 12 regions out of 30 (Ashengo et al. 2014).

During the study, I stayed at Nyarero village while following the activities of the participants in and beyond the village, in the surrounding areas of Tarime and Rorya Districts. In addition, I held telephone conversations with some villagers and made one-month visitations to Tarime District in 2012 and 2014 during the circumcision period. The study deployed ethnographic methods that included participant observation, life histories, narratives, and both formal and informal semi-structured interviews with different categories of community members. A total of 226 people took part in the interviews.

Maturation and Attainment of Full Personhood

This article employs a cultural and socio-cultural symbolic perspective on circumcision (Gruenbaum 2009; Esho et al. 2010) in order to explain how the position of the woman or man who has just gone through circumcision in the society changes in the context of indigenous discourse (Shweder 2000). Traditional female circumcision and male circumcision differ from place to place in terms of meaning, change resistance, and social and cultural reasons for their continuity (Boddy 2007; Majinge and Ngallaba 2011; Egesah et al. 2014). This article follows an anthropological approach that explores one such meaning, personhood (Fortes 1973; Carsten 1995; Carrithers et al. 1985; Gillespie 2001).

Personhood develops from performing relations as elements of day-by-day experience and practice (Gillespie 2001, 82). Personhood includes status or rank and title or name in relation to others and does not automatically emerge, as it usually involves passing through stages over a lifetime or beyond (Fortes 1973; Carsten 1995; Gillespie 2001). Carrithers and colleagues provide further insight into the category of person, noting that Mauss's (1985, 67) person "concerns essentially the concept of the individual presupposed by or expressed in a society's dominant value system or encompassing ideology." Mauss's work on the cultural and social dimensions of the body emphasises that an individual action is one that a person learns through social processes. He further suggests that the development of the body depends on both the social person and perceptual person, which is the distinction between a person's material world and world of thought. This distinction is not unproblematic. La Fontaine (1985, 123), for instance, criticises Mauss for developing a theory that treats the idea of the "individual" as unique to Western thought. However, this article employs Mauss's idea of a culturally controlled person operating in a social context (that of a Kuria social system). Collins asserts that personhood commences empirically, differs cross-culturally and evolves historically (Carrithers et al. 1985, 74). Although a body is a requisite, it is not adequate for completion in itself; in this regard, psychological identity that mainly depends on social relationship is necessary (1985, 75). Consequently, personhood is a social identity and depends on conditions of time and place. I follow Winterbottom and colleagues (2009, 48) by questioning the dichotomies of "traditional and modern, power and culture, and locality and globalization that once guided an anthropological study of 'traditional' culture and 'cultural practices.'" In this article, I argue

that a one-dimensional description of female circumcision as a "tradition" and a "cultural practice" by NGOs, international organisations, activists and government can be counterproductive. In dealing with Kuria discourses, I reject binaries such as tradition versus modernity, culture versus power, and local versus global. Ongoing school debates and actions by youth and community members with regard to supporting or rejecting traditional circumcision require a concept of culture that embraces ambiguities and contestations. Although cultural values are influential in configuring ideas and action, actors frequently critically assess their backgrounds, adjusting their ideas, actions and religious values in response to emerging situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In the following section, I introduce female and male circumcision rites separately. I give an overview of historical and more contemporary literature on the practice of circumcision and anti-circumcision campaigns, emphasising the discourse of female genital mutilation/female genital cutting (FGM/FGC) in the latter.

Indigenous Frameworks and Discourses on Circumcision Rites

Among Kuria, both boys and girls undergo circumcision. In recent times, however, anti-circumcision activism has had an effect on the attitudes of some parents, schoolgirls and boys toward circumcision. While among strangers, female youth pretend to have not gone through circumcision to fit into "modern" society and social expectations, in reality, they often participate in the practice. In this regard, the denial intends to circumvent insults and isolation at the hands of fellow youth and community members. In addition, there is a contradictory situation for female circumcision, which is that the practice is illegal in Tanzania but widespread among some ethnic groups, including Kuria. In fact, these are two sides of the same coin. That is, they are part of the same intervention in the human life cycle that accentuates the rite of passage from an androgynous childhood to a differentially sexed adulthood. In the next section, I explore the circumcision rites of girls, interpreting the narratives and statistics associated with different groups.

Female Circumcision: Narratives and Statistics

In Tanzania, many of the female circumcision studies relate to health (Klouman et al. 2005; Majinge and Ngallaba 2011), and very few focus on the socio-cultural dimensions of the practice (Africanus 2012; Bingi 2014). Girls and women are part of FGM or FGC in different ways in different parts of Tanzania. Female circumcision involves either the partial or complete removal of the clitoris (clitoridectomy) or removal of the whole clitoris and cutting of the labia minora (excision). An extreme type also exists that involves the removal of the entire external genitalia and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva, leaving only a small vaginal opening (infibulation). FGM or FGC also includes all other harmful procedures on the female genitalia for non-medical reasons (Rahman and Toubia 2000; World Health Organization 2008). In Tanzanian women who have undergone circumcision, 84 per cent have experienced clitoridectomy and 7 per cent infibulation (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children [MoHCDGEC] 2016, 16).

