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**Role of Circumcision Rites and their Impact on Schooling of Public
Primary School Pupils in Bungoma County, Kenya**

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ABSTRACT

Kenya has reaffirmed its commitment to enabling majority of its citizens access education by introducing free and compulsory primary education (FPE) and subsidized secondary education (free day secondary education - FDSE) as a way of preparing them for future life. In Bungoma County, the primary school age population (6-13) is 245,000 (boys 48% and girls 52%) out of which the school enrolment is 97%. However, the dropout for boys is 57.5% and 53% for girls by Standard Eight. This negates the efforts and finances pumped in by the government to enable majority of its citizens access education. Bungoma County is considered conservative in cultural aspects especially circumcision rites, which is a way of preparing boys for adult life. The circumcision rites take place in between the school terms and tend to be disruptive to the education of the adolescent boys and girls. The rites also place a heavy economic burden on the parents and the community through diversion of financial and other resources to these celebrations. However, little research has been done on role of circumcision rites. The general

objective of this study was to determine the roles of circumcision rites and modern schooling in preparing young boys for adult life.. The study adopted a descriptive design. The target population included primary pupils, teachers, village leaders and key cultural informants from the County. A total of 591 respondents were selected from these categories to participate in the study. Interview schedules, focused group discussions and questionnaires were used to collect data that were analysed both descriptively and inferentially. Data from interview schedules were used to explain the outcomes of quantitative data. It was found that traditional circumcision rites are instrumental in teaching and training initiates for future responsibilities; imparting sacred teachings and secrets of the community to initiates and imparting relevant virtues to the initiates. On the other hand, modern schooling plays the role of imparting relevant skills and knowledge; helps in moral development as well as instilling a sense of responsibility in preparation for adult life. It was concluded that circumcision be done in a hygienic hospital environment which is cost-effective and does not adversely interfere with the primary school calendar so that the youth are not denied the opportunity to live effectively in the modern competitive global community. It was recommended that deliberate move to educate the Bukusu community to embrace the modern method of circumcision so that the primary going youth in the County can concentrate on the formal school curriculum in preparation to live in a modern competitive global community.

1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Education is a key human development tool, which provides learners with the capabilities required to become economically productive. It is a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context. Investment in education has great potential to contribute to poverty reduction. Various governments and state education boards across the world are in search for methods of creating school systems that provide learners with quality education (World Bank, 2012).

The global development and welfare indices show that illiteracy and poor quality education are rampant in developing nations. Access to sustainable quality education has been a challenge threatening achievement of universal education as one of MDGs. Even with the efforts by various countries to put measures in place that can mitigate these challenges, there are socio-economic factors that continue to impede the implementation of education policies. As such, the efficiency of education in eradicating illiteracy is always at stake (World Bank, 2010).

A number of cultural practices are still held as highly important in African countries including Kenya. Several communities still hold to regressive practices that directly affect education and therefore development. Common practices such as pastoralism which is greatly identified with cattle rustling has affected school attendance and the result has been the soaring illiteracy levels in such communities. Female genital mutilation and early marriages are also some of the social factors that can be attributed to poor levels of education especially in rural areas where the practices are rampant (Sawamura, 2006). Further, the ceremonies and celebrations that come along with these practices are of significant influence on the school attendance and academic performance in the affected communities.

Kenya has reaffirmed its commitment to enabling majority of its citizens access education by introducing free and compulsory primary education (FPE) and subsidized secondary education (free day secondary education - FDSE). In Bungoma County, the primary school age population (6-13) is 245,000 (boys 48% and girls 52%) of which the school enrolment is 97% which is encouraging. However, the dropout for boys is 57.5% and 53% for girls by Standard Eight. The enrolment at secondary school is 29% for boys and 26.5% for girls with a further

drop out rate at 26.5% and 30% respectively negating the efforts and finances pumped in by Government and even parents to enable majority of its citizens access education (Onyango, 2013).

Bungoma County is considered conservative in cultural aspects and specifically circumcision. Circumcision of boys takes place bi-annually. The circumcision rites tend to be disruptive to the education of both boys and girls as they take place in between the school terms. The rites also place a heavy economic burden on the family and community through diversion of resources to the accompanying ceremonies. However, little research has been done to find out the role of circumcision rites and role of schooling in preparing young boys for adult life and whether there are similarities in the same or not.

The general objective of this study was to determine the role of circumcision rites and schooling in primary schools of Bungoma County as a way of preparing young boys for adulthood.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The role of Education in the Socio-Economic Development of Society

Throughout the world, education is recognized as an important human development tool. It is the primary agent for transformation towards sustainable development. Educated people have increased capabilities to transform their visions for society into reality. All countries strive to create school systems where their citizens receive the best education possible (World Bank, 2012).

