

Circumcision Rites Among the Babukusu People of Kenya:

A Local Christian Response to a Cultural Tradition

J. Nathan Corbitt with Edwin Wanyama

Pictures and Text ©1988 by J. Nathan Corbitt. Use with permission only.



Fig. 1

Two boys with sickness, 'bafulu', and namakhala (uncircumcised boy).

Introduction

This article summary is about the adaptation of circumcision rites by a small community of Christians in the struggle to be Christian and also be Bukusu. The Babukusu ethnic group live in Western Kenya near the Ugandan border. In 1988, a diploma class at the Baptist College in Limuru, Kenya traveled to the area to observe these circumcision rites as part of a field learning experience. The monograph was written with the help of student Edwin Wanyama who was our host and a member of the community. The summary is in four sections: The oral tradition, a description of the cultural event, the local Christian response, and questions for consideration.

Circumcision is not practiced by all African communities. Nor is female circumcision practiced by all communities that practice male circumcision. However, it is virtually a sacred rite to the communities that practice it; because, it is vital to the perpetuation of

myth and culture and within the group. One should read the text and view the pictures with these things in mind.

For centuries circumcision has been practiced by African peoples. This practice remained virtually unchanged until the early part of the twentieth century when missionaries, colonial administrators, and western development brought pressure on African people groups to eliminate its practice in their traditional manner—especially female circumcision. In males, like the ancient biblical practice among Israelites, circumcision involves the removal of the foreskin. In females, a number of practices are performed with degrees of severity, but all involve the removal of the clitoris. Female circumcision is discussed in depth from a cultural perspective in the Mali film *Zinzan* to be watched later in the semester.

During the 1930's conflict arose in Kenya between the Kikuyu and the early church missionaries over the circumcision of females. This conflict was an irritant that fueled the fires of independence from British colonial rule. The first President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, wrote an influential anthropology thesis in defense of the practice called, Facing Mount Kenya. Today, the western missionary has little, if any, direct influence related to many cultural matters. Local Christians have accepted responsibility to contextualize the Gospel within their own time, place and culture. There is growing international pressure to stop female circumcision which is considered more severe and in violation of the human rites of African women. However, many cultural changes may be more impacted by growing educational, economic and political pressures.

Oral Tradition

Circumcision is a special time in the life of a Bukusu boy. It is the time when he is initiated and brought into the community as a man. The actual cutting only lasts a few seconds under the knife of the circumciser. Yet, this rite of passage lasts at least six months during which a boy goes through a number of other ceremonies, and is given instruction about tribal matters, before he is accepted as a man in his community. Traditionally, circumcision takes place during the month of August. Ceremonies are arranged in even-numbered consecutive years, such as 1984, 1886, 1988. While circumcision is an age-set rite, the boys undergo the rites individually within their family and clan.

The Story of Mango, as told by Saul Wanyama and translated by Tom Makhapila, is the oral history told by a Sango elder during circumcision training. This story tells of the historical relationship to a neighboring tribe, the Kalenjin, and the emphasizes the central value of bravery.

"I am going to speak about circumcision. There was a big enormous snake. It was a very poisonous snake. It lived near the village of Mwiala wa Mango. This snake was so fierce that it could even fly. If you were near the snake when it flew over, you had to take a flat rock and place it on your head to protect yourself. That snake liked to kill people by biting them on the head.

That snake killed people by biting them on the head. So, if it came by, you had the flat rock that kept the snake from biting your head. The snake bit the rock instead of your head. Now many, many people lived in this area. Both the Bukusu and Kalinjin people lived at this place. I have heard old people say who came from this place. This snake killed many Kalinjin cattle and people.

Now Mango, the Bukusu, was from the clan of Omukhurarua. At that time the Bukusu and Kalenjin would go to the river to dig mud. This mud was used as a salt substitute for the cattle. At this place there was no salt. You see, when you carry the mud for the cattle to eat, you don't dress, but you go naked.

Now Mango noticed that the Kalenjin were circumcised, and he wasn't. When he learned why their body was different from his he asked, "Would you cut me to look like you?" They told him, "If you want to look like this, go and kill that bad snake that bothers us. Then we will cut you to look like us."

The snake slept in a big cave. Mango left at night. He climbed a tree in order to watch the coming and going of the snake. He stayed there a long time. Now in the morning, when the sun began to get hot, he saw the head of the snake. He watched as the snake left the cave and returned to the cave. Mango watched the snake for two whole days...