Kuria continue to practise clitoridectomy despite opposition because of premised on human rights infringements and numerous health problems (Prazak 2007, 2016; Tearfund 2013; UNICEF 2013). Previously, excision was a common practice, but by 2008, all of the respondents in this study reported that it had stopped. The discontinuation of the practice was later evident in a baseline study completed by the Christian Council of Tanzania, which revealed that only clitoridectomy was in practice (Waritay and Wilson 2012).

This article uses the term "female circumcision" despite the opposition to this term by anti-FGM/FGC activists who seek to end the practice. The term "circumcision" emphasises both the meaning of the surgery and the kuria cultural context, where it is equated with male circumcision (UNICEF 2013). Kuria girls' circumcision ceremony is a group act that runs parallel to male circumcision; they go locally by the same word, *esaaro* ("circumcision"). Female circumcision entails a partial cutting of the clitoris using a razor. A female traditional surgeon carries out the incision. Moreover, both processes are pathways to full personhood under Kuria tradition. By contrast, the alternative terms – FGM and FGC[1] – carry highly negative connotations and are incongruent with the positive associations that often accompany female circumcision in Kuria culture. The heightened national and international campaign against the practice stems from the negative health effects on girls and the assumption that the practice reinforces a repressively patriarchal culture.

To understand why this practice persists and remains rigid despite calls to ban it, one has to look at the positive dimensions of FGM or FGC as a cultural practice among Kuria. Indeed, both Kuria men and women guard it jealously against official sanctions. Nevertheless, despite its positive aspects, this article recognises that the procedures involved in male and female circumcision, and the social statuses of women and men who

pass through circumcision, are different. Female circumcision involves physical damage for the enhancement of social status within Kuria society. The fact that the local peer group is more important to Kuria women than external viewpoints makes circumcision an even stronger sign of loyalty and belonging to Kuria society.

Female Circumcision

Circumcision for Kuria girls persists as a central ritual of social maturity and retains its positive connotation within that society despite outside pressures. This is 8 December 2008, in Nyarero in Tarime District, Tanzania. Standing on the front veranda of a house facing a winding dusty road leading to Nyamwaga market, with two other secondary school teachers (a female and a male) we watch over a crowd of 60 or so children, youth, middle-aged men and women dancing *iritungu* (a Kuria local dance accompanied by an eight-stringed lyre). As they dance, more people join the crowd. In the midst of the crowd are two girls, with umbrellas and hats shielding them against the sun. They are wearing colourful *kanga* (a woman's printed cotton wrap) toppings. They have sandals on their feet. Their faces have lines of white chalk. As they progress toward their father's homestead, people pin money onto their hats and dresses, whereas others wrap them with new *kanga* and *vitenge* (*vitenge* are women's print cotton wraps and clothes; they are heavier and more expensive than *kanga*). The girls have just emerged from the place of their circumcision. During December, many groups of girls and boys undergo circumcision in the neighbourhood. Their parents then celebrate in their homesteads with pomp and ceremony. These circumcision events were still common for both boys and girls during my visits in 2012 and 2014.

Several narratives that I gathered for this study indicate that female circumcision remains a persistent feature amidst socio-cultural changes taking place in Kuria society. First, external criticisms and law (Tearfund 2013; UNICEF 2013; URT 1998[2]) against female circumcision have attracted mixed reactions from different people on whether one should go through circumcision or not. Second, the ongoing social adjustments to modern education in Tanzania have generated debates among girls at school, forcing some of them to pretend to be intact or to postpone the age of circumcision. Third, community members subject resistant females to social exclusion and persuasion in order to ensure they culturally toe the line. Generally, there is a strong ideological base that enforces the importance of becoming a person in the eyes of the community, which helps to sustain the practice of female circumcision. Moreover, there are mitigating circumstances that make it necessary for many girls. This includes the poverty of villagers and the need to share resources under the common bond of social and cultural identity; and the collective need to avoid the ridicule and social stigma that haunt resistant girls, who implicitly also bring shame upon their families.

During an interview on circumcision, Boke, a 16-year-old female secondary school student, supported the practice. In this regard, she said:

> How can one avoid circumcision? I have gone through the ritual because not doing so makes me an incomplete woman. Nowadays, it is okay to go through the process as girls do it after completion of Standard 7 [after the completion of the seven-year primary school education cycle]. That gives us an opportunity to continue with our education …

On the other hand, Boke's classmate, Nyanguni, who is 17, offered a different opinion altogether when she said: "Circumcision is not good. In the church they tell us not to accept it." Boke chimed in, mockingly. "Are you pretending you have not undergone circumcision? Ah, ah, ah, Nyanguni, I know you have done it! Or you just want to impress the teacher!" [*pointing at the author*].

Boke's and Nyanguni's statements and counter-statements present the dilemma that young Kuria girls face with regard to circumcision. For Boke, the circumcision is a prerequisite for attaining personhood. As such, she stressed the valued outcome of becoming a complete woman with rights to marry and to have children. Nyanguni, on the other hand, dismissed circumcision on the basis of Christian teachings, though she had nevertheless gone through the ritual to avoid social stigma. Since she is educated and holds a religious affiliation, Nyanguni pretended to be progressive in the eyes of a stranger. In support of Nyanguni, Lidia, a 17-year-old secondary school student, said:

> When we encounter strangers who come to our school, we tell them that we have not undergone circumcision because that is what they want to hear. Educated girls like us should not go through circumcision. That is what some of us want. But the reality is different. We go back home after school. How do you expect us to persevere with all these insults and ostracism?

