

LUO CIRCUMCISION RITES

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DEDICATED TO: RAMOGI AJWANG, THE LUO TRADITIONAL ANCESTOR.

Ruth Benedict (1939), in a discussion of rites that mark the passage of individuals to adult status, suggests that what we need to know about such rites is “what is identified in different cultures with the beginning of adulthood and what are their methods of admitting novitiates to the new status?”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I'm indebted to Professor Kokwaro of the Chiromo campus of the University of Nairobi for helping me with the scientific names of the botanical plants described in the glossary. Thanks also to Honourable Grace Ogot, the Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services for agreeing to read through the original manuscript and her critical comments that has shaped the final script. Not to forget lecturers of the University of Nairobi and students who willingly discussed the treatise with

me. Finally I would like to commend all those who participated towards the success of this book, the list of their names is too long to mention here.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, the definition of terminology is constantly changing, and the concept of circumcision is no exception. Today we can talk meaningfully of 'female circumcision' yet the conventional definition of circumcision has it as the removal of the foreskin of the male sex organ.

According to an international reader's dictionary, circumcision is the "cutting off of the loose skin covering the end of the male sex organ". Therefore 'female circumcision' and the cutting of the connective tissue that joins the foreskin to the male genital, as practised by the southern Luo does not tally with this definition.

However, various scholars are beginning to recognise the changing nature of terminology, in agreement with etymologists. They are appreciating the Luo mode of circumcision and female excision as part of the wide concept of circumcision. To cite only one example Dr. Katama Mkangi of the Sociology Department of the University of Nairobi makes an anthropological approach in his sociological overview on the concept of circumcision. He points out; "An initiation such as the circumcision of the males and females, or its Alaktar equivalent among the Luo; and even the Nak (i.e. teeth-pulling as practised by the Luo, Kalenjin, etc.) succeeded in creating a strong sense of comradeship among all the initiates who were initiated at the same time".

Despite the fact that some scholars have recognised the Luo way of carrying out the ritual ordeal, the misconception that they had no equivalent for ritual circumcision still lingers. An example of such egoflattering ethnocentricism was once highlighted in the Kenya parliament, in 1981, by an Assistant Minister. The Minister and people of his persuasion have therefore fallen among western ethnocentricists in their false interpretation of some aspects of pre-colonial African customs. They sought to define them not in terms of what they really were and what they had (per se), but in the opposite terms. Catherine George, the American anthropologist has intimated (1968), "There was established thus early the pattern of thought which for many future centuries formed the basis for the approach to the "primitives" of Africa, and which defined them not in terms of what they were and what they had, but in terms of what they presumably were not and had not, in terms, that is, of their inhumanity, their wildness and their lack of proper law".

Apart from reacting against the alleged slur against the Luo people, this treatise seeks to re-introduce the concept of ancestral Luo circumcision as it really was. This is because some people are hitherto unaware that the Luo people had their own methods of observing ritual circumcision. Precisely and in its broadest sense, circumcision can be defined as 'the ritual mutilation of the genital organ'. The rendered the tip of the male organ uncovered. It involved the cutting of the foreskin among most Bantu peoples of Africa, but among the Southern Luo, it involved the cutting of the connective tissue joining the foreskin and the male organ at the back.

The typology of circumcision reminiscent of the Southern Luo was therefore only different in method, and as we have seen terminology is essentially pejorative or relative. Ruth Benedict, in a discussion of rites that mark the passage of individuals to adult status recognises that "what we need to know about such rites is what is identified in different, cultures with the beginning of adulthood and what are their methods of admitting novitiates into the new status?"

There has also been a misconception that the removal of the lower teeth was the equivalent of circumcision among the Southern Luo. This is wrong since even among the Kipsigis, Teso, Masai, etc., the removal of the teeth did not replace ritual circumcision among them. The removal of the lower teeth had three different functions of its own. First, it offered a convenient way of feeding in liquid foods during tetanus of the jaw muscle attack. Secondly, it became necessary for tetanus patient to take liquid medicinal herbs prescribed to cure the disease. Thirdly the removal of the lower teeth was meant to act as an identification mark, the number of teeth removed differed from one ethnic group to another. The removal of the lower teeth among the Southern Luo, and others could therefore not replace ritual circumcision whatsoever, it had its own purpose.

The Luo mode of circumcision has been eclipsed from the knowledge of most peoples. This has been accentuated by the fact that details such as festivoous preparations and pomp after the operations which characterised most Bantu circumcision ceremonies were not practised in Luoland. The 'seclusion period' was also non-existent in the concept of Luo circumcision, the operations were instead extempore. The absence of the seclusion period in the Luo concept of circumcision was due partly because, the Luo initiates had a short 'healing period' or convalescence. The non-existence of the seclusion period in the concept of Luo circumcision was also partly due to their nomadic tradition of pastoralism and fish hunting could not allow them to stay secluded in one place. All these reasons rendered the seclusion period unnecessary among the Luo people.