The third day the snake left the cave. Mango climbed down the tree and followed the snake. He carried with him a panga (machete) which had really been sharpened. He cut a huge log and placed it in front of the cave. He then hid it behind the wall of the cave where the snake could not see him.

When the snake came crawling back to his home, he noticed the log and said, "Hey, what is this change at my house?" The snake moved backwards. Mango became nervous to the point of shaking. But he composed himself and became brave again. The snake began to move across the log. When his head was laying on top of the log, Mango took his panga and forcefully cut the head from the snake. The head looked at him from inside the cave.

The body jumped and jumped. But Mango waited until the body was still. Then Mango thought that the head must be dead. When he was sure, he entered the cave and touched the head with his panga. It was still, so he went outside and tested the body. There was nothing. (It was still.)

He went to the Kalenjin people. "Circumcise me, the big snake is dead!"

"Hey man, you are cheating us," they said. "You are not capable of killing that big thing." So they took the stones and put them over their heads as usual. Mango led them to the cave and said, "Look!" He took the body of the snake. It had no head. He was a brave man. He went inside and threw out the head.

"This man really killed the snake," they said. They began to celebrate and carry Mango on their shoulders. Some said, "This snake had killed my children and my cattle." Then they would carry Mango on their shoulders. "You have done wonderful," they rejoiced.

Then these people went and circumcised Mango. And that is when circumcision among the Bukusu was started."

The Rite of Passage



Fig. 2
Chinyimba carried by the candidates.

Khuminya (Preparations)

By tradition, a boy is given the opportunity by his father to choose the year of his circumcision. He may be encouraged by older circumcised boys. Generally, the age is at the time of puberty, between 12 and 16 years of age. When the boy feels he is ready, he takes a chicken from his father's house and goes to the blacksmith. This may be as much as four months before the August ceremony. The blacksmith, in return for the chicken, makes a set of cow bells with wrist wrings, called *chinyimba*.

The candidate, along with others of his age-set, learns how to decorate the chinyimba, dance and prepare his private organ for the ceremony. Daily, the candidates march along the paths of the village to practice for the special day. The rhythmic clanking of chinyimba are heard everywhere as they are encouraged by community. This constant marching, running, and dancing helps to discipline the initiates for the climactic ceremony months away.

Kuchukhila

Several ceremonies prepare the candidate for his circumcision. Kuchukhila, the first of these, takes place at his home. The day before the ceremony, the boy helps his mother to brew traditional beer. He goes to the river and collects water for the beer making. Instead of using a pallet to soften the load, he carries the water pot directly on his head. This is another way of training the candidate. It signifies the hardships he must endure as he

joins the entire community. Yet, accepts this work as a symbol of his willingness to serve the community.

The boy pours the water on the millet that his mother has fried for the brewing. The mother makes a special paste from the yeast used in brewing the beer and dabs it on the boy. When she is finished, he resembles a spotted guinea fowl. He then leaves his mother's house and goes out to invite his friends and relatives.

Wakhochawe



Fig. 3 In the picture you can see 'endwidwi' and the manner of playing. Notice the stomach of the slain bull, the shrine next to the endwidwi player (left) and the candidates accompanying with chinyimba. You can also see the lisombo and the stomach contents on the chest of the boys.

From his mother's home the boy visits the home of his mother's brother (uncle). Once there, he is not given permission to leave until a bull has been slaughtered. The uncle dresses a bull and places part of the bull's stomach around the candidates shoulders and encourages him, as friends and family observe. Surrounded by friends and supporters, he does not speak, but focuses on his own discipline and preparation. From his mother's side of the clan he then proceeds to his father's homestead. About dusk, in a celebrative atmosphere as his friends sing songs of encouragement, this "parade" proceeds to the father's homestead.

Khukovola Engo

The group continues to dance and encourage the boy when they arrive in the homestead. The candidate and others who will be circumcised with him stand in the middle of the supporters. Once they are within the village area a young bull is brought near the father's house. The young bull must not be above the age of the candidate.

The legs of the young bull are bound. He is taken to the ground and his head stretched toward the west, the same direction the boy will face during the circumcision. The bull's throat is slit to allow the blood to flow freely. Blood is caught in a gourd calabash and then poured on a "shrine" dedicated to the family ancestors. Meat is also cut and placed on the shrine in honor of family ancestors. A special piece of meat is cut and placed at the shrine for heroic leaders who will protect the candidate while he is undergoing circumcision. The stomach is then pulled out and placed near the shrine.

