
Tharaka Female Circumcision

A Case Study in the Role of the Translation Organization¹

By John Ommani
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Introduction

A rite of passage is a ritual marking the transition from one social state to another. Every society has rites of passage. Some societies have only a few, connected with birth, marriage, or death. Others have many more, such as naming ceremonies, male and female initiation, coming-out ceremonies for mothers, or retirement from village politics or duties. Various rites, such as scarification, circumcision, removal of front teeth, ear piercing, or lip piercing, can accompany these passages. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert has written, "These rites show us the people's most significant assumptions about the nature and destiny of human beings and their place in the world" (1989:176).

When Christianity is introduced into a society there will obviously be clashes with a people's traditional ideas about the world. This clash will often manifest itself in heated debates about the society's rites of passage. Earlier in the history of missions new Christians were told to break completely with their traditional ways. This created a cultural vacuum for the people concerned, who then often adopted the Western way; consequently, people perceived Christianity to be a foreign religion. When such a vacuum continues to exist, Christians often resume traditional practices in secret. More recently, local churches have expressed their desire to think through cultural traditions with the Bible as a yardstick instead of Western Christianity.

This article examines female circumcision among the Tharaka people of Kenya, who live near Mount Kenya, and the problems it entails. The Tharaka number approximately 112,000, with a large majority claiming to be Christian. The Bible Translation and Literacy agency (BTL) to which I belong, began the Tharaka project in 1988. What is our role as a Bible-based agency in this project? How can we in BTL help the church find ways for a person to be a Christian without being alienated from the culture unnecessarily?

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Tharaka female circumcision

Origin and purpose of circumcision

Female circumcision is a deeply rooted practice among the Tharaka people. Men are the ones who introduced female circumcision many years ago. According to the myth, it had two main purposes. First, it was to weaken the sex drive of women so that they would not outdo men in that area. Related to this was the idea that if a man had a wife with a strong sex drive, he would be overworked during the night and consequently he would be too weak to do the farm work necessary to supply enough food for his family. Second, it was believed that a woman who was circumcised normally would be very faithful to her husband and so it was a way to prevent women from committing adultery.

The Tharaka have a saying: *mûthera atirî kîama*. This means, “A woman who is not circumcised is not disciplined, has no manners, is not cultured, and therefore knows nothing and cannot even keep secrets.” This is normally applied to all uncircumcised women (mainly young, uncircumcised girls) when they make mistakes in public. The seclusion time of the circumcision ceremony had a very important role to teach the girls vital things about how to live a respectable life in the community. It was a kind of formalized education, a time to learn how to respect husbands, how to relate to people of various ages and sexes, how to relate to one’s in-laws, how to keep family secrets, and how to bring up children. The information they received touched on every aspect of life and was very important in enabling the community to be morally strong and to be able to live cohesively.

In the Tharaka community, this rite of passage educates the young women in the following areas:

- It enforces solidarity among women as moral teachers of children.
- It shows them how to live socially acceptable lives, including how to relate to neighbors, relatives, strangers, the elderly, and in-laws.
- It instructs them on the history of the clan so that they can pass that knowledge on to the younger generations.
- It provides sex education. Most of the people I talked to felt that this was the most important part of the training.
- It explains clan endogamy. Women were not supposed to marry outside of their clans. It is only here that they were told the importance of their clans. If a woman married outside her clan, then in times of war between her clan and the clan she married into, her clan would have priority.
- It shows them how to deal with fear and conquer it. This was to prepare them for motherhood and the pains of childbirth, as well as the possible death of a child or husband.

The participants

The society requires all young girls to be circumcised before they reach age sixteen. During their circumcision time, the candidates are separated from the rest of the community. Older respected women, who are experts, circumcise them and stay with them for a period of two weeks during their healing time. It is during this time that the young girls are taught values of womanhood, how to relate to men and how to respect their husbands-to-be. On circumcision day both men and women attend to witness the circumcision, as this is an important day for all. However, the majority present on that day would be women, because it is an affair for women.

After the two weeks, there is a big feast when the rest of the community, including relatives from afar, come to welcome the girls back into society as young women. The women arrive first to give the girls their final and most important instructions to remember in life. Then the men arrive just in time for the feasting. The initiates are given new names of honor and respect as they graduate into full womanhood. There is feasting, dancing, and singing as the whole community joins the young women and their families in celebrating her newly earned status in society. After that the parents and those who were involved in teaching her put the girl under very strict observation to see if she is obeying what she was taught. This is the time that would-be suitors come to propose, because they begin to realize the unique character of what a Tharaka wife should be like as they see this new cultural graduate.

As you can see female circumcision has an important role to play in educating girls for womanhood. The time of seclusion, needed for the wounds to heal, was used to prepare the girls for their responsibilities after graduating to their new social state in life, i.e., womanhood. However, when Christianity reached Tharaka, the people were forced to choose between the new faith with a lot of unknowns or their well-known traditions. Is Christianity mutually exclusive with this tradition?

Is circumcision still relevant?

Circumcision may have been successful in the past. For now its educating role is ineffective. The turbulent changes characteristic of this century all over the world did not pass Tharaka without leaving a mark. Formal education being taken over by schools, the decline of respect for elders who used to be considered the wise people, and exposure to Western ideas through the media have all played a role in the decline of traditional values. Not only the church, but the whole Tharaka society is struggling with the issue of female circumcision.

Negative effects of female circumcision in the society

1. Circumcision has failed to prevent immorality in the community. There is a lot of adultery and fornication. The community is realizing that adultery comes from the nature of people's hearts and not the state of their bodies. Even the circumcised women are found at markets as prostitutes. Most men who are married to the circumcised women are saying that sexually they do not get satisfaction, so many of them are going out to find sexual fulfillment elsewhere and thus increase adultery within the community.

2. Not all women who have gone through the circumcision are as good, obedient, loyal to husbands, and as socially acceptable as the community expects them to be.
3. The community is now divided between those who are for and against female circumcision. What was thought of as a positive thing is now ripping apart the community. This divisiveness goes directly against the high value the community places on harmonious communal living.
4. Above all, it is an injustice to the women. Biologically it is true the women's sex drive was reduced, but this deprives them of a divinely given pleasure.

Problems for the Christian community

There are Tharaka Christians who are opposed to the ritual of female circumcision for various reasons. For one thing female circumcision is not mentioned in the Bible. A second reason is that it is biologically not good for women. A third reason Tharaka Christians are opposed to it is that it is an initiation in tribal alliance and proper "Tharaka-hood." Precisely because of this third reason, Tharaka Christians who fear being social outcasts support the practice quietly. Those Tharaka who are against female circumcision are looked on as people who have no respect for their own society. The church's stand against female circumcision reflects poorly on Christianity because Tharaka people assume for one to be a Christian they must take on a foreign culture that lacks respect for their own culture. The biggest problem arises from the fact that the Bible does not address female circumcision directly.

The Jewish culture had a circumcision rite for boys, but it carried a very different meaning in the culture. Jewish boys were circumcised eight days after birth, as a sign that they were a part of the Jewish ethnic group. It was a decision of the parents in obedience to God to bring the child into the nationhood of their country. It was a kind of citizenship rite. Biologically, only men have a hygienic reason for circumcision. It was not as painful as for women, especially when performed on the eighth day. Also, it did not have negative effects on their sexual lives as it does for women.

The Christian leaders did not know the real biblical solution to this. In fact, even some pastors were getting their daughters circumcised. One pastor told me, "How can I marry off my daughter unless she has been 'trimmed to size' (circumcised)? I will get my brothers to ensure it is done on my behalf so that the Church does not blame me." This is what got me interested in finding out why their daughters had to be "trimmed up."

What is BTL's role in this?

One of the goals of BTL is to see more people live out their Christianity in their own cultural ways with the Bible as a yardstick. When the Bible remains silent about certain cultural features, the Church and BTL should assist the Christians to think through their traditions by digging deeper.

In the Tharaka situation our role was to do the cultural research and enlighten the Church on what they could do to resolve this critical problem in the community. We needed to look into the origin

and purpose of female circumcision. We challenged the pastors to test female circumcision in the light of God's Word. We discovered that it was necessary to educate the women in the area of morality.

We came in at a time when the whole community was feeling the need to change what they were doing. They did not know how to do it. We were one of the channels to help them work out a solution.

There was a lot of commotion about female circumcision at the time I lived in Tharaka (1994–1996). I set out to gain insights about the origin of this practice, the purpose it was meant to serve in the society, and its present relevancy within Tharaka society where male and female roles were drastically changing. I hoped to pass on my findings and suggestions for biblical solutions to the pastors and other interested people as a tool to help them in their efforts to stop the practice. I carried out formal discussions about this tradition with various people and groups, both with Christians who supported female circumcision and those who were against it. I also talked to a few who participated in female circumcision. In several church fellowships, ladies whom I knew personally to be very strong believers and models of the Christian faith had just been circumcised. Many people were asking what was the right way to follow: the Christian faith or the tradition? It was a complex issue to tackle. How should we deal with female circumcision, seeing that even some church leaders allow it, and the Bible does not address it directly?

Recommendations

In Tharaka, we discovered that part of the rite of passage known as female circumcision is good—wanting the young women to have wisdom, to be able to live in the community within acceptable moral expectations. However, another part is not honorable at all: the pain and injustice inflicted on the woman, the desire of men to deny women pleasure with their husbands. The practice has even resulted in adultery and general promiscuity in the community.

By the second week I had come up with some insights and went back to those groups with whom I had had initial discussions. Later I found another new group that was not involved in the initial discussions and shared the findings with them also. I told them what I assumed were the main reasons behind female circumcision and I also shared what I thought would be the Christian approach to the problem (see below). Out of the first group of thirty-six men and five women who were with me in the seminar, only one man was not sure whether this would help. The other thirty-five men thought it would be a great help. The women just smiled and said nothing. Culturally, this smiling was a sign of agreement that is only given when one totally agrees and does so emphatically. It is a smile of relief, suggesting we have arrived at the right conclusion. They all went out to teach it, and later they all reported that the response from the community was very positive. For the first time they had been shown the biblical view without simply being told that female circumcision was sin.

I proposed the following solution to the Tharaka pastors:

- Lead people to recognize the changes in life due to modernity.

- Challenge the elite in the society to share the benefits of their education with their people, for example, that female circumcision is physical mutilation.
- Offer them a Christian alternative for this rite of passage to fulfill the role the old ritual had.

As an alternative to the traditional circumcision, the Christian community could bring these girls together in seminars and have older Christian women respected in the community teach the girls how to live holy lives based on the Scriptures. This uses the biblical method of old women teaching young girls how to live with their husbands.

The Christian view of sex must be taught. The Bible tells us that there should be no adultery or fornication. Both man and woman should be able to enjoy their marriage life. The teaching could include a broader range of information about God's world and creation: topics as basic as the biology of males and females, cycles, and how it all works.

The role of women in society needs to be redefined, corresponding with biblical teaching. Husbands should love their wives. Women should be treated with respect as fellow human beings. In marriage husband and wife should treat one another with respect. Women should be honored as fellow heirs of the kingdom of God.

The Church and BTL need to think through how Christian rites and symbols can be developed. They will need input from the wider community in order to come up with alternatives for traditional ways from an experiential level and not just an intellectual level. So far this investigation has yet to be done.

Application in the community

The Methodist Church organized a seminar for its leaders on how to go about introducing an alternative. The response from the participants was very positive. For the first time they had been shown a better way of dealing with the situation. A Methodist pastor, Rev. Githetu, said, "I have never known these seminars could help me so much. I had been in Bible school and all I was told was that we should stop circumcising women, that it was evil and wicked. How could I tell that to my people? It is like abusing your own mother of how ugly and dirty she is. Even if she is, you do not tell her just bluntly like that! I am glad that the old men who came for the seminar said that the whole community needs to hear this. The way people are now teaching this to the young girls is gaining momentum."

Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Progress for Women) and Ntanira na Mugambo (Circumcise with Words) are secular initiatives that have been organizing alternatives to the traditional female circumcision in Tharaka, as well. For a week, teenage girls attend classes in subjects such as sex education, family planning, and self-esteem. They also learn about harmful effects of circumcision. They are then tested on their knowledge and receive certificates before taking part in coming-of-age festivities. If one does not call a party for his child, no one will know that she has changed and become a woman. People have to witness and celebrate.

Conclusion

Rites of passage are foundational to a society's organization. They cannot be simply excised. This Tharaka example shows that people, even Christian leaders, will continue to practice those rites they feel are essential to life regardless of the church's official position. The recommendation of BTL was that rites of passage must be studied carefully, their functions defined, and then analyzed in the light of Scripture. Those elements that are incompatible with Scripture must be removed and replaced by other elements that fulfill the functions of the former element so that the needs of society continue to be met.

Reference

Hiebert, Paul G. 1989. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. (5th printing) Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.