

EXAMINING RELIGION AND FEMALE CIRCUMCISION (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION): A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines religion and African cultural practices of female circumcision in some parts of African traditional society vis-a-vis contemporary opposition to female circumcision. It further x-rays the biblical and Christian perspectives on female circumcision and end with recommendation and conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Female circumcision is a practice that arouses violent controversy. Those who oppose it insist that it be referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM). This term was officially adopted by the Inter-African community on Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and children at their meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1990. They consider it a way of passing on positive values to girls and women.

Moreover, as Gachiri (2000) points out, “the term female circumcision is today use as a polite term when dealing with affected individuals in order to respect their feeling. No person would wish to be referred to as mutilated”.

When our goal is to change people’s attitude towards some practice, it is always better to be positive and respectful rather than negative and confrontational.

The Traditional Practice of Female Circumcision

Female circumcision has been practiced for centuries in many parts of the world. In much of Africa it is a rite of passage preparing a young girl for womanhood and marriage. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that more than 130 million African girls and Women in some twenty-eight countries have been circumcised. In some countries, it is estimated that 98% of the women are circumcised.

The World Health Organization (2003) defines female circumcision (which it refers to as FGM) as comprising “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”. The reference definition to “all procedures” is an acknowledgement that circumcision can take different forms in different communities. The WHO identifies four broad categories:

- **Clitoridectomy**, involving removal of part or all of the clitoris.
- **Excision**, involving removal of both the clitoris and of the labia minora and sometimes of the labia majora.
- **Infibulation**, the severest form of female circumcision, involving narrowing the vaginal opening. The clitoris and Labia Minora may or may not be removed, but the surface of the labia are cut and then held together (either by stitching the edges or by tying the

girls legs together) until scar tissue fuses them. Only a very small opening remains for the passing of urine and menstrual blood.

- **Unclassified**, a category that includes “all other procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example, pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization”.

Outsiders tend to react with horror to female circumcision while failing to appreciate the deep religious and traditional values that underlie the practice. Jomo Kenyatta (1938), the former president of Kenya, observed that among the Gikuyu “this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications...for the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitoridectomy.”

What exactly are these educational, social, moral and religious values that Kenyatta referred to? This critical question must be address before meaningful progress can be made in understanding female circumcision. The rite involves far more than just the removal of part or all the female genitalia. It includes teaching positive values about marriage and sexuality, hospitability, home-making, a woman’s responsibility to her husband and children, community living, solidarity with other women and chastity. The initiates are taught to avoid a promiscuous lifestyle and virginity is promoted.

Kibor (2008) points out that girls were traditionally taught that “procreation was only for the mature, the circumcised, virginity was treasured. Traditionally, the smaller the vaginal opening, the bigger the gift the husband gave to his new bride. The gift served as a key to allow the man to open the wife’s birth canal the first night of intercourse.”

Supporters of traditional female circumcision feel so strongly about it that they are prepared to resort to violence to defend it. In Cameroon, “associations that have spoken and are still speaking against such practices that have met with a lot of hostility from the chief’s men, who are usually of a gang of thugs living and feeding from the palace and are prepared to do whatever the chiefs demand of them.” Pastor John Ayuk lost his life because of his opposition to female circumcision.

Contemporary Opposition to Female circumcision

Women’s rights groups, human rights groups, medical experts, doctors, nurses and midwives have contributed to making people aware of the risks associated with female genital mutilation. The cause has been taken up by international organizations such as the World Health Organization, Amnesty International and the United States Agency for International development (USAID). They have campaigned against the practice as “brutal, medically risky, repugnant, a form of violence against women, and a public health hazard. The Programme of Action adopted by the international Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 referred to female circumcision as “a violation of basic rights and major lifelong risk to women’s health” and urged governments to “urgently take steps to stop the practice of female genital mutilation and protect women and girls from all such similar unnecessary dangerous practices”.