Khukhwesaya



Fig. 4

The father placing stomach meat (lisombo) on the candidate's shoulders.

The father cuts a section of fat from the stomach of the bull and places it on the shoulders of the boy. The father then takes some contents from the stomach and flings them on the chest of the young boy. In a stern warning the father says, "Open your eyes like Bukusu, like Mango! This is your decision, your day!"

A special drum called *endwidwi* is then placed near the boys and stomach. Juice from the stomach is squeezed on the head of the drum until it is moist. This is a friction drum. Sound is produced by running the clasped hands down a stick (with one end placed on the head) causing the head of the drum to vibrate in a droning sound. An elder then sings a song of encouragement.

Following this ceremony, the boy is left outside with those who will stay with him throughout the night. He must not speak. He looks straight ahead, not distracted by anything. Those who dance around him throughout the night use abusive language and gestures in order to train him to resist the cutting. Occasionally, an older member such as an uncle will face the boy and shout words of encouragement into his face, "Be strong, be a Bukusu!" He is paraded around the village, from house to house where each household gives him further encouragement. During this time he is not allowed to drink water. This is to prevent him from urinating on the circumciser the next morning, thus bringing very bad luck.

The candidate is allowed to sleep from 2:00 to 5:00 AM at which time he arises and begins to play *chinyimba* in their unrelenting rhythm. The father's age mates, for fear of bringing back luck, run from the village and do not return until after the ceremony is completed.

Traditionally milk is poured into a four-legged stool and the boy's head is shaved. There is saying, "A wealthy man can bathe in milk." Wealth was, and still is in some areas, determined by the number of cattle in ownership. The saying symbolizes the hopes of wealth.. The growth of new hair will be a reminder of his transformation into manhood.

The Day of Circumcision

The River

The circumcised men of the village now surround the candidate. Singing a song, "The day has come for you to be a man,. Yes, you must be shaped," they march en masse to a local river. At the river bank, two men accompany him to the river's edge where he first relieves himself—to avoid embarrassment during the ceremony. He then enters the water and bathes.

Leaving the water he is led to a place of mudding. Special mud (clay) is smeared on his entire body, except for his private parts. A mound of mud is then placed on top of his head, and a small reed is stuck in the mound. Mud is also placed on the bridge of the nose to help him keep his eyes focused ahead. As the mound is being built on his head he is told, "I am building a house for you. We (the clan) are building it once and for all. You must take care of your house." This exhortation stresses the importance of his personal responsibility to his home and extended family. The mound, called *kwatutu*, also has symbolic significance. The single reed is a phallic representation of manhood, the single center pole of the village hut. The group now prepares to return to the homestead.



Fig. 5

The father leads the boy into the homestead.
He will help the boy in taking his position within the circle.
He will then stand aside as the boy faces the circumciser alone.

The Homestead

In the homestead and while the son was at the river, the father has taken flour and draws

a circle on the ground in front of the main house. The circle marks the spot where the boy must stand, and also provides a sacred area where evil spirits cannot interfere.

As the group returns from the river, still singing, an aunt runs forward to tease the boy with the stick that stirs porridge. It is a reminder that he is leaving his mother and becoming a man.

The father greets the boy as he enters the village and leads him to the circle where the entire community has gathered to observe. The father will often wear a blanket across his shoulder tied with a larger knot. In times past, this would have been a leopard skin. The knot symbolizes a crown. A question often asked of a father is "How many times have you tied the knot?" meaning how many sons have you circumcised?

As the father nears the circle, an assistant circumciser places the boy in the circle and proceeds to inspect his private area to make sure it is clean. He then makes several preparations and steps aside for the master circumciser who then steps forward.



Fig. 6

Omukhebi and his assistants perform the first cut. Notice the bravery of the candidate and the concern of the father. The boy is firmly within the circle.

The Event

Now in front of the entire community, the boy is to show his courage. Standing erect and undaunted he awaits the moment. The master circumciser or *omukhebi* draws a knife that has been cleaned with ash and wrapped in a leather case. With two precise cuts of expert speed, he places the foreskin on the ground. As he steps away all eyes are on the young boy who has shown unusual bravery without flinching or yelling out. Elders now come forward to examine the cut. The father gives a signal to his mother and aunt who have been waiting inside of the main house that her son--the boy—now man, has proved his courage by asking, "Who is to ululate for this one that has triumphed?" The mother and run from the house in joyful celebration as the entire community breaks into song and dance.

A young girl or grandmother removes the foreskin and places it on a banana leave next to the new man who is now allowed to sit on the ground. Later, the father will hide in the forest at night. Well-wishers place gifts in front of the boy as they continue the celebration.

For the next weeks the boy will recuperate in seclusion where strict rules ensure a healthy recovery. After months of healing, the group of initiates prepare for a final coming out ceremony. A special bed, where he has been forced to recover for the first weeks, is burned. Elders give instructions on how to live in the community and be responsible Bukusu adults.

The Spirit of Circumcision

A final note is made in regards to the circumciser (omukhebi). Traditionally, the art of the circumciser is passed from generation to generation. However, before a circumciser can practice there is both a selection process and training procedure.

Before a person is recognized to have a gift of circumcision, he is by a spirit and confirmed by a master circumciser. During a ceremony, a man or woman will begin to shake and move toward the circumcision that is in progress. The possessed may even be held back from interfering. Immediately upon recognition of the actions, the oldest circumciser discerns the spirit of the person. He dabs the person's face with the fine clay used in the ceremony and taps the person on the head with his circumcision knife, thus confirming the gift of the person. In the years to come, he will undergo training by the master circumciser before performing his own.



Fig. 7

A Christian Omukhebi skillfully performs his craft as the community anxiously awaits the results for the candidate.

Analysis--Bukusu Christian Response

Circumcision is a tradition among the Bukusu people. As you have read, this ceremony is a time to test the will and sprit of the young boy. This test is witnesses by the entire community and his response follows him throughout his lifetime. However, this tradition

is in the process of change. Even during our visit to Sango the Kenya government had assigned additional doctors to the local hospital in Bungoma for the many parents who were bringing their sons for a clinical circumcision.

It might be convenient for us to say that Christianity was forcing these changes, and in fact, many Christian—even some Bukusu—see it as a sinful if not dangerous practice. But there are other equally contemporary, practical reasons. First, the economics of slaughtering a bull for each son becomes a financial burden. As we read, the ceremony may place a burden on the family to feed a host of people arriving for a meal and other benefits throughout the night. With growing pressure for school fees, clothes and food in a rapidly growing population, the economics of circumcision is a rite only the wealthier can afford. One pastor openly laughed at the practice and called it pagan, but then commented that he had taken his son to the hospital because, "It is very expensive, I don't own land and cattle and cannot afford this."

Education, too, has changed this custom. The requirements of school attendance has shortened the preparation and healing rituals. Many boys are forced to shorten chinyimba to only several weeks. They no longer can wear the traditional dress and mud once returning to school.

Health education has also been a primary influence. On many occasions young boys under an insure knife have bled profusely needing attention at distant medical facilities. One doctor, when asked of the risk involved, described that there is a chance of hemorrhage which can lead to the candidate bleeding to death, bacterial infection from an unclean wound, and viral infection by sharing the same knife leading to Hepatitis B. There is even the possibility of AIDS should a knife be unclean. Circumcisers traditionally clean the knife with ashes. As adults have learned of these facts, many they have chosen to follow the practice of clinical circumcision which is convenient, cheaper and safer.

This has had a fracturing effect on the community. The extended family is often left without a purpose to relive history. They must find other ways to know the character of the new members, and to congregate and celebrate as a community. Alternatives have been slow to emerge. The school—through athletics, music and drama festivals, and harambee (self-help programs)—have become a substitution.

Early missionaries often attacked the practice as sinful, but reasons for change are more than likely based on the above factors. However, there were and are biblical considerations that have forced Christians to drop or alter the tradition. It is these considerations that we can discuss below.

It appears that there are three acting groups in this scenario. On one side is the rural farming community, virtually cut-off from the developments of the country. It holds tightly to tradition. This community is largely non-Christian. On the other side is the Christian leadership who lives outside the community and who has embraced the developments of formal education, cash economy and western religious practices and

beliefs. This group may openly condemn the practice as pagan, ignore its existence, or in some cases, see it as a practice of the uneducated.