Primary school completion in Tanzania has become part and parcel of coming of age for children, so it is organised in parallel to other coming-of-age rituals such as circumcision. It is difficult for girls to refuse the

circumcision ritual, especially after they complete their primary education, because this is the stage when tradition demands that each girl go through this coming-of-age ritual. In cases where girls or/and heads of the household do not want circumcision, their relatives, friends and neighbours, who are agents of coercion, make it difficult for them to resist. These agents, particularly close relatives, persuade some of the girls secretly and even promise to lavish them with cash and gifts to ensure they undergo circumcision. After circumcision, relatives and friends do in fact shower the girls with gifts and money. Such niceties and promises manipulate some girls into accepting circumcision.

Although Tanzania has a law prohibiting girls' circumcision under the Sexual Offences Special Provisions Act of 1998, effective enforcement is another issue. Indeed, enforcement remains difficult[3] and rather inept. As a result, mass circumcision ceremonies take place in Tarime District continuously (Aman and Nyakeke 2013; Batha 2013; Nyakeke 2014). Kuria society tends to overlook this law to safeguard their initiation practices, which seem outdated and inadequate to outside observers. Nonetheless, the ongoing crackdowns have had an effect. With participants of circumcision facing conviction and imprisonment,[4] rates of girls' circumcision dropped slightly from 18 per cent in 1996 to 15 per cent in 2004–05 across Tanzania (URT 2005). And yet the Kuria community is generally reluctant to ban female circumcision completely. The resistance to eliminating it comes from parents, ritual elders, circumcisers, community leaders, and even the police in the area, who either benefit financially (receiving money or payment in kind), are part of the tradition, or are sympathetic to the strong support the practice enjoys among the local populace. Such an environment of local support undermines law enforcement and campaigns against the practice. Although in 2010, the prevalence of girls' circumcision remained at 15 per cent nationwide (URT 2010), in Mara Region it rose from 38 to 40 per cent (URT 2005, 2010). This indicates that the movement against the practice has had the effect of entrenching it even more in Kuria society.

Using different methodology from that of Demographic Health Statistics of Tanzania, the Christian Council of Tanzania carried out a baseline study in Tarime District that established that only 25 per cent of the girls avoided circumcision (Waritay and Wilson 2012, 9). As a matter of fact, Waritay and Wilson's (2012, 8–9) study reports that the practice varies among Kuria communities, ranging from 68 to 100 per cent.

Helena was 15 years old when she underwent circumcision. She had just completed her primary education and was waiting to begin her secondary education. Her parents stood in the way of their daughter's circumcision, a stand they uphold because they are Seventh-day Adventists. However, Helena went against their wish in order to fulfill her womanly dream, as she narrated below:

> My mother and father had decided that I was not going to undergo circumcision. They told me that I should not accept such a practice and promised to pay for my secondary education. One morning, I went to the well to fetch water along with my friends. My friends told me of their circumcision plans and invited me to join their group so that we could undergo circumcision in the same group. I told them that my parents had advised me against circumcision. They laughed at me, saying, nobody was going to marry an *irikunene* [uncircumcised girl]. That day, I returned home unhappy. In the subsequent days, my friends kept on persuading me to accept circumcision. When my uncle learned about my parents' decision, he came over to see me and promised to give me a new dress and slaughter a goat. I eventually agreed, and the next morning I escaped and joined my friends. After circumcision, I joined my best friend's party. Before returning home, my uncle brought a goat to my parents and informed them of what had happened. On my way back home, my uncle and his friends presented me with gifts. I got a total of TShs. 153,500 [about $85 USD].

Similarly, Gati, a 14-year-old girl, went through an experience typical of many Kuria girls. She stated:

> I went through circumcision this December because it is the right thing for me to do. It is the only way my relatives here at home and my in-laws can regard me as an adult and a respectable person. One of my sisters-in-law has not undergone circumcision. She has now married for four years but she cannot serve guests when we have parties. My parents do not even allow her to open the cattle-byre or even pass through our main gate. When she is in need of vegetables, she cannot pick these from my parents' or anybody's garden, until someone picks them for her. I cannot lead such a life [of exclusion and ostracism] where people will not respect and consider me as a grown-up woman.

This social dilemma demonstrates how difficult it is to end female circumcision among Kuria, the efforts by government officials, activists and local people themselves to end the practice notwithstanding. Silverman (2004, 434) reminds us of the existence of different contextual debates in which critics discuss the rites, as well as the rights and wrongs, of circumcision.

On the one hand, Helena's parents' position represents the changing attitudes among some Kuria members. Her mother, Juliana, who is 50, told me: "My daughter really let me down. Despite advising her not to go for circumcision, her friends and my brother convinced her. Well, when she explained to me what had happened, I was very angry, but I could only reprimand her. This does not change what has happened."

On the other hand, Helena's uncle and her friends' reactions, which eventually drove her into embracing female circumcision against her parents' wishes, indicate the kind of social pressure female youth are under. Prazak (2007, 36) projects a similar quandary among the Kuria of Kenya. Like with most of the other girls, money and gifts were the enticements that led Helena to go through circumcision. By succumbing to the pressure, she gained access to money from her uncle's friends and received a goat from her uncle as a reward, although these gifts were against her parents' protests. The strength of peer pressure among age mates undercuts normal expectations of how patriarchal norms would be enforced. For the Kuria of Tanzania, circumcision is an act of independence marking not only a social adulthood, but even a psychological one, following the normal trend that with adolescence the peer group starts to displace parents as the main source of influence and authority.