Indeed as Prof. Ogot observes, Luo customary belief and religious practices cannot be understood without reference to their migrations and settlement. Their beliefs are therefore, a guide to Luo history, and itself remains incomprehensible without this historical reference. The professor hereby pinpoints this fact. "The (Luo) people had no great love for the land on which they lived, as long as there was enough of it for their cattle, and their crops. . . This traditional attitude to land has, however, changed for two reasons. The southern migrations of the Nilotes took some of the groups into forested or formerly forested areas where an agricultural economy was more suitable. The result is that the degree of the cattle complex in the Nilotic world decreases as one moves southwards from the Sudan. . . Most of the Kenya Luo, for example, who traditionally were much more attached to their flocks than their fields are now much more attached to their fields and some are even prepared to do without their flocks. . . There was a growing sense of the value of land, and the result is that each family today is closely tied religiously and spiritually to the land of its ancestors" (Ogot, 1967). However, this later love for land did not lead into the Luo embracing customary Bantu features such as the seclusion period into the concept of Luo circumcision.

Finally, this work is partly inspired to get to grips with the genuine need to rehabilitate this eclipsed aspect of Luo ancestral value. This is necessary to avoid it contributing to the gradual depersonalisation of the Luo image. This is therefore a small attempt to an otherwise huge taste of rehabilitating the overall African personality, as one African thinker, Frantz Fanon (1971), has put it, "The colossal task consists in reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality". This colossal task of "reintroducing man into the world" to Fanon, was not for Africa alone, but also for the inhumanly industrialised countries of the world, that are reduced to sub-human materialism.

It is in so doing that this work seeks to disillusion people of the Assistant Minister's persuasion, that smacks of misinformed ethnocentrism.

CHAPTER ONE

Okoko Method (Soldier Ant Method)

The Luo method of circumcision differed from the Bantu method in that, it was a simple operation on younger boys of over twelve years by older ones who had qualified through the painful ordeal.

The convenient places that the operation took place were the grazing fields where the young herdsboy opted to carry out the operation. The operations were supervised by the older ones, who only reported to the elders on what they had done and the progress of the initiates.

The young boys who had not gone through the operation were teased, and called dirty little ones. In some cases, when someone had come of age but had not braced up to suffer the ordeal, even girls would not want to shake hand with him. The operation was painful and the ones who were afraid to undergo it were chased by the older ones before they were caught and forced to go through it. The different methods of Luo circumcision could best be carried out after the Ridhruok method (see section five), had been performed.

One method which the initiates had to brace up to involved the use of Okoko. The Okoko is the male soldier ant. The boy to undergo the operation had to sit with his legs apart. The Okoko would then be caught and its incisor like proboscis placed squarely on the connective tissue that joins the penial foreskin to the male organ.

The Okoko would then tighten grip to sever through the connective tissue. The result of this would be that the penial foreskin would shrink or recoil back and remain leaving the part of the male organ permanently uncovered. This method is known as the Okoko method.

The Okoko method was very painful because the Okoko could cling to the connective tissue and take its time about severing it. During this process, the blood drips on the ancestral communal grazing field. The graduates of this ordeal were henceforth considered to have undergone the ancestral circumcision. The transitional period was known as pon or initiation.

The initiates preferred using the Okoko method only in areas where anthills are prevalent. The preference of this method was therefore dictated by the ecology of the reddish-brown soldier ant known as Okoko Mar Riwo. This type of Okoko is reported to prevail in red volcanic soil areas. Such areas in Luoland include Kajulu, Seme and Milambo of South Nyanza.

The other type of Okoko was the Okoko Mar Agoro said to avail in black cotton soils. The areas that agoro is commonly seen are Kano, Uyoma and Kanyada. It is believed that the Riwo type of Okoko is more effective than the agoro type in severing the connective tissue.

The Okoko method and the Opila method were the most painful of all the other types. Exceptional endurance among the candidates was their pride, since it earned them considerable respect among their Mbas . . . age groups. It also earned the candidates respectful names like Thwon or Thwondi in plural. . . meaning brave.

The fresh initiates, according to traditional Luo norms, were no longer expected to sleep in their parents hut. They were expected to sleep in hut known as Simba, which was shared by the Mbas before each built a hut for his own.

According to the traditional circumcision of the Southern Luo, where Okoko method sought to sever the connective tissue, the importance of this process can be understood from the fact that during erection, the eligible initiate yet to undergo the operation, has stooping penis.

The fore part is stooped because the connective tissue anchoring the foreskin to the penis is taut. The taut tissue can stretch to breaking during erection if the uncircumcised male force his organ into a narrow vaginal hymen during intercourse. This makes clear the necessity of severing the tissue during the Luo mode of circumcision rite.