According to World Bank statistics, education is stated to be one of the most powerful tools for reducing poverty and inequality. It lays a foundation for sustained economic growth. Global development and welfare indices reveal that poverty is a function of illiteracy and most countries afflicted by poverty have been shown as faring poorly in terms of knowledge economy indices, availability and absorption of new technologies (World Bank, 2012). Consequently, in order for countries to achieve economic growth and sustainable development, they strive to invest heavily in the education sector.

Several authors (Bourdieu, 1986; Purves, 1973; Guthrie, 1978; Taube, 1988; Elley, 1994; Lehmann, 1996; Lietz, 1996; OECD, 2001, 2002; Fredriksson, 2002) emphasize that parents' level of education, socio-economic position of the family and cultural heritage play an important role in the learning achievements of children. Cultural identity and the desire to continue ethnic traditions are the strongest determinants for continuing traditional practices. In some societies, male circumcision as a rite of passage is of major importance to the social status of a man, essential to him becoming a full and acceptable member of society. In some communities, an uncircumcised man remains a boy forever, whatever his age. It has been established that in the rural areas where cultural practices and traditions are highly prevalent, more pupils have dropped out of school. Cultural practices and a number of other factors account for the high drop-out rate from school (Goodwin, 2000).

2.2 The Impact of Teachings given to the Initiates after Circumcision Ceremonies on Education

Bukusu traditional education was to expose the young people to the nature and practice of the various ethnic institutions that existed in Bukusuland: institutions of law, languages and Bukusu values. The young were expected to understand the working of the Bukusu government as this was supposed to foster a close-knit communal society. As the young turned into adults, they were supposed to defend the community against the "marauding leopards" as the Bukusu called their enemies. The idea was that if the young man cannot stand the circumcision knife, then he would be unable to protect the community against the invading enemies. Bravery was, therefore, a trait necessary for a would-be warrior. Resilience is another aptitude that goes hand in hand with warriorship. A Bukusu initiate must train himself to withstand difficult conditions and be able to recover quickly.

The circumcision songs are about bravery but at the same time satirical, making fun of cowards. Any person who was afraid of circumcision had no place in the Bukusu society. So ideally, songs were supposed to psyche the initiates to face the knife with courage.

Real education for the young takes place during the healing process. *Lubito* is actually the traditional school (central place identified by an elder whose child is among the initiates) where formal teaching and counselling takes place. It takes place when the initiate is healing and this is in seclusion in most cases. This is after the initiate has been circumcised and is convalescing in *Likombe* where he is basically under treatment in seclusion. During this time, it is the circumciser who is in charge of giving elementary education to the young. He counsels the initiate in the presence of the father, the mother, the uncles and the aunts and mainly dwells on the transition between boyhood and adulthood. The circumciser stresses on what it means to be a man and gives him a code of conduct as he needs to know how he conducts himself as an adult. The initiate will mainly be trained on how not only to behave as a man but how to relate with other people such as the weak, disabled, elderly and the poor. The initiate will also be counselled on how to look after a family as he would soon have a license to getting married after graduation. It will be emphasised to the initiate that he should not “enter closed doors” meaning that he should not have sex with married women. He should however go into open doors (look for unmarried women/girls). In this way, the Bukusu community intended to maintain sexual decency. To emphasise this, “the initiate is told not to go to someone’s homestead when the owner of the home is not in and also to avoid incest.” The education that takes place during this time is supposed to make the initiate a mature person who should respect various persons in the community and respect sex. The initiate learns how to be hard working and be able to farm and rear animals. He should be concerned with manly duties and not get involved in kitchen affairs. *Lubito* therefore, not only gives a sense of focus but gives guidelines on future expectations. It is a counselling session in preparation for life. It should be noted that these teachings would be being given to 12 – 16 year old boys who would be school-going children. After healing, they go back to school with the new concept, that they had become men and not boys. They will have been taught that as men, they could either seduce girls or even get married for as long as they didn’t seduce married women. The boys became rude to lady teachers and wouldn’t allow lady teachers to punish them should they be breaking school routine and rules. This highly compromises school standards as well as negatively affects their individual performance.

According to Ministry of Education (2007), the constitution of Kenya out-laws discrimination based on gender, tribe or region, and emphasize on social justice and equal opportunities with regard to education. Other policy documents also seek to reinforce a policy of equal opportunities regardless of social- cultural, religious, regional and gender barriers. Disparities between gender and regions in the end widen the gap between individuals in life; and more importantly, they create a vacuum in socio- economic status between communities, which are difficult to eradicate.

From the socio- cultural point of view, key factors responsible for disparities include cultural and religious beliefs, attitude and practice, and social norms that restrict individuals from participating in learning such as age group circumcisions, early marriage among girls, and subsequent celebrations. Performance in national examination is one aspect where disparities speak volumes.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey design was adopted since it is used to answer descriptive research questions that describe what, why and how situations are happening (Creswell 2002). The study was carried out in Bungoma County. Bungoma County is located in Western Region of Kenya surrounded by the following counties: Trans-nzoia, Busia, Kakamega, and Uasin Gishu. Bungoma is divided into nine administrative divisions thus: Bumula,

Kanduyi, Kimilili, Sirisia, Kabuchai, Webuye East, Webuye West, Tongaren, and Mt. Elgon. The main economic activity is subsistence agriculture with maize, sunflower, sugarcane, coffee, tobacco, potatoes and beans being the main crops. Residents also keep cattle for economic reasons.

The target population of the study included class seven and eight pupils, head teachers, teachers, village leaders and key people in cultural ceremonies and activities. This study employed a combination of sampling procedures to arrive at the actual sample. Random sampling was used to select 33% which is 3 of the 9 administrative and political divisions in the County to be involved in the study. These were Webuye East, Kanduyi and Mt Elgon. Stratified random sampling was then used to select 4 schools namely Sinoko, Musa, Minyali, Malomomnye Primary Schools in Webuye East, Kewabrang, Kiptiroko, Chemses, Chemoge Primary Schools in Mt Elgon, Bukembe, Ududu, Nzoia Industrial and Sipala Primary Schools in Kanduyi in each of the three selected divisions; Webuye East, Kanduyi and Mt Elgon to participate in the study. Stratified random sampling, grouping pupils according to sex, was used to select 10% of the pupils in the sampled schools which resulted in a sample of 180 pupils. Class eight and seven class teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study and therefore 18 teachers participated. The study further sampled head teachers, village administrative leaders and key circumcision ceremony individuals purposively and a total of 50 of these leaders were selected. A total of 260 respondents participated in the study.

The main tools for data collection were the questionnaire, focused group discussions and interview schedules.

4.0 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Respondents Background Information

This study generally sought to determine the role modern schooling and circumcision rites play in preparing these boys for adult life. It was therefore prudent that community members are involved, and from the sampling procedure 41% of the sampled respondents were female and 59% were male. Respondents were asked to state their highest level of education and based on the responses it was found that majority of them (23) had a tertiary college certificate, 16 had form four certificate, 9 had primary certificates and 8 were university graduates.

The respondents were further asked to state their position in society. This was to enable identifying the different sources of information based on position so as to point out the variation of respondents' positions. Based on the findings, majority of the respondents (32) were parents and had no other additional responsibilities in the society, 13 of the respondents apart from being parents were also teachers in the sampled schools, five (5) were village elders, two (2) head teachers, two (2) church leaders, one (1) clan elder and one (1) chief.

4.2 Role of Traditional Circumcision Rites in Preparing Boys for Adulthood

Every society has a way of preparing their young ones to assume an active and effective role as adults. Establishing the role that traditional circumcision rites play in preparing young boys for adulthood was pertinent to this study.

Respondents were asked if in their opinion traditional circumcision rites have a role in preparing boys for adult life. Majority (66%) agreed that traditional circumcision rites have a role in preparing young boys for adulthood however, 27% stated that it has no role while 7% did not give their opinion.

Based on the findings, traditional circumcision rites have a role to play in preparing young boys for adulthood. This contradicts the earlier finding where some community members were of the opinion that traditional circumcision rites should be done away with. This finding will be adequately discussed in the last section.

The study further presented a set of statements on the role of circumcision rites in preparing boys for adulthood. The statements were to be either agreed or disagreed on and an option of not being sure was also provided. The findings are as indicated in Table 4.1 below. Majority of the respondents agreed with all of the following statements: traditional circumcision rites initiates are advised to shun childishness and embrace adulthood; traditional circumcision provides a platform for inducting boys with sacred teachings and secrets of the community; traditional Circumcision enables the initiates to acquire social identity, acceptance and sense of belonging; traditional circumcision prepares initiates for marriage and parenthood; and traditional circumcision rites provide a platform for teaching initiates and training them for future responsibilities.

Table 4.1: Role of Traditional Circumcision in Preparation for Adulthood

Statement	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
Through traditional circumcision rites initiates are advised to shun childishness and embrace adulthood	89.3	10.7	0.0
Traditional circumcision provides a platform for inducting boys with sacred teachings and secrets of the community	78.6	17.9	3.6
Traditional Circumcision enables the initiates to acquire social identity acceptance and sense of belonging	87.5	8.9	3.6
Traditional circumcision prepares initiates for marriage and parenthood	64.3	14.3	21.4
Traditional circumcision rites provides a platform for teaching initiates and training them for future responsibilities	80.4	8.9	10.7

Respondents agreed on the important role of traditional circumcision rites in preparing young boys for adulthood, although this is on the background that the community has a negative perception on traditional circumcision rites. These findings bring out the important role traditional circumcision rites and therefore opens several questions as to why is not held with high esteem in the society.

Findings from Table 4.1 on the role of circumcision concur with various findings conducted elsewhere. For instance; a study conducted by Meissner and Buso (2007) in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, among the Xhosa culture, revealed traditional circumcision of male was paramount. According to the study, boys who are circumcised are considered more capable of making informed judgments; they are entitled to businesses, property or marriage, or to participate in other features of community life such as feasts and beer-drinking ceremonies.

Consequently, circumcised boys in Bungoma County are perceived to be mature and can participate in adult responsibilities such as decision-making and marriage among others. Thus, circumcision is a way of preparing young boys for future responsibilities. Similarly, just like the Luhya community, societal structures are reported from Masaai groups in Kenya where males become warriors (“morani”) once they are circumcised, and men are referred to as elders when their children have been circumcised (Marck, 1997). In addition, male circumcision is considered essential for becoming a full member of society among the Meru in Kenya (Grant, Brown, Michen, Grant, Manuthu & Njeru, 2004), in Bendel State, Nigeria, and in rural Guinea-Bissau and Senegal (Cheikh & Boiro, 2007).

Similarly, the following were the roles of traditional circumcision as a way of preparing young boys into adulthood from key informants sessions held. It was found that traditional circumcision prepared the initiates to be brave and courageous. This is because during the preparation to initiation, the initiates withstand all types of tests and humiliations that accompany circumcision ceremonies (such as slaps, mockery, beatings, bullying and night colds among others) and finally the removal of the fore skin of the penis in the morning, which is believed the boys are prepared for the tough world ahead. The bravery and courage gained is used to protect the women and families.

Niang et al. in Cheikh & Boiro (2007), refer to the time after circumcision spent in seclusion by many communities across Africa as an “*incubation period*” for new attitudes, practices and behaviours of the initiates critical for the transmission of cultural knowledge. In practice, this is more of a school of hard knocks than a period of joy, as the boys often experiencing privations, bullying and humiliation. This is likely to be a remnant of traditional practices when circumcision was closely linked to toughening, training and initiation of male adolescents into warrior status (Marck, 1997). This is similar to toughening among the Bukusu community where the initiates are beaten, dancing with bells for a long period as well as withstanding the pain without showing any sign of cowardice.

Through the practice, important binding rules and regulations are imparted to the initiates. Various secrets of the community are revealed to the circumcised boys with an aim of ensuring that the culture does not wither away. Furthermore, it promotes unity and a sense of belonging among the initiates and between them and the entire community which ushers the initiates into adult life.

During tradition circumcision rites, initiates are taught various virtues such as discipline, respect, obedience, honesty and responsibility among others. During and after circumcision ceremonies and in most cases during graduation, boys are taught about virtues and how important they are in their lives. They are taught the importance of respect, responsibility, courage, honesty and discipline among other virtues. Thus, imparting virtues during traditional circumcision is perceived to be a positive precursor towards preparation of young boys to adulthood.

Findings from key informants further gave reasons for and against traditional circumcision. They argued that traditional circumcision was important in passing on the community’s valued teachings to the initiates for posterity.

Apart from these positive sides, traditional circumcision has been plagued by a number of problems. Some of these problems include but not limited to: wrong procedures done to initiates by some traditional circumcisers, who end up in hospitals for corrective surgeries, infections and spread of HIV/AIDS (due to use of same equipment during circumcision and freedom to engage in sex), reported indiscipline cases in schools after initiation, absenteeism from school, freedom to engage in sexual activities, spread of sexually transmitted diseases, high levels of pregnancies for girls, increased use and abuse of drugs and alcoholism, and other social problems.

Due to the many problems associated with traditional circumcision rites, some respondents argued for adoption of the modern/hospital method of circumcision. Their reasons for this argument included its being cost-effective (the only expenses incurred are for the procedure of circumcision and medication, no elaborate partying, no animal slaughtering and no waste of time over-night dancing and misbehaviour). The circumcision procedures performed in hospitals are safer and with high hygienic standards due to involvement of professionals. There is also non-interference with normal school calendar since healing is faster due to quality medical care provided to the

initiates. Furthermore, wound cleaning and treatment is done effectively to avoid infections which may prolong healing. Additionally, boys who adopt this method do not get themselves fatigued with traditional procedures such as bell ringing thus, seldom affect their academic calendar.