The money the girls get is a little more than the monthly income (about $76 USD) that a villager in Tanzania usually earns. Considering the generally poor economic condition of many of the villagers, girls find the money that comes their way upon going through circumcision irresistible. Because of high peer pressure in some Kuria communities, some girls even resort to cutting themselves using a razor blade (Waritay and Wilson 2012, 18), a perilous task. Thus, Helena's parents, like those of other Kuria girls, remain powerless, as the extended family and community constitute a stronger tide of support. They represent a collective coercive force or agency (Gillespie 2001).

Conversely, Gati exemplifies Fortes's concept of "person" by exercising, in a way that is suitable to her and her social perception of personhood, the "qualities, the rights, the duties and capacities that are distinctive of it" (Fortes 1973, 311). By subscribing to the dominant practice of circumcision, Gati becomes an adult and a respectable person in the eyes of her community. She can perform family and community duties, such as exercising "matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation, and family responsibilities" (Mbiti 1969, 121–122), which her resistant sister-in-law cannot simply because by being uncircumcised tradition forbids it. In Gati's case, she can escape the everyday social stigma and exclusion faced by women in the community because female circumcision is a passport to liberation from these things. Under the prevailing social setup, whereby families share resources such as food with other community members and neighbours, Gati finds it compelling to adhere to rituals for her everyday survival.

As in the Tarime area, resistant Kuria girls in Nyambene District in Kenya are treated as outcasts who remain "children" and unrespectable, in addition to lacking esteem and confidence (Ikamari 2002, 49). For Kuria, as with the Nyaturu of Singida District and Gogo of Manyoni District in Tanzania, circumcision entails a transition from childhood into adulthood, which allows the initiates to avoid social stigma and gain access to sources of income. These social rewards reinforce the rhetoric that circumcision defends the community against promiscuity and prostitution and is thus a marker of adult morality (Waritay and Wilson 2012, 16–19).

Such stigma appears to be an issue for Kuria girls, as the following example illustrates. Lily, an 18-year-old secondary school female student, said, "Other girls call me names, one of them being *omosagane*. When they have social activities they do not invite me. Sometimes they whistle in contempt and make insulting sounds when I pass. It is very annoying!" *Omosagane* is a derogatory nickname for a young woman who has not gone through the circumcision ritual, whereas the unrespectable label of *irikunene* is for a woman who marries before circumcision or a girl who gets pregnant before circumcision. The word *omosagane* also constitutes an insult when people use it for a young woman whose circumcision period has elapsed without her undergoing the ritual. For a girl, there is still time to make amends; for a young woman, it is, in some cases, too late.

Generally, Kuria treat an uncircumcised woman as an *incomplete person* who is dangerous and a source of pollution; they fear she can bring misfortune to the people, livestock and crops. Thus, society prohibits such a woman to receive, entertain or serve her in-laws or to escort any bride during a wedding ceremony. Moreover, tradition bars her from opening the cattle-byre door, let alone passing through its main entrance. She can use only the back service doorway of the house to enter and leave the homestead. She cannot pick or harvest crops from another person's farm. It is difficult for girls to withstand these restrictions and hostility given the poor economic situation of many villagers and the fact that resources are shared.

There is, however, pervasive scepticism about the practice even among Kuria people. A conversation with a male pastor revealed that Kuria parents discourage their sons from marrying girls who have not gone through circumcision: "Many young men have come to me for advice, complaining that their parents prohibit them from marrying girls who have not undergone circumcision despite the church teaching against circumcision." Although exiling resistant girls from the clan's territory has stopped, some households still chase away such girls from their parents' homes.

For girls who dare to oppose circumcision, the actual means of avoiding the practice is garnered through institutional support. Some of these courageous girls run off to a safe house at Termination of Female Genital Mutilation (TFGM) Masanga Centre in Tarime District.[5] Others flee to a safe house in Mugumu area, Serengeti District.[6] In 2016, about 286 girls escaping circumcision found refuge at TFGM.[7] Those who run away to relatives in Tarime town continue to face social stigma and ridicule, as traditional values still dominate Kuria even in the urban setting. Since few girls have prospects of living their lives away from traditional Kuria society, shunning the circumcision ritual remains a major dilemma with far-reaching implications. This quandary extends to the schooling system, as Pesambili (2013) demonstrates in Tarime and Ondiek (2010) in Nyanza District, Kenya. Resistant girls experience isolation, stigmatisation and ridicule in school too. Such rigid and stringent social conditions make it increasingly hard for Kuria girls to forego circumcision even under the pressures of modernity that are enveloping their society. Nevertheless, there are girls who choose to run away, when, as is often the case, their family's wish to circumcise and quickly marry them off, means they would also have to leave school. Below, I explore circumcision as it affects adolescent boys.