The Demerits of Female Circumcision

Arrey (2008) asserts that the health risks associated with female circumcision depend in part on the type of cutting performed. Infibulation, which involves deep cutting of many parts of the female genitalia, obviously has more severe effects than mere piercing of

the labia minora. But all form of circumcision inhibit or terminate sexual feelings during intercourse and can result in infection to the wound, chronic pelvic infections, urinary infections, haemorrhage and shock. If the same knife is to be used to circumcise a number of girls, HIV/AIDS may be transmitted from one to another during the operation. Female circumcision also causes difficulties during child birth, increasing the risks to both the mother and the baby.

According to Gachiri (2000) women who have undergone female circumcision testify that it is a painful and bitter experience. They endured great anxiety before the circumcision and are left with terrible memories of the circumcision as well as great pain if their wounds failed to heal properly. Complain of a lack of sexual fulfilment and of the difficulty they have in giving birth.

Obviously, even if those practicing this rite mean well and are trying to teach positive values, these negative physical and psychological effects are real and must be dealt with. The proven health hazards of female circumcision and international criticism of the practice have persuaded sixteen Countries to ban the practice. However, these bans are widely ignored. The practice continues even among professing Christians. "Examples abound of young Christian women who have been circumcised even after marriage - especially those married into nominal Christian or non-Christian families." (Mackie, 1998).

Biblical Perspectives on Female Circumcision

The scripture are silent with regard to female circumcision. When God commands Abraham to circumcise himself, his son Isaac and all the male members of his household, there is no mention of Sarah and female members of the household:

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner — those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen 17:10-14).

Nowhere in all of Scripture or in any of recorded church history is there even a hint that women were to be circumcised.

We can also draw some conclusions about female circumcision the debate about male circumcision in the early church. The first believers were mainly Jewish and thus practised circumcision. When they found that many Gentiles were being converted, there was much debate whether Gentile men needed to be circumcised too. The Council of Jerusalem unanimously agreed not to insist on the circumcision of the Christians. They recognized that male circumcision was not a requirement for salvation and membership in the church. Thus there can be no need for female circumcision as proof that a woman is virtuous. Those who are in Christ are cleansed, regenerated and transformed (2 Cor. 5:17).

To discriminate against uncircumcised women is to fall into same trap that Peter did (Gal 2:11-21).

The New Testament also makes it abundantly clear that salvation in Christ does not negate traditional values such as hospitality, kindness, hard-work, the virtues of womanhood, marriage, sexuality, procreation and love. These universal values that are taught to initiates at the time of circumcision should also be taught in the churches, for they are fully consistent with scriptural teaching.

What the New Testament does discourage is any action that harms others. Because female circumcision is indeed medically, physically and psychologically harmful, the church must discourage the practice and urge that it be discontinued.

Finally, from a theological point of view, female circumcision is morally unjustifiable because it negates God's purpose in creating the female reproductive organs. It distorts and mutilates what God created as good and beautiful and denies women God's gift of sexual satisfaction. Female circumcision must thus be condemned as unbiblical and unethical.

A Christian Response to Female Circumcision

Once we accept that female circumcision is unethical, we need to come up with effective ways of eradicating this practice. The following are some guidelines on how to go about doing this.

RECOMMENDATION

Respect those who Practice Female Circumcision

It is important to begin with the positive recognition that "the people who do FGC (female genital cutting) are honourable upright, moral people who love their children and want the best for them. That is why they do FGC and that is why they will decide to stop doing it, once a safe way of stopping it is found."

Understand the Tradition

Scholars and non-governmental organizations need to study the Cultural tradition of female circumcision in every society that practices it. We need more work like that of Gachiri (2000) and Kenyatta (1938) on the Gikuyu of Kibor on the Marakwet of Kenya and of Mackie in Senegal. Case studies of specific ethnic groups will yield a better understanding of the specific cultural values and beliefs underlying the practice. While there are general similarities between groups, there are also unique elements in each local context. This local context needs to be studied and evaluated before recommendations can be made about how to eradicate the practice.