4.3 Role of Modern Schooling in Preparing Boys for Adulthood

The study sought to determine the role of modern schooling in preparing young boys for adulthood responsibilities. A set of statements were presented to respondents to agree, disagree or not sure. The results are as indicated in Table 4.2 below. Majority of the respondents agreed that modern schooling imparts relevant skills and knowledge, encourages boys to develop positive social identity and sense of belonging, develops relevant self-esteem and instils a sense of responsibility.

Table 4.2: Role of Modern Schooling in Preparation for Adulthood

Statement	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
Modern schooling imparts relevant skills and knowledge	87.5	8.9	3.6
Modern schooling encourage boys to develop positive social identity and sense of belonging	75.0	19.6	5.4
Modern schooling develops relevant self-esteem	83.9	8.9	7.1
Modern schooling instils a sense of responsibility	76.8	12.5	10.7

The above findings indicate that modern schooling is adequate in preparing young boys for adult life. It can be deduced from the findings that what traditional circumcision rites can do in preparing boys for adulthood, modern schooling can also do it.

Findings from the key informants' interviews indicated that modern schooling is very crucial to young boys because it imparts all the necessary skills and knowledge that is required for one to have a successful future. This is so because the curriculum is formally designed which ensures holistic development of the youth. This also ensures that young boys learn among other things how to be responsible, disciplined, develop morality, time consciousness, respect for self and others, inquisitive, innovative and creative, adaptive and flexibility for now and future. Consequently, that modern schooling is very significant in preparing young boys for adulthood.

5.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study found that the traditional circumcision ceremonies as a rite of passage are practised among the Bukusu community in Bungoma County. Most respondents (66%) agreed that this passage of rite is important in preparing the young boys for adulthood. When the boys are circumcised, they eventually graduate after going through teachings referred to as *Lubito*, during which they are taught to immediately mature into adults. They are taught to shun childishness and embrace adulthood. They are also taught sacred secrets of the community, social identity through acceptance and sense of belonging, bravery and courage, discipline, respect, obedience, honesty, marriage and responsibility. All these virtues are taught as positive precursor towards preparation for adulthood.

Most respondents (68%) were also in agreement that modern schooling prepares young boys for adulthood. They were in agreement that modern schooling has a positive impact on future lives of young boys (89.3%) and that it instils discipline which is vital in their future lives (85.7%). It was argued that modern schooling has a formal

curriculum which ensures a holistic development of the youth. In this curriculum, they are taught relevant skills and knowledge, positive social identity and a sense of belonging, self-esteem, sense of responsibility, inquisitiveness, innovativeness and adaptive. All these are intended to prepare the young boys for adulthood.

5.2 Conclusions

It was found that the traditional circumcision rites were important in preparing young boys for adulthood. Similarly, modern schooling was also very important in preparing young boys for adulthood backed with a formal curriculum. In Bungoma County, these two were found to be in competition and the young boys were torn in between which was affecting both girls and boys. The traditional circumcision ceremonies were plagued with risks of wrong procedures being done on the boys, infections and spread of HIV/AIDS, reported indiscipline cases, freedom to engage in sexual activities, pregnancies among school-going girls, increase in use and abuse of drugs and alcoholism and other social problems. Since the traditional circumcision is localised among the Bukusu community in Bungoma County and yet the young boys and girls by extension have to fit in the global competitive modern community, it is imperative that a shift is made to the modern method of circumcision. This will ensure that circumcision is done in a hygienic hospital environment which is cost-effective and does not adversely interfere with the primary school calendar so that the youth are not denied the opportunity to live effectively in the modern competitive global community.

5.3 Recommendations

From the foregoing findings and conclusions, it is recommended that:

1. There should be a deliberate move to educate the Bukusu community to embrace the modern method of circumcision so that the primary going youth in the County can concentrate on the formal school curriculum in preparation to live in a modern competitive global community.
2. The formal school curriculum in Kenya should be enriched to include the positive traditional African virtues that are found in the diverse communities in an effort to ensuring that the learners are globally competitive but also relevant in their various communities of origin.
3. Similar studies should be carried out in communities who have similar and other cultural activities that may be competing with the formal school curriculum to derive ways of integrating the positive aspects of such cultural activities to enhance the school curriculum and discard the negative aspects that have no role to play in the modern global community.

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