Male Circumcision

Kuria circumcision of boys entails a complete or partial removal of the foreskin (prepuce) (Wambura et al. 2009, 2011). Kuria mainly perform male circumcision traditionally, with some cases benefitting from a clinical procedure in a modern hospital. Wambura and colleagues' (2011, 3) study in Tarime shows that traditional male circumcision accounts for 63.7 per cent of cases and clinical procedures for the remaining 36.3 per cent. Generally, the unhygienic methods under which male circumcision takes place in the traditional setting have attracted opposition from different stakeholders, particularly from the country's health providers. Boys who receive traditional circumcision face a somewhat higher risk of pain, slower wound healing, infection or other adverse events (bleeding, mutilation) (Egesah et al. 2014, 281). On the other hand, clinical circumcision has increasingly become popular as a medical strategy for preventing HIV infection in men (Osaki et al. 2015). It is healthier and safer for boys: hygienic, with a lower risk of tetanus, less pain and fast healing (Egesah et al. 2014, 279, 281).

In 2008, I witnessed a male circumciser using a single knife to circumcise a group of boys. However, in 2014 I visited some surrounding villages and learned that this practice is decreasing. Circumcising in the traditional setting now involves using a personal razor with the circumciser wearing gloves. The Tanzania government and non-state actors have been promoting male medical circumcision in the area and other parts of the country, particularly to control the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. This is proving to influence cultural practices, as more and more Tanzanians are resorting to circumcision in a modern health facility.[8]

From one village to another, I was able to spot boys strutting about proudly before and after circumcision. Kuria refer to this state as *aratara obosamba*, which is a display of male fierceness and bravery where young males roar and shake with aplomb. Before the ceremony, they wrap themselves in *kangas*, bed sheets or blankets and wear baseball hats. Some boys continue with the old tradition of donning a headdress made of ostrich or chicken feathers of the Maasai type. Boys put on sandals or shoes and carry warrior's paraphernalia such as arrows or sticks, long double-edged knives, or clubs in the accompaniment of a male paternal kinsman who serves as an overseer and witness to their circumcision.

After circumcision, a boy is no longer an *omorisia* (a young uninitiated boy), as he morphs into a warrior or *omomura.* The initiated young man starts to salute his fellow initiates as *muraa* (a salute directed to a fellow circumcised male person), hence marking the start of his relative economic independence, in which he looks forward to his first marriage. During this period, the young man can have intimate relations with a young woman who has undergone circumcision. In 2009, I witnessed the young warriors together with middle-aged men protecting their families and lineage against rival clans during warfare.[9]

Personhood involves sharing the same property limits as the group from which one is a member (Fortes 1973). Circumcision gives a young man the right to claim land and bride-wealth from his father for his first marriage. Usually, an adult man who has undergone circumcision initiates the betrothal and marriage on behalf of the boy, who takes on his duty as a husband when he is old enough, although the boy can also take the initiative.[10] If the boy or his parents do not want him to

undergo traditional circumcision, the parents can arrange for circumcision in the hospital before his first marriage.

Besides marking the rite of passage to adulthood, traditional circumcision is a way for males to display their individual and collective identity (Ruel 2000, 81). Traditional circumcision enables community solidarity and identity, and the opportunity to celebrate (Egesah et al. 2014). Boys who undergo circumcision in hospitals also participate in village development work with their respective circumcision cohort. However, there are restrictions they have to observe, including not partaking in the individual and community ritual activities of their age cohort. For example, they cannot sit together with their fellow age-mate members as invitees at a funeral or marriage ceremony, and cannot take part in social visits (*obosamba*) during the circumcision period. In fact, Kuria do not trust the "unrecognised" circumciser who circumcises boys separately at a health centre, and these youth risk exclusion from some of the core Kuria traditional rituals. The hygienic, and socially sterile context of the hospital undermines the broader meaning of circumcision as a social ritual with particular meaning. Indeed, their peers mock them by saying that they have "gone for a pregnancy test." Implicitly, they accuse boys of being somehow "feminised," perhaps because of having to undergo a "safe" and "hassle-free" medical procedure instead of undergoing, as part of the collective spirit, something that requires endurance and bravery. Kuria people treat men who fail to properly pass through the circumcision rites as non-persons, exemplifying how traditionally controlled persons operate in a given social context (Mauss 1985). In other words, Kuria culture mediates processes surrounding youth's position and status in society (Esho 2012). Yohana's case below provides an example of this.

Yohana was 15 years old, and he had just finished his primary education when the time for circumcision came. Since his family members are practising Christians, they agreed that Yohana and his brother should go for circumcision at a nearby health centre. One evening, a week before their circumcision, a friend convinced Yohana and his brother to go for a bath in the lake. They met four other friends and four men from their village who had gathered, waiting for their arrival. The group persuaded the two to join their friends for a group circumcision the following day. The four boys gave the two boys bed sheets to wrap around themselves. Initially, Yohana refused, but eventually he gave in after his friends had threatened to sever ties with him. After circumcision, he and his brother each received TShs. 100,000 (about $56 USD) as a reward. However, there was no party for the two boys as they had angered their parents. Yohana explained his ordeal:

> I was intending to refuse to go for circumcision in a traditional way. But how could I do this? My friends scared me when they told me that they would swear to break our relationship if I refused. Unfortunately, my brother gave in very early because of the gifts they promised to give him. He told me that he would never allow me to join him with his friends during their visitations after circumcision. He even went as far as promising not to allow his friends to communicate with me. I panicked and succumbed to their demands. That night we did not sleep. The next day, we left home very early in the morning and joined our friends. Together we went to our local circumcision place. We disappointed our parents but there was nothing they could do; we had already done it. Later on, I learned that my brother had known about the scheme. My relatives had persuaded him the day before I joined in, and had given him money to persuade me to do the same.

Yohana's and other boys' fear of refraining from undergoing traditional circumcision "may be better understood as social constructions that symbolically refer to 'persons,' whose identities, statuses, and motivations are shaped by their linkages to others in a collectivity" (Gillespie 2001, 85). Yohana adjusted his values in response to the challenging circumstances (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Unlike the Kuria of Kenya, who, by the end of the 1990s, had stopped ostracising boys who opted for clinical circumcision (Prazak 2007, 24), Kuria boys in Tanzania continue to face exclusion from fellow groups of initiates as they wander around the community during the period of seclusion. Furthermore, this exclusion does not end after the circumcision rite seclusion period but haunts them throughout their lives in their association with fellow circumcision-set members, a point I will return to later.

Through circumcision, a man's offspring unambiguously fits in and gains acceptance as a member of a lineage and community (Prazak 2007, 26). In this regard, among Kuria, calling one an *omorisia* – a man who has not undergone circumcision – when someone is past the circumcision age amounts to a very serious insult,[11] hence the continuity of traditional male circumcision. In what follows, I compare male and female circumcision rites.

Comparison between Male and Female Rites

Although the processes of male and female circumcision differ, common features include physical and social separation, liminality and reintegration into society. As Esho et al. (2010) and Esho (2012) note, the process

impacts upon a man or a woman's individual identity as well as their social identity. The circumcision period starts at the beginning of November with a meeting of the ritual elders and circumcisers.

Afterwards, the male and female initiates embark on a period of seclusion as they await the circumcision date, which normally falls in December, a period when children are on school holidays waiting to begin secondary school. This vacation period allows time for healing and depending on one's clan, also a time when ritual elders may impose a shorter period of prohibition upon other members of the community. Among the Nyabasi clan, for example, people avoid carrying anything on their heads, working on their farms, or engaging in any nocturnal activity for a night.

After circumcision, celebrations take place in the boys' and girls' homesteads. Families flaunt their wealth and ability to host festivities, with parties displaying all of the gifts they have showered on the initiates. Such celebrations take place in the open (Aman and Nyakeke 2013; Nyakeke 2014).

The circumcision age has changed to between 13 and 15 years for both boys and girls, from 8 to 10 and 12 to 13 years, respectively, which Tobisson (1986, 164–165) previously reported. Like Tearfund's 2012 study, this study has ascertained that change has come in the wake of the government's prohibition of withdrawing children from primary education during the circumcision period, along with the law banning the practice. Unlike the Kuria of Kenya, most parents on the Tanzanian side of the border prefer to circumcise their children between primary and secondary school; in Kenya, circumcision happens every year before the schools reopen, after the December break (Prazak 2007, 27). In Tanzania, the integration of traditional and governmental statuses is noteworthy. Primary school marks a coming of age in which people adopt other markers of adolescence/puberty.

Kuria treat male and female initiates that die during the time of seclusion as incomplete persons. According to Kuria belief, these people tend to become ghosts since they have not progressed to ancestor-hood. Caught in this liminal stage, dead circumcised boys and girls are cast-offs because their condition remains ambiguous and paradoxical as "they are neither one thing nor the other" (Turner 1967, 97) in the society's cosmology.

For both boys and girls, the use of the same knife for all procedures is changing. Previously, the circumciser would use the same knife on all the girls and boys of a single cohort; however, now each girl and boy has to carry her or his own razor blade for the circumcision ritual. The practice of using the same traditional knife had once created a bond between the initiates, no matter how temporary (for girls – when girls marry they take their husband's age-set, a point I discuss in the next section on circumcision-sets). The abandonment of this practice has made the shared ritual of circumcision all the more important, demonstrating the social parallelism of male and female circumcision.

Generally under Kuria custom, young men who go through circumcision have relatively more freedom than their women counterparts, whose movement does not entirely escape the watchful gaze of their parents. For instance, girls still have to request permission from their parents to attend traditional parties and ceremonies. Parents fear that they may become pregnant. As potential wives and bride-wealth bringers to the family, the new initiates look forward to engaging and marrying suitable suitors soon after circumcision.

These days, relatives and other members of Kuria society give more gifts to girls than boys to entice them into accepting circumcision amidst increasing pressure to desist from the practice. They lavish such gifts on girls in anticipation of the household getting bride-wealth upon their betrothal and eventual marriage. Not undergoing the ritual significantly lowers bride-wealth. As they prepare for their first marriage, males who have undergone circumcision require the support of parents, who provide heads of cattle as bride-wealth to the young woman's family. The property for bride-wealth varies from one marriage to another and includes cattle, to a lesser extent money, and other presents transferred to agnates, non-agnates and the bride. Cattle continue to symbolise and express bride-wealth, and while cash can do this as well, most parents prefer cattle as the main source of bride-wealth. The major reason for this is the customary belief that livestock is wealth and a means for achieving the proper status in a person's life cycle through its sacrifice. In addition, cattle bring more wealth by allowing men to marry women whose reproductive and productive capacities are a necessity in an agro-pastoralist society. Therefore, a Kuria man marrying his first wife will most likely depend on his parents' support to get either the cattle from his sister's marriage, the cattle that the father bought after selling maize from his granary, or the cattle that the father inherited.

Chacha, who is 40 years old and lives in Tarime, stated, "We give girls more money to convince them to accept circumcision. Women who have gone through the ritual attract more bride-wealth than uncircumcised ones." Supporting Chacha's statement, a participant in a male focus group discussion remarked:

> When a girl marries she brings cattle, but boys need cattle to marry. So we coerce girls with more gifts than boys. But we, too, persuade boys who shy away from traditional male circumcision. You give them some money and promise to support their marriage. Parents control cattle and every son needs support during first marriage. A father may deny his son cattle for marriage if he is disrespectful.

Kuria consider boys and girls who have undergone circumcision to have a right to enter a marital relationship. After marriage, a man moves away from his parents to establish his own homestead. As husband and wife, a couple expects to produce progeny. With the birth of children and eventually the attainment of grandchildren, the couple successfully progresses to the next phase of their lives, that of elderhood. Elders enjoy certain privileges such as sharing certain meat, exemption from performing certain communal work, entitlement to an elderhood ceremony in recognition of their status, and the occupation of certain positions in a wedding party, funeral or public meeting. Importantly, only men can be ritual elders, in the past as well as the present. Ritual elders occupy a central role in the coordination and preparation of circumcision jointly through a secret council of elders. Finally, elders become ancestors, ascending to ancestor-hood as "full persons" upon their demise. In this regard, Carsten (1995, 227) asserts: "The person is thus both individual and multiple." To become a person, one progresses gradually through several phases – puberty, circumcision, marriage and parenthood – before eventually reaching the status of an adult and progressing onwards toward ancestor-hood. As one becomes a mature person, an *omonto mokoro*, one becomes a potential ancestor, an *omokoro*. Ruel (1965), however, cautions against projecting the idea of "life after death" onto Kuria ancestor-hood: "Ancestorhood is not an extension after death of a social maturity which one acquires during one's life, for a person (man) may die before reaching full social maturity as a ritual elder and this will not debar him from becoming an ancestor" (1965, 302–303).

Kuria understand ancestors as dead persons who live through their existing descendants who have assumed their names. Among Kuria, not all individuals are full persons, as one has to pass through the entire life cycle of rituals and beyond to attain that status. The ritual identification of accumulation of responsibilities and status marks the progress of men and women toward full personhood, suggesting a processual view of personhood. A Kuria boy or girl is immature and unable to participate fully in adult relationships until after circumcision, the traditional coming-of-age rite (Mhando 2014, 69, 80). Moreover, passing through circumcision enables Kuria men and women to fit into specific circumcision-sets. Whereas men form a lifetime set, upon marriage women move to join those of their husbands. However, only men can head a circumcision-set, which entitles them to village and political leadership.

Below, I describe a circumcision-set, and moreover, I elaborate on the complications of institutionalising circumcision-sets within the local government structure, which leads to ineffective efforts against female circumcision and difficulties in promoting safe male circumcision.

Circumcision-Sets: Male and Female Access to Various Social Circles

A circumcision-set consists of three groups who underwent circumcision over a span of two to three years. Circumcision marks young men's entry into the lowest-ranked group of the existing age-set. As new members of a junior circumcision-set, young men have to abide by specific rules of conduct toward their own set and those above them. Each circumcision-set derives its name from a local event. People belonging to the same set refer to each other as *omosaiga* (plural *abasaiga*). Men belonging to one of the groups within the set regard each other as blood brothers and so maintain some definite obligations and privileges among themselves. Similar to the Kikuyu of Kenya, as Murray (1974, 19) explains, Kuria males become social equals through circumcision, which implies the acceptance of each other as potential sexual partners to each other's wives through a leviratic union in the event of a member's death (Kirwen 1979, 9). Magige, who lives in Tarime, told me about the privileges and isolation of passing through traditional or non-traditional circumcision, respectively:

> I have a sexual relationship with the wife of my *omosaiga* who died two years ago. I can visit her house anytime and no one questions me. They know I am her lover. [*Giggling*] Our group usually isolates Yoabu [Magige's age-mate] because he went to the dispensary for circumcision. During a funeral he cannot sit with us. He cannot come to us for a loan.

Kuria continue to hold on to the importance of boys' unification through circumcision, hence the persistence of the traditional circumcision rites in these communities. They believe that young men ought to retain membership in their set and build a lasting identity, whereas circumcision has different implications for women.

After the circumcision ceremony, the entire girls' set goes by the same name as the boys'. But upon marriage, a girl becomes a member of her husband's set. Presumably, there is no age system for women because they can shift from one lineage to another through marriage.

In 1967, the policy of *ujamaa* (African socialism) Tanzania adopted introduced "villages" as part of the villagisation policy aimed at transforming communal agriculture to boost the production of cash crops, which beginning in 1973, led to mass villagisation in Tarime District (Bryceson 2000). Eventually, the circumcision-set became part of the village government structure. Under this setup, the leaders convene separate circumcision-set meetings each week. All the sets then congregate as a large group once a month for a general meeting under a chairman from among the members with leadership positions in their respective circumcision-sets. The sets mobilise community action and have a right to express their opinions on the village development plans. Circumcision-sets decide on all village plans, including education and health; elect committee members and village leaders during monthly general meetings of the circumcision-sets, and report any progress they have made during these gatherings. Those who lead circumcision-set groups can also become hamlet and village leaders. Members of local government committees are chosen during circumcision-set meetings.