Recognise that Change must come from within

Gachiri (2000) further observes that experience has shown that external condemnation and legislation outlawing female circumcision will not necessarily eradicate the practice. If medical personnel are ordered to stop performing circumcisions, the operations will still be performed by others. However, if the community, especially the women who are directly affected, discuss circumcision and decide that it should end, then in all probability the practice will stop. This is what happened in Melicounda, a village with some 3,000 inhabitants in Senegal. Tostan, a non-governmental organization working in collaboration with UNICEF and the government of Senegal, spent two years discussing female circumcision with the women of the village. After serious deliberations, the women

themselves decided that the practice should stop. The women then persuaded the community leaders to stop the practice. They then went on to convince neighbouring villages to follow their example.

Educate the Community

Community education and awareness are critical for the eradication of female circumcision. Such education must not be seen as attacking positive traditional values and beliefs but as upholding them. So the focus must be on encouraging positive values and not on denouncing female circumcision as a rite of passage.

Circumcision can be thought of as a bag holding positive values. If you insist that people get rid of the bag, they may think that you also want them to discard the contents of the bag, that is, the positive values the rite is trying to pass on to young girls. So any programme to abolish it should actively commend those who demonstrate Christian virtues in their lives and homes while discouraging teasing or disparaging remarks about those who have not been circumcised.

The programme should include teaching by medical experts who can provide information about the many negative medical consequences of cutting away part or all of the female genitalia. They should discuss infections, problems in childbirth, the inability to enjoy sex, and other psychological and emotional problems associated with circumcision. There should also be Christian teaching, reminding people that God never commanded female circumcision. He created sexual organs for sexual enjoyment, love and procreation. Female circumcision defeats the divine plan and purpose. We should respect, care for and protect the organs that God has so carefully created.

Effective means of education and awareness include dramas, talk-shows, workshops and discussion of female circumcision in school curricular and church programmes such as Sunday Schools, youth programmes and men and women's programmes. However, the education programme should particularly target opinion leaders in the community, such as elders, circumcisers, chiefs, older women and women who have been circumcised. They should be given workshops and training sessions at which the issues surrounding circumcision can be dealt with. Once these important groups and individuals have been persuaded of the harmful effects of female circumcision, there is hope that the practice will be discontinued - provided that they can also be assured that positive values will be effectively passed on to the next generation of girls.

Provide Effective Substitutes

It has been proven over and over again that old practices are not abandoned unless some suitable alternative ritual is put in place. To stop female circumcision without providing an alternative rites of passage would soon lead to a return to the former rite, even if only clandestinely. Thus some communities in Kenya have tried to provide an alternative initiation rites that parallels boys' circumcision rites. Girls can now go through a week-long coming of age programme, which marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood. It is called "Ntanira Na Mugambo" or Circumcision through Words. (Kenyatta, 1938).

There is nothing wrong in having Christian rites that are intended to teach and pass on Christian values on womanhood, sexuality, hospitality, the relationship between husband and wives, the rearing of children, and so forth. In fact, the church in Africa still needs to work out how to celebrate many rites of passage in a way that links them to real life. Baptism, for instance, should not merely be another requirement like attending school

or singing hymns in church, but should be a very serious Christian initiation into the body of Christ. Baptismal candidates should be instructed in vital doctrinal truths and the ceremony should be the culmination of an initiation process whereby they move from being babies in Christ to becoming adults who are informed about basic Christian teaching and have been raised anew to live transformed lives.

Introduce Legislation

Premature legislation is ineffective and is ignored. All it may do is to drive circumcision underground, as happened when the Kenyan government tried to prohibit medical personnel from circumcising females in hospitals. Kenyan communities insisted that the “government has no influence over this customary issue. It is people’s way of life.” Respect for customary laws and traditions led to the legislation being aborted. As Mackie (1988) points out, “unpopular legal prohibitions or harsh propaganda are doomed to meet with resistance. It’s just human nature.”

However, if the groundwork is first laid through careful education and training of women, village elders and chief and religious leaders, legislation will serve to enforce bans that communities are already adopting.

CONCLUSION

The final remedy to female circumcision is a presentation of the full Gospel of Jesus Christ, with its stress that our value and righteousness comes from God, regardless of what is done to our bodies. The gospel’s stress on doing good, refraining from harm and thanking God for all His gifts and also undercuts all arguments in favour of female circumcision.

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