It is noteworthy, however, that when the male organ is placid, among the youngsters, the tissue too remains placid. It is convenient at this stage to mention that an age-group in the Luo society is called Mbas, while an age-set is called Tieng. The plural for Mbas is Mbese. This will be clarified further in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER TWO

The Wino Method (Flywhisk Method)

The Wino method seems to have been very popular among the Southern Luo. Field work findings reveal that it was practised among most of the Luo clans. It was also a painful operation that could continue for two, three or even more days.

In this flywhisk strand method, the operation procedure involved the presence of a thorn known as Kuth Alak Tar and one long strand from a flywhisk called Wino. The initiate was held down by a number of older ones with his legs apart. The thorn is first used to pierce through the connective tissue joining the foreskin to the male organ. As the thorn pierces further, blood drips from the mutilated part. The Wino is then passed through the opening made by the thorn, and knotted tightly round the circumference of the tissue. The hanging portions of the Wino is trimmed short by the use of an arrow blade or just a knife. The trimming of the flywhisk strands hanging from the genital organ was necessary to avoid playful children from accidentally pulling them off. The operation had no official preparation but was extempore as the other methods of Luo circumcision.

The knotted strand would slowly cut through the tissue overnight after two days, or more, depending on the individuals. The result was that the foreskin would shrink or recoil after the connective tissue had been circumcised by the strand of the flywhisk.

Since the Luo type of circumcision was carried out extempore, there was therefore no fixed season in which the candidate could undergo the ritual ordeal in the pasture fields.

In Luo ancestral circumcision, the black strand from the flywhisk was preferred for the Wino method. This was because it was not very conspicuous on the Luo African skin pigmentation. It was not noticeable, for example, when someone went swimming or bathing with others, as long as the operation lasted. Secondly, the black strand from the flywhisk was supposed to be removed

from particularly a black bull. It was not to be got from a heifer or a dairy cow. The symbolism behind this was that it was to depict the initiate's maturity and manhood that the concept of initiation sought to fulfil.

During the process of flywhisk strand method in Luo circumcision, unmelted animal ghee known as Mor-Dhiang' is applied to the connective tissue as long as it is knotted. The application of this ghee is thought to act as the modern petroleum jelly substitute, to render the connective tissue soft to accelerate the severing process of the knotted flywhisk strand. This animal ghee was kept hidden in the pasture fields, inside a container mentioned in the Tuchruok method described in the later sections.

The flywhisk strand method was the most widespread of all the methods, and therefore the most popular. The reason can be traced to the Luo pastoral tradition, which became almost indispensable among them. It was from the tail of the cattle that the flywhisk strand was obtained.

In the Luo traditional circumcision, during the occasion of the flywhisk strand method, the aspiring circumcision candidate was cautioned to avoid drinking corn mill porridge or gruel. This was advisable since the drinking of gruel or corn mill porridge could encourage urinating. Urine causes itchy irritation on the mutilated part of the connective tissue of the male genital organ.

The most painful time of the flywhisk method is when the thorn Kuth-Alaktar - is used to pierce through the penial connective tissue. But once the flywhisk strand has been tightly knotted around the connective tissue, the pain is relatively minimal.

CHAPTER THREE

The Opila Method (Sugarcane Rind Method)

In the Luo mode of circumcision, candidates who were to undergo the ordeal were expected to display stoic courage and endurance during the painful operation. Betrayal of pain and/or fear marks one off as a coward, a stigma which might stick for the better part of one's life.

The tacit approval of the elder's attitude towards the ritual operations encouraged the older ones who had undergone the operation to recruit eligible candidates for the painful ordeal.

One of the most painful methods in Luo ancestral circumcision was the Opila method. In some different parts of Luoland, the sheath-like cover of the millet stalk was widely preferred to than that of sugar cane.

In this ordeal, the aspiring candidate to be operated stood with his legs astride. The older boys would get hold of him by the arms and legs. In the Opila method the thorn Kuth Alaktar was first used to pierce through the connective tissue of the male organ. But before the thorn could be pulled out, the sharp blade is used to incise through upto the thorn. The thorn was therefore an anvil on which the blade of the Opila stopped in order to avoid hideous mutilation of the male organ.

In the Opila method, the net effect becomes the shrinking of the foreskin backwards, thereby leaving the fore part of the male organ uncovered. When carrying out the Opila method, the connective tissue is first pierced then incised, thereby causing the dripping of blood.

The Opila method was mostly practised by the Luo of the present day Siaya Town, and its surrounding areas, and some parts of Southern Nyanza. This practice was not very common among the Luo clans around the present day Kisumu District.

However, the use of the Opila for severing the umbilical cord during childbirth, and also for cutting pieces of meat, was universal in Luo ancestral times.

In order to practice the Luo genres of circumcision, the aspiring candidates were recruited by the older boys from the eligible age group. The eligible age group in this type of circumcision was known as Mbas Ma Dwaro Pon. The exceptionally brave ones were asked to undergo the operation without being forced, to show their determination to undergo the painful ordeal.

The obligation to express courage during the pains of the operation was surprisingly, most expected in the Opila and Okoko methods. This was because they were the two most painful and interesting methods in Luo ancestral circumcision. To mark and also to remind one of the good performance during the endurance test, the exceptionally successful circumcision graduate (or Thuon) was likely to be designated to important strategic positions during ancestral pre-colonial wars among other warriors. During these wars the exceptionally brave ones could put on an ostrich feather attached to the head, or wield the shield, or Kuot. (Kuot was a special type of shield, different from the Okumba, which was an ordinary shield, used by any warrior in war). It was this bravery which was expected to be applied when the Thwon was deployed to defend the ancestral land from any outside aggression. The ostrich feather was known as the Osimbo.

The elders tacit approval towards the operation, among some Luo clans such as the Mumbo clan of South Nyanza, could be noted in the fact that an elder, who become proud of his son's (grandson's) show of exceptional courage during the endurance test, could award him with a price token. This act of awarding tokens like chicken or ostrich feather was however not widely practised among all the Luo clans. .

The connective tissue joining the foreskin and the male organ was referred to as the Onduong to differentiate it from other bodily tissue. The term Onduon'g could differ according to different clans.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tuchruok Method (The Piercing Method)

The primordial methods of circumcision in the ancestral Luo society was typified by the constant presence of the thorn known as Kuth Alaktar. This was because of the widespread growth of this species of thorn in Luoland. Kuth Alaktar was preferred because of its smooth surface, hence it's efficient penetrability, in piercing through the Onduong easily. It was also preferred because of the fact that it could not break easily.

The Tuchruok method is another example where it was used. In both the Wino and the Opila methods, the thorn was used in preparation while in the Tuchruok method, it is the only tool used.

In this method, the older boys who had undergone the operation got hold of the boys to be operated, setting them ready for the ordeal. The thorn is used to pierce through the Onduong. Since the hind part of the thorn is generally larger than the fore part, the sharp part is pushed further, thereby widening the 'opening'. The widening process continues until the Onduong is finally severed. Here too, like in the previous cases, the foreskin shrinks backwards, leaving the forepart of the male organ permanently uncovered.

The Tuchruok method, however, wasn't very much successful among certain individuals. Such individuals were required to repeat the process by piercing portions of the Onduong, two or three times depending on the individual, until the operation was complete.

In the Tuchruok method, and other methods, the resin of a medicinal herb was used to stop the profuse dripping of blood from the severed part. The most widely used such herb was known as Oluoro Chieng, which was compressed to produce the resin.

The resin was then applied to the severed part. In some other parts of Luoland, for speedy recovery and healing, the fruit juice of another medicinal herb known as Ochok was used.

One other reason why Kuth Alaktar was preferred among some clans in Luoland is that some individuals were allergic to the pricking effect of some infectious species of thorns. The infectious thorns could cause an infectious swell known as Yamo. Kuth Alaktar did not cause this two mar yamo.

In the Tuchruok and Wino methods, an animal ghee known as Mor Dhiang was used as jelly, which softened the Onduong, accelerating the severing process. The animal ghee was applied after the operation. It was supposed to be kept in an unmelted state known as Mo Mabwo, convenient for this case.

The unmelted solid ghee also kept the mutilated part from drying. This ghee was kept in a bowl made of clay known as Kasiglo. The top of this Kasiglo was made by the circumcision candidates at the pasture fields. The bowl could then be kept hidden with the unmelted ghee inside away from the pests that could try to eat it. To effectively keep away these pest, mostly ants, from eating the ghee, the edge of the lid was cemented with clay to seal the top. In this and the Wino method, one sizeable clay bowl could be shared among one Tieng age-set of the initiates.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ridhrouk Method (Peeling Method)

The fifth method of the Luo genre of circumcision that was also popular was the Ridhrouk method. In this type of operation, the foreskin of the male organ is the part that was mutilated by the peeling process. In this method the penial connective tissue is not mutilated like the other four methods.

Ridhruok method was the least painful of all the other methods, though aspirants who wanted to undergo the ritual but had no courage were held by force and operated. This was done with the legs astride in readiness for the ordeal. Among some clans in Luoland, this method was referred to as Thuanyruok - the terminology differing according to regions.

In this method, the older boys after getting hold of the boy to be initiated would force back his foreskin continuously until the tip of the male genital organ remained uncovered. However, brave ones could perform the ordeal themselves without help from anywhere. Some preferred to perform the operation bit by bit for a few days until finally the tip of the penis remained uncovered.

It is only this method and the Okoko method mentioned earlier that did not include the use of Kuth Alaktar. In this method, like the others, the part of the male organ normally covered by the foreskin then starts to develop melanin pigmentation, since the tip remains uncovered after the operation. The development of more melanin on this uncovered part is necessary in reducing the tenderness of the penis tip, fostered because it is always covered by the foreskin.

This is the method that did not require great courage, and therefore the least painful. There was no much bleeding either, particularly for those who opted to carry out the operation gradually. There was no need therefore for medicinal herbs to curb bleeding. But because Ridhruok was the least painful, it was dubbed the method of cowards. Those who wanted to boast of their bravery opted for the painful methods like the Opila method.

In Luo mode of circumcision, there were no specialists to act as “Craftsmen” for the rituals. It was the reliable accomplished first hand experience of the older boys who had gone through the rituals, that rendered them ‘experts’ to perform the ritual on the candidates.

Since after the ritual, an initiate had thus acquired a clearance for marriage (see Chapter Six), it was at this stage that the Ridhruok and the other methods proved a pre-condition before breaking the virginity cult. The breaking of virginity took place during the Ndaria, after courtship and other marriage arrangements had been finalised. During the Ndaria girls from the nearly married girl’s (Miaha) village arrives at the home where the Miaha is married. This was for the purpose of witnessing the Ndaria and also to return back with one of the bloody beddings as evidence of the Miaha’s freshness and virginity. During this occasion, the hymen of the virgin is broken.

In this case, if Ridhruok and the other methods were not observed by the man, the narrow hymen of the girl performs the act. This causes the bleeding of both the man and the girl, which is diametrically opposed to the purpose of the Ndaria which sought to prove the virginity of the new wife, but not the uncircumcised condition of the husband. For the husband to prove that he too was uncircumcised on the bridal bed was a stigma that could stick on his personality for the rest of his life.

Such accidents have been known to break the Onduong by force during the breaking of the virginity.

In Ridhruok method, there existed cases where the initiatives used to apply the sap from Euphobia tree on the fore part of organ to accelerate the peeling process. It is noteworthy, however, that this was unpopular since the milky sap could, in some cases, cause swellings on the organ. The use of this sap was mostly practised in South Nyanza.

CHAPTER SIX

Significance and Meaning of Luo Circumcision

The significance of the custom is that it marks radical changes for the individual. During that period, a person goes through physical, emotional and psychological changes, which takes him from childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

In this chapter, the significance of Luo circumcision will be highlighted according to the physical, emotional and finally the psychological dimensions of the changes that an individual undergoes during the initiation rite.

One physical importance of the circumcision is that this operation helped in adulthood because in most cases people were known to bleed if they indulged in copulation before undergoing the ritual ordeal.

Another physical importance of the custom according to the Luo people was that it marked the acceptance of youth into adulthood, it was thus a transitional rite marked by the cutting of the connective tissue as symbol of getting rid of the period childhood, and getting ready for adulthood, or Pon, as it is referred to among the Luo.

It also had the physical importance of bridging youth and adulthood, initiation is therefore a central bridge in life. It's initiation that also bridges the male and the female, fatherhood and motherhood, since after Pon it signifies the official permission for marriage and the subsequent bearing of children. A person could perform sacred rituals after initiation. The example of this can be found in the fact that the boys who had undergone the ritual could be allowed to perform it on younger ones.

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In the Luo mode of circumcision, the graduates who successfully underwent the pains of the ordeal were then considered responsible enough to be able to have the right to inherit the property from the parents. The initiates could also be able to inherit the widow of a deceased elder brother or relative, to discourage widowhood.

The emotional dimension of the change undergone was manifested in the blood shed during the painful operation. The shedding of this blood onto the ancestral land is intended to bind the initiate to the departed members including ancestors, who are in the intermediaries with the sacral deities of Luo spiritual life. This was an important rite which emphasised the relationship of the initiate and the sacred dimension of life, that is, the physical and the spiritual.

Returning home was a psychological change on the initiate like a new birth. The graduates went home from the pasture field as new people, full and responsible.

Another psychological change on the initiate was that it was believed to be a mark of solemn unity and identification. The Luo genre of circumcision identified the initiates as members of Luo people. It identified the individual with his community.

The psychological changes that an initiate undergoes include the significance of the pains during the operation. The tolerance of the pangs of the ordeal was token of the endurance test and prowess

of the initiate. Betrayal of pain was a sign of cowardice, an attribute that was not respected among the male circles in Luoland.

Hand in glove with psychological changes, the initiates considered themselves as a batch of an incumbent age-set, or Tien'g that had undergone the same radical experience in their lives. This signified a common bond that binds the initiates. It is important to clarify that an age group or Mbas member was one of those who were born at about the same time. Therefore age-group members were all of approximately the same age. But an age-set, or tien'g was made up of young men who had undergone initiation at the same time.

Therefore new age-sets were usually formed at intervals of approximately after puberty. It is noteworthy that this concept of Luo circumcision ensured that the need for genital hygiene was observed as a concomitant factor, it is also worth noting that in the Luo mode of circumcision there was no, equivalence of Bantu traditional education during the seclusion period. Since there was no seclusion period in Luo circumcision, the traditional schooling among the Luo took place mostly at the Duol, or bonfire. An elder would often be present at the Duol to inculcate ancestral Luo values to the young adults (girls were tutored by grandmothers at the Siwindhe). The young adults themselves could advice each other at the Simba. However traditional education practised during the seclusion period among the Bantus was non-existent among the Luo.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Prevalence of Luo Circumcision Rite in Contemporary Luo Life

Is the Luo mode of circumcision (lying, dead or not dying but going strong? These are the main questions that are lingering in the minds when the persistence of the ritual practise is questionable in contemporary Luo life.

It is noteworthy that the practice of Luo ritual circumcision is still operational in some parts of Luoland such as parts of South Nyanza, Siaya and the vicinities of Lake Victoria regions. This persistence can be experienced in the areas of Luoland mentioned above, but not equally true of the urbanised Luo. Only those who underwent the operation before migrating to the urban areas can be considered to know about the painful ordeal. The gradual marginalisation of the ancestral Luo circumcision from the secular ways of life has been accelerated by the rapid economic and social changes of the modernization process.

The survival of this Luo ritual has been manifested in contemporary life by the prevalent existence and practise of the Ridhruok or peeling method, mentioned in Chapter Five of this book. This method has managed to survive considerably better than the other methods because of the fact that it was the most simple and least painful besides it is a method that one could easily perform himself. The result of this preference of the Ridhruok method, nowadays, is that ancestral methods such as Tuchruok are not very much thought of now, yet it was one of the methods that every Luo boy was supposed to undergo before becoming a man.

However, even though the Luo mode of circumcision has been affected by some aspects of social change, the seclusion period characteristic of the Bantu ways of initiation has made the Kenya Government to threaten abolishing this age old Bantu tradition. In these cases, the seclusion period

has always been the problem at stake. Thanks to the lack of the seclusion period in the concept of Luo circumcision, thereby promising to give it a new lease of life in the face of Government clampdown on this aspect of Bantu circumcision.

Examples of such Government action against age old cultural practices in Kenya; a District Commissioner, in September 1984, expressed his dissatisfaction with “lengthy circumcision ceremonies”. The DC was reacting to reports that half school age children in various locations in Elgeyo Marakwet took up to six months and so kept children out of school because of ceremonies. The DC said that Kenyans should begin to discard or review traditional practices which interfered with development. In this case, the Luo concept of circumcision which lacked the period of seclusion is advantaged to persist in contemporary life without making children to avoid school.

Another noteworthy example of outmoded rites is the Maasai ritual circumcision. The Masai moran, that symbol of ‘tribal’ courage and pride, is set to disappear. The Government, through the provincial administration, has clamped down on the practice. Village committees have also been set to help deal with the decree. The then Kajiado DC gave the Masai an ultimatum to abandon the seclusion period within months, and join their families in the villages. The DC pointed out that “Kajiado district had one of the lowest levels of education, this was due to moranism. Drop-outs are rampant, because after initiation the youths never return back to school”. It was clear that any culture which did not conform to the modern aspirations of the country is intolerable.

The recurrent problem worth emphasising here is the seclusion period which required the youth to remain isolated in a secluded area, even for five years in some cases. However, the Maasai mutilation of the male organ as an operation in itself has never been a central issue at stake. It is due to the seclusion period that school attendance has been affected in such areas. This fact was recognised by the DC. He directed that school boys be circumcised during the school holidays. This proved very successful in the August school holidays of 1985 lasting for only nine days. Therefore it is commendable that a special effort has been made to remould the minds of some Kenyans towards the benefits of social change to review superfluous aspects of cultural practices, such as the seclusion period which if extended has proved diametrically opposed to the aspirations of contemporary life style and developments.

Therefore circumcision as an operation can still persist in modern life. The sustaining of old traditions is as much a way of present life in Kenya, the Ministry of Culture is aware that the revival of our customs is not a sign of being a culture vulture (or nostalgic), but a way of life that everyone is happy not to have behind as long as it is not against progress. Times are changing and if certain aspects of the old age are rescued from the past it is to add a carefree dimension to our current life.

Even though the lack of seclusion period in the concept of Luo circumcision has stood it in good stead in the face of Government review of some aspects of Bantu initiation, the revival for the survival of Luo circumcision need more enthusiastic practitioners in present Luo life. Therefore it is noteworthy that quite a number of people from Luoland have undergone the operation, but a large number of the young generation, especially the urbanised, have not heard of the ritual ordeal. In the present times some Luo youth have heard about it but have not bothered to undergo the operation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Future and Effects of Contemporary Change on Luo Circumcision

The wave of contemporary change and westernisation has threatened to affect Luo ancestral circumcision in several ways.

The new factors which affect the Luo custom include the concept of urbanisation which has resulted into rural urban mobility, forcing the modern Luo to search for jobs in towns and dwell there. Some of them have settled in these towns with their families, resulting into the eclipse of the customary practice among the Luo youths. This is because they no longer held cattle in the grazing fields where the customary ritual was practised. The modern moneyed economy forces the parents to hire herdsmen to graze the cattle back at the countryside.

Western education has also aggravated the modern Luo youth's ignorance in the traditional initiation rite. The post-colonial school as an institution of learning has encouraged the teaching of western cultural values and beliefs in the educational system.

The ancestral norm that every eligible age-group had to go through the rite of passage, in order to be considered an initiate who had graduated, has nowadays been relaxed by contemporary permissiveness of the social order. This has been made worse by the influence of modern affluence in present society.

Contemporary sedentary way of life has also resulted into the reduction of the number of livestock among the pastoral Luo, this has affected the practice of the flywhisk method (wino) in the Luo mode of circumcision since it was from the Bull's tail that the flywhisk was obtained.

The future of the concept of Luo circumcision is partly uncertain because of the present violation of the virginity cult, yet it is noteworthy that the breaking of the hymen in marriage provided a necessary pre condition for observing the ritual. Despite temporary changes in Luo, cultural practices the Ridhruok method's future in the concept of Luo circumcision may keep persisting deriving this persistence to its simplicity.

The ignorance of some urbanised Luo youth about the ritual practice has forced some of them to resort to the hospital for the observation of the ritual. But in the modern hospitals the youth have ended up surgically cutting the male foreskin of the genital organ, instead of the connective tissue joining the male organ and the foreskin as was the case of the Luo ancestral circumcision. In the hospital, anaesthesia is applied to render the male organ insensitive to pain during the operation. This is opposed to the significance of the endurance test, which was meant to gauge the manly prowess of the individual undergoing the operation. The Luo type of circumcision has nowadays moved out of its age old practice of carrying out the ordeal, and has acquired the designation of a surgical operation in modern medical clinics. The modern medical clinics have made use of the surgical blade or the pair of scissors, to cut the foreskin of the male organ, but have not made use of the Opila or the Wino to sever the connective tissue joining the foreskin to the male organ.

In retrospect, Luo ancestral circumcision should adjust with contemporary change. There is nothing superfluous in, say, a strand of modern synthetic fibre replacing its strand of flywhisk, used

in the Wino method of Luo circumcision. There is also nothing outmoded in a modern surgeon pricking the connective tissue connecting the foreskin and the male organ, then incising it with a surgical blade to replace the thorn and the blade of Opila of Luo circumcision. This can be in line with the way the surgical blade has replaced the knife in secular Bantu circumcision (in the modern hospitals) by being used to sever the foreskin.

We must not confuse cultural simplicity with poverty for there is no point in clinging to practices and habits which arose merely from a lack of something better, what we need to do is to develop a culture based on the Luo (or African) traditions, yet not shunning international contacts and development.

Tom Mboya, in an address to the East African Academy Fourth Symposium, at Makerere College, 19th September, 1966, shed some light on this problem of transition: "But whatever studies we undertake, it must be realised that the East African is a child of and participant in the events of twentieth century. If we do not bear this in mind we might arrive at false conclusions in the mistaken belief that our present day east Africa belongs to the Africa of the nineteenth century. In fact some of what we call modern institutions have been conceived right here in East Africa and are neither foreign nor alien to our people. The impact of such institutions would differ from those imported from abroad".

Suffice is to say, that even though some intellectuals like Mboya would propose adjustments into the twentieth century (in East Africa including Luoland), care should be taken to avoid cases of maladjustment in society in an effort to tally with the pace of social change, that has characterised the acculturation process. The watered-down aspects of our traditional values may not all be successfully conformed with present transitional Society.

CONCLUSION

Hitherto, that the Luo community had always been undergoing their own unique methods of ancestral circumcision has been clouded from the awareness of most Kenyans. This is evident from the very fact that various ethnic groups in Kenya have coined words in their different vernacular, to refer to the uncircumcised ones, particularly beamed at the Luo people. For example, the Bantu of central province refer to the uncircumcised as Kihii or Kahee (just to mention one example).

This misconception has been sparked off by none other than an Assistant Minister in 1981 mentioned in the prologue to this book. To the Assistant Minister the uncircumcised were liable to being inflicted by penis cancer. The Assistant Minister added that, this could be contagious resulting into the cancer of the cervix among young girls who had intercourse with the uncircumcised. This allegation was rendered flimsy since the Assistant Minister never tabled medical evidence to support his utterance. The Assistant Minister's apparent machinations against this aspect of Luo way of life was never seconded by a majority of honourable representatives. To dismiss the allegation it has been widely documented that this type of cancer is benign, and that the malignant type is known to affect both the uncircumcised and the circumcised males. The allegation was therefore a mere figment of the Assistant Minister's imagination that only succeeded into reflecting his blinkers on this aspect of Luo cultural life.

This allegation in particular is symptomatic of a prevailing blindspot in the heretofore interpretation of Luo customs, and is the lacuna that this work seeks to reintroduce once and for all, the concept of authentic ancestral Luo circumcision rite. It is the reintroduction of Luo circumcision as it really were but not in terms that it was presumed to be.

It is in so doing that this work seeks to live up to retrieving this salient aspect of Luo cultural practice. This therefore contributes to the overall task of repersonalisation of not only the Luo but also the African of which the Luo are kin. Okot p'Bitek has written in his book African Religions in Western Scholarship; "the African scholar has two clear tasks before him. First, to expose and destroy all false ideas about African peoples, and cultures that have been perpetuated by western scholarships", he adds "second the African, scholar must endeavour to present the institutions of African peoples as they really are"

These two clear tasks facing the African scholar in present-day Africa, are the central concerns of this book. It has been the central task of this work to prove the former Assistant Minister wrong in not only alleging penis cancer among the Luo but also to prove that the Luo people had always practised the ritual mutilation of the male genital organ.

GLOSSARY

DUOL - This was the bonfire where an elder would gather with the boys for teaching about the traditional values of the community.

KASIGLO - This was the container used to keep ghee either at the homestead, or casually made by the circumcision graduates in the pasture fields, for application on the mutilated part of the male sex organ.

KUOT - This is a traditional shield different from the ordinary one known as Okumba. The Kuot was a special shield wielded by the exceptionally brave warriors.

KUTH ALAKTAR - This thorn is from a tree of the acacia family (*Acacia Radiana*).

MBAS - This word refers to the age-group system. These are the age-mates who were born at about the same time.

MIAHA - This is a term referring to the newly married virgin wife who had not yet given birth.

MO MABWO - This is the unmelted state of animal ghee. The melted state was known as Mo Moleny.

MOR DHIAN'G - This ghee is the one obtained from the milk of a dairy cow.

NDARIA - This was an occasion when girls from the newly married wife's home (Miaha) would come to witness the breaking of the Miaha's virginity and then go back with the bloody beddings to act as evidence for her freshness.

OCHOK - This type of herb could alternatively be used among some clans instead of the Ojuok during the Tuchruok method. The botanical term for the Ochok is Salanum incanum or Sodom apple.

OJUOK - This type of Euphorbia is used in the Ridhrouk method. The sap from the tree is applied during the operation. The botanical term for the Ojuok is Euphorbia tirucalli or finger Euphorbia.

OKOKO - This is the male ant commonly found in the tropics scientifically known as Macrotermitinae, by the entomologists.

OKOKO MAR AGORO - This type, of ant is Commonly found in tropical black cotton soil. The entomological reference is Macrotermitinae subnylinus.

OKOKO MAR RIWO - This type of ant is commonly found in volcanic red soils. The entomological term used to describe it is Macrotermitinae Michalseni.

OLUORO CHIEN'G - This type of herb is often used to curb bleeding in the ancestral days. The botanical word for the herb is Ageratum conyzoides.

ONDUON'G - This term refers to the connective tissue joining the foreskin to the inner dermis of the male genital.

OPILA - This is the sheath-like cover of the sugar cane or sorghum stalk.

PON - The initiation of youngsters into adulthood from childhood. This is usually marked by a rite of passage.

RIDHRUOK or THUANYRUOK - This word refers to the peeling process such as the one mentioned in the concept of Luo circumcision.

SIMBA - This is the word referring to a hut that belongs to the unmarried boys who are fresh initiates.

THWON - This is a term used to describe the bravery of the initiate who has successfully undergone the painful ordeal.

TIEN'G - This was the age-set system. The age-set members were the ones who had undergone initiation together.

TUO MAR YAMO - This was a term referring to a swollen part inflicted by the sap of Ojuok or a tumour.

WINO - This is the flywhisk strand used in the Luo type of circumcision.

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He is a cultural anthropologist Ex Professo and has taught history and African religious heritage in several schools in Kisumu, and has an interest in African cultural revolution and currently is involved in Luo cultural exegesis.

In this book, he undertakes the formidable task of demythologising the misconception surrounding the making of a man in Luoland. He further re-introduces the whole gamut of Luo methods of ancestral circumcision as they really were. Herein therefore is unmisconceived interpretation of ancestral Luo customs in gestation.