Such lofty decision-making powers in the hands of the sets during the monthly general meetings, including the implementation of some government policies and regulations, create an environment that is highly unsupportive of the anti-circumcision regulation, making it difficult to apply. In fact, the institutionalisation of the circumcision-set system in the village government structure has worked in favour of the women and men doing the circumcisions. Circumcisers receive payment for each individual circumcision they perform, ritual elders get special portions of meat from cattle slaughter, parents connect with relatives, and the community gets together in celebration. All who may benefit financially in some way from the practice guard it jealously as a means of protecting their access to wealth.

Conclusion

It is important to treat male and female circumcision in Kuria society as parallel practices (Merli 2010) and as an integral part of coming-of-age maturation and development. Men and women have different tasks and statuses as they progress toward full personhood under the full scrutiny of the Kuria social gaze. Attaining full personhood implies passing gradually through several phases: puberty, circumcision, marriage, parenthood, adulthood, and upon death ancestor-hood.

This article suggests that circumcision will continue for a long time in Kuria society, despite enormous pressure from international and local organisations. This pressure primarily militates against female circumcision, the infamous FGM or FGC, which has negative connotations and attracts global condemnation. Despite this opprobium, female circumcision among Kuria maintains its positive status. Kuria society imposes traditional social exclusion measures and sanctions on individuals to safeguard the practice. Furthermore, circumcision for males and females has socio-economic and political ramifications, including gaining a political position and access to resources.

Due to the existing contradictory perceptions about circumcision by different actors, youths may choose to opt for or against circumcision. However, pressure from peers, kith and kin, or non-related members of Kuria community in support of the ritual tends to drive the youth toward traditional circumcision, regardless of whether they oppose the practice as individuals or their parents forbid it on religious, educational, social or other grounds. It is important to acknowledge that anti-circumcision campaigns have had some effect on the ambiguous outlook toward eradicating circumcision among parents, boys and girls. Most women are supportive of the practice, with the exception of Christian women and some girls who have escaped from the community. Generally, Christianity is a weak but still active agent of change, as are the secular NGOs and the government, who have had a significant impact in adjusting the riskiest aspects of the rituals.

On the whole, many of the girls and boys growing up in Tarime and Rorya Districts know that their futures are firmly rooted in these areas. With ritual elders, circumcisers, community leaders, parents and relatives benefitting financially or in terms of status, only girls who are courageous and boys who stand firm manage to escape from traditional female and male circumcision. In the case of uncircumcised girls in Northeastern Tanzania, those daring to escape from the community tend to either connect and settle with Kuria ethnic groups or take refuge in safe houses. Girls who settle with Kuria ethnic groups continue encountering negative perceptions that reinforce Kuria values. Nevertheless, resistance is happening for girls who escape in an effort to avoid circumcision, early marriage and having to leave school. For boys, clinics exist that allow them to undergo safe medical circumcision. The ongoing

response toward the incidence of traditional circumcision for males and FGM/FGC for women should be cognizant of these developments when attempting, at the very least, to bring about change or an end to these deeply entrenched practices.

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Notes

1 Female genital mutilation is defined as “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” See Fact Sheet 241, World Health Organization (February 2014), http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/. WHO and many other organisations use the term “FGM” to underline the gravity of the damage on those cut. Several international organisations use the term “female genital cutting” because they consider the term “cutting” to be more neutral than “mutilation.” See Yoder et al. 2013.

2 See section 169A(1) of the Penal Code, Cap. 16 of the R.E. 2002 of the Laws of Tanzania.

3 A. Mayunga, “Police Attacked over FGM Crackdown in Serengeti,” 28 December 2016, *The Citizen* (Tanzania), http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/News/Police-attacked-over-FGM-crackdown-in-Serengeti/1840340-3499928-110udl2/index.html.

4 M. Jacob, “Tanzania: Eight Women Arrested over Female Genital Mutilation Practice,” 21 December 2016, *AllAfrica*, http://allafrica.com/stories/201612210060.html.

5 M. Jacob, “Tanzania: Graca Commends Girls for Refusing FGM,” 26 January 2015, *AllAfrica*, http://allafrica.com/stories/201501262291.html.

6 R. Sanghani, “Meet the Amazing Woman Running a Safe House for Girls Fleeing FGM,” 2 April 2015, *The Telegraph* (United Kingdom), http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-health/11509843/FGM-Meet-the-amazing-woman-saving-girls-in-Tanzania.html. See also A.M. Tremonti, “Tanzanian Safe House Helps Courageous Girls Escape Female Genital Mutilation,” 11 April 11 2017, *The Current*, http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/tanzanian-safe-house-helps-courageous-girls-escape-female-genital-mutilation-1.4066083.

7 J. Mugini, “Masanga Camp Receives 286 Girls Escaping FGM,” 16 December 2016, *Daily News* (Tanzania), http://www.dailynews.co.tz/index.php/home-news/47289-masanga-camp-receives-286-girls-escaping-fgm.

8 M. Jacob, “Tanzania: TaSaCi Replaces Traditional Circumcisers,” 9 December 2016, *AllAfrica*, http://allafrica.com/stories/201612090321.html.

9 In 2008 and 2009, when I lived among Kuria, recurrent warfare took place between Buirege, Nyabasi, Nyamongo, Bunchari, and Barenchoka, fuelled by frequent cattle-rustling.

10 For a description of the union between a young boy and a girl or woman, see Mhando (2014).

11 See A. Makongo, “Man Killed for Publicly Calling Another ‘Uncut,’ ” *The Citizen.*

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