



# An Examination of the Spiritual and Moral Importance of Contemporary Male Circumcision Ritual Among the Ameru in Kenya

Jona Mbaabu Karicha<sup>1</sup>, Stephen Akaranga Ifedha<sup>1</sup>  & Telesia Kathini Musili<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Nairobi, Kenya.

## ABSTRACT

Ritualistic circumcision has been carried out in West Africa for over 5000 years. This was a revered rite and upheld in indigenous societies. In Kenya, almost all ethnic groups traditionally practice male circumcision. Those that do not include some people spilling over the Ugandan border (eg: Teso and Chapadola), and the Turkana and Luo. The purpose is generally to facilitate a seamless transition of adolescent males to adulthood. However, this revered rite has been transformed in contemporary times and some societies do not practice it as it was done in the past. The study thus examined how circumcision is practised among the indigenous Ameru who inhabit both the Meru and Tharaka Nithi Counties of Kenya. It further underscored the changes that have affected the conduct of this ritual in contemporary society. It finally expounded on the future and continuity of this significant ritual among the Ameru. The research was carried out in the Ameru and Tharaka Nithi Counties in Kenya. The mixed methods approach proved appropriate for this study since the empirical data gathered from the field is important in examining the contemporary male circumcision ritual among the Ameru of Kenya. A total of eighty-eight respondents were purposefully sampled to participate in the study. They comprised 24 Njuri Ncheke Elders, 32 males from the eight age sets among the Ameru who underwent the traditional circumcision rite, and 32 youthful males from the Ameru age sets who underwent modern hospital circumcision. Apart from employing oral interviews with the selected respondents, open and closed-ended questionnaires were administered to them. The research findings established that circumcision is an important rite among the Ameru enabling the youth to transform into mature and responsible adult men. Religion, education, intermarriage, and other modern ways of life have transformed male circumcision among the Ameru. The churches, schools, and the Njuri Ncheke now undertake the educational and moral teachings of this important ritual. Apart from the physical nature of circumcision, elaborate seminars should be conducted to educate adolescent males on the importance of this ritual.

## Correspondence

Stephen Akaranga Ifedha  
Email: [drifedha@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:drifedha@uonbi.ac.ke)

Publication History  
Received 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2023  
Accepted 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2023  
Published online:  
18<sup>th</sup> December, 2023

**Keywords:** Culture, Male Circumcision, Modernity, Rite, Traditions, Kenya, Ameru Tribe

## INTRODUCTION

Globally approximately 25% of men are circumcised for religