

Female Circumcision in Kenya

Female genital mutilation, otherwise known as female circumcision, has been around for millennia, pre-dating both Christianity and Islam. Circumcised female mummies from ancient Egypt have been found. Herodotus, a Greek historian, once wrote about the practice of female circumcision after visiting Egypt in the 5th century BCE.¹ The history of female circumcision is muddled and unclear in origins, with very little evidence to support how it first came into practice or how the original forms of female circumcision looked. While female circumcision is practiced in Malaysia, the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and Indonesia, the majority of female circumcision cases come from Africa. In Africa, it appears to be prevalent in at least twenty-six countries across the entire continent.² This paper aims to look more specifically at Kenya, where the Kuria, Suba, Meru, and Abagusii tribes are the main tribes practicing female circumcision.³

There are several different types of female circumcision however, all have varying rates of usage. The first type is *Mild Sunna*, which is the pricking of the clitoris with a small, sharp object such as a pin. This leaves little or no damage. The next type is the *Modified Sunna*, which is the partial or total removal of the body of the clitoris. The third type is the *Clitoridectomy/Excision*, which is the removal of all or part of the clitoris along with the removal of all or part of the labia minora. This leaves extensive scarring and sometimes the scar tissue

¹ Leonard Kouba and Judith Muasher, *Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview*, African Studies Review Vol. 28, 1985, pg. 95.

² Ibid

³ Edwins Laban Moogi Gwako, *Continuity and Change in the Practice of Clitoridectomy in Kenya: A Case-Study of the Abagusii*, The Journal of Modern African Studies Vol. 33, 1995, pg. 333.

will cover the vaginal opening. The fourth type is the *Infibulation/Pharaonic Circumcision*. This type consists of the clitoridectomy of the previous type of circumcision, and the total removal of the labia minora as well as the inner walls of the labia majora. From there, the vulva is sewn together so that it will heal closed, with a small sliver of wood inserted to form a small hole that will not heal shut so that urine and menstrual flow may pass unobstructed.⁴ Afterwards, the legs of the now-circumcised woman are tied together to immobilize the wound for three days.⁵ The last type of circumcision is *Introcision*, which is the enlargement of the vaginal orifice by tearing it downward either by hand or with a sharp tool.⁶

Health risks are present after circumcision, as often times women are circumcised in unsanitary conditions. Immediate risks are shock from the loss of blood and severe pain. Other risks include sepsis and ulceration in the genitals in the days after the procedure.⁷ Often fluids are denied to women immediately after circumcision to prevent urination, which leads to severe dehydration.⁸ Other complications include hemorrhaging, septicemia, and tetanus infections, all of which can lead to death. Long term effects can include damage to the urinary tract, genital infections, incontinence, and the formation of blood clots, cysts, and keloids. Pain during intercourse is often reported, as well as difficulty giving birth or even sterility. There is also the reported effects of psychological issues, which are reported as irritability, depression, anxiety, reduced feelings of femininity, and personality alterations.⁹

⁴ Kouba and Muasher, pg. 96.

⁵ Evelyn Shaw, *Female Circumcision*, The American Journal of Nursing Vol. 85, 1985, pg. 685.

⁶ Kouba and Muasher, pg. 96.

⁷ Ibid, 102.

⁸ Shaw, pg 685.

⁹ Kouba and Muasher, pg. 102.

The type of circumcision currently most commonly practiced in Kenya is *Infibulation/Pharaonic* circumcision.¹⁰ However, traditionally, the most common form was the *Clitoridectomy/Excision* circumcision, with the *Infibulation/Pharaonic* circumcision having spread there in more modern times.¹¹ While the amount of currently practicing ethnic groups has dwindled, in the early 20th century the groups that practiced was much larger and included the Maasi, Samburu, Nandi, Kipsigis, Kuria, Gusii, Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru. In modified forms, it existed amongst the Kamba, Taita, and other coastal ethnic groups.¹²

Because the history of female circumcision is so muddled, it's difficult to tell when it arrived in Kenya. What is clear is that by the time missionaries arrived in Kenya, female circumcision was an established part of the female initiation rituals of many of the ethnic groups in Kenya. The usage of female circumcision was meant to usher girls into adulthood, where after this initiation ritual, the girls would be expected to assume the roles of wives and eventually mothers.¹³ As a religious rite, it was to ensure purification, family honor, cleanliness, good health, marriage, fertility, virginity protection, and prevention of promiscuity, enhancement of sexual pleasure for the husband, maturity, social discipline, and community solidarity.¹⁴ Understanding the purpose of female circumcision is necessary, as it helps explain why the procedure became so ingrained in different cultures and why the practice is so persistent to this day, as well as why the practitioners of female circumcision so heavily resisted attempts to remove it from practice.

¹⁰ Beth Maina Ahlberg, Wangui Njau, Karanja Kiiru and Ingela Krantz, *Gender masked or self-inflicted pain: female circumcision, eradication and persistence in Central Kenya*, African Sociological Review Vol. 4, 2000, pg. 37.

¹¹ Kouba and Muasher, pg. 96.

¹² Jocelyn Murray, *The Church Missionary Society and the "Female Circumcision" Issue in Kenya 1929-1932*, Journal of Religion in Africa Vol. 8, 1976, pg. 92.

¹³ Ahlberg, Njau, Kiiru, and Krantz, pg. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid pg. 40.

In the 20th century, Protestant missionaries from Europe strongly opposed female circumcision in all forms, with this opposition coming to a head between 1929-1931. Previous to this year, in 1926, the Embru Local Native Council passed a law limiting the use of female circumcision and making the registration of the surgeons who performed it compulsory.¹⁵ Within a few years, most local councils had adopted various forms of this law to help stem the rate of female circumcision surgeries.¹⁶ In 1931, the Kigari Pastorate Committee passed a resolution concerning female circumcision stating: “1- That any communicant that allowing female circumcision should be put under discipline...2-That candidates for baptism and confirmation should agree to put away female circumcision.”¹⁷

Reaction was swift and mirrored earlier reactions from other areas whose churches had attempted to pass similar resolutions. Schools went on strike, the churches were quickly emptied, and soon enough dissidents had set up their own schools and prayer services. A mediation held in July of that year attempted to soothe feelings by stating that girls would be given a modified form of female circumcision and that the parts of the ritual that included the public would be abolished. This resolution passed, however the independent schools and prayer services set up by the dissidents gained a strong hold and developed into a local church group. These events mirrored similar events going on throughout the whole of Kenya, where female circumcision laws and resolutions were passed with varying degrees of success.¹⁸

A critique of the missionaries' methods have been that they never tried to understand the various cultural reasons for having female circumcision. For example, with the Kikuyu, one of the groups with a large public ritual, the operation was performed in view of the group and

¹⁵ Murray, 97.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid.

dancing and singing ensued. The dancing and singing often mocked men and male sexuality and celebrated the bravery of the initiates. Girls that were circumcised together formed age groups that would enforce social norms amongst themselves.¹⁹ In the Kikuyu, as well as with the Meru, circumcision of daughters raised the status of the mother as well, which gave incentive for the continued practice of female circumcision.²⁰ Uncircumcised women are viewed as unclean or impure and are excluded from the group, which adds societal pressure to young girls to get circumcised so that they may be included in society.²¹

Resistance to the laws attempting to eradicate female circumcision has been a presence in Kenya since the creation of the laws. In 1956, Meru women in Eastern Kenya joined together and became involved in a *ngaitana*. Young women threatened to, and did, circumcise themselves as an act of resistance to the ban on female circumcision by the colonial leadership.²² Male resistance is more passive, however because in these societies girls need to be circumcised before marriage, the passivity reinforces the gender roles of the group by encouraging women to get circumcised so that they can get married.

Amongst the Abagusii, female circumcision is now occurring at younger and younger ages. Whereas now a girl could be circumcised at age 6 to 8, it used to be ages 10 or 11. A part of that reason is economic. Circumcised girls can be married and the increasing demand for bridewealth ensures that fathers circumcise and then marry their daughters off swiftly. In Kuria society, the girls are circumcised before they reach puberty for similar reasons.²³

¹⁹ Ahlberg, Njau, Kiiru, and Krantz, pg. 38.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Gwako, pg. 334.

In the 1950's, the *Mau Mau* uprising helped centered in on what was being called the "female circumcision controversy". Women played a major role in this and the *Mau Mau* uprising would not have been as successful without the role of women. Women spied, learned coded languages, and sang songs of protest against their colonial rulers. Women involved with the *Mau Mau* uprising did not believe that female circumcision repressed them, but rather that the banning of female circumcision did.²⁴ The *Mau Mau* uprising itself sprung out of land grievances and its first political movement centered on politicizing the agrarian sector. It was used to question the power and authority of the British settlers who had, in 1915, declared Kenya a "white man's country".²⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, used this opportunity to cast female circumcision in a favorable light. The attempts to cease female circumcision by the Christian missionaries up to that point were temporarily ceased as a result.²⁶

The *Mau Mau* uprising used female circumcision even in the oaths of loyalty. After the oath was completed, the initiates became "purified". The *Mau Mau* oath was commonly known as a second circumcision, something that set the initiates apart from the uninitiated as true adults in the group.²⁷

While there is a marked difference between the groups that practiced female circumcision at the beginning of the 20th century and the groups that practice it now after the efforts of the missionaries became law, female circumcision is still prevalent in Kenya. One of the reasons that the missionaries failed to eradicate female circumcision in Kenya is that many of them failed to understand the reasons that women are circumcised, reasons which include purity and

²⁴ Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, "Irua Ria Atumia and Anti-Colonial Struggles Among the Gikuyu of Kenya: A Counter Narrative on "Female Genital Mutulation" Critical Sociology, Vol. 33, 2007, pg. 692.

²⁵ Mwangi Wa-Githumo "The Truth about the Mau Mau Movement: The Most Popular Uprising in Kenya." Transafrican Journal of History, Vol. 20, 1991, pg 2.

²⁶ Njambi, pg. 692

²⁷ Ibid

community initiation. Female circumcision has been used as a rallying point against the colonial powers and the missionaries and many women involved in the *Mau Mau* movement did not consider female circumcision to be oppressive. The long history that female circumcision has in Kenya, dating back generations, and the deep roots it has in the initiation of women into adulthood in the tribes that still practice it makes simply banning female circumcision difficult. Eradication of female circumcision in Kenya will have to include understanding the societal reasons for female circumcision and helping that society change their long-held views.

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