Pulled between these groups is the new Christian community, at Sango, which relates to the outside Christian regularly but also lives as neighbors to the traditional community. For them, total abstinence from the ceremony would be rude and unsociable in a society where sharing and participating is a responsibility in order to be called a Bukusu.

For them the Bible offers no immediate solutions to the practice but some reasons for changing part of the custom. The church is fully aware of the fact that God commanded the Israelites to circumcise. They know that Jesus was taken to the Temple for a ceremony of circumcision. But they are also aware of the New Testament teaching on drunkenness, filthy speech (which are found in songs), worship of idols (which they see in the blood sacrifice to the tribal ancestors) and spirit possession which is necessary for the anointing of the circumciser.

Several Christian elders have recognized the conflict and have adopted the tradition into Christian practice. While this has not been totally accepted by the non-Christian community, it has offered an alternative that allows the Christian community member to maintain his spiritual integrity while sharing as a part of the Bukusu community.

One such ceremony took place on our field trip. An elder of Baptist church had a son who had volunteered to become a candidate for circumcision. As he related, there were two practices which conflicted with his biblical learning. One was singing and dancing through the night. This preparation is the one time in the community when anything can be said; therefore, abusive language is shouted freely and frequently. Because traditional beer drinking accompanies this activity, tribal moderation of drinking is forgotten and drunkenness is tolerated. Too, following the circumcision, a dance is performed by some couples in celebration of the act that was done by parents to bring the boy into the world. This, to many Christians, is abusive and unacceptable. The second practice is the tradition behind the selection of the circumciser. There is some fear that the traditional circumciser is not as careful or fair with the boy from a Christian family.

The ceremony that this elder planned was no less serious than the traditional practice. He wanted his son to enter the Bukusu clan as a man before the community, but as a Christian, he adapted the tradition in the following manner.

The candidate carried and played chinyimba for several weeks. He was a school boy, and therefore, had a shorter preparation. On the night before, instead of the traditional slaughtering and all-night preparation, he planned a worship service. The church community was invited as well as his neighbors, even though it was not well attended as the traditional ceremony.

The service included an introduction of guests, prayer and Bible readings related to circumcision from the Old Testament and New Testament. These were in support of the

practice. No readings were taken from Paul's writings or the Acts of the Apostles where this practice created conflict within the church.

Following these readings, Christians songs (in the local language) were sung to encourage the boy. At one point, the father brought the boy before the group to accompany the singing with chinyimba. This was done in the same manner as the traditional singing, but for the major portion of the evening, the candidate stood in the doorway silently listening to the service.

The second change the father made was in enlisting a Christian circumciser. An earlier incident of a Christian boy being taken to the hospital following a bad cut by a traditional omukhebi encouraged this action.

In the morning, instead of drawing the traditional circle with flour, the father placed a square piece of cardboard on which the boy could stand. No drinking or dancing was allowed. Otherwise, mudding and marching to the river remained the same. The circumcision was successful and the father felt his Christian witness, and his tribal integrity were upheld before the community. The circumcision was well attended by the community in contrast to the services the night before.

Questions for Consideration

Does tradition have validity in a contemporary world, as told in the story of Mango?

What are the benefits of knowing your own traditions?

What parallels do you see between the circumcision rites of the Bukusu and the conversion and baptism of a new Christian believer?

What opportunities does the Christian church have for filling the voids in traditional societies created by modernization?

How does the outsider relate to the community when presenting Christianity? What is his/her responsibility?

What is the responsibility of the insider Christian community in maintaining both Christian integrity and community responsibility?

Considering medical information and economic changes being placed in many African communities, what is the responsibility of the contemporary African church?

What biblical passages support the practice of circumcision? (Read Genesis 17:1-21; Exodus 4: 24-26; Joshua 5: 2-8; Luke 2:21)

Read Acts 15:1-12 and Galations 2: 11-21. How would this difficulty in the New Testament apply to the Bukusu community and the neighboring Luo community which does not practice circumcision?

What are some traditions in your community that present conflicts or barriers in sharing Christ? How have they been resolved?

Discuss this statement. Those who follow tradition are free to follow them as their elders advise them without any interference from Christians. But if one is saved, let him go his own way according to Scripture.

Discuss this statement. Traditional ceremonies, like circumcision, have become a burden to families who must provide for hundreds of guests who are not interested in anything other than a meal and free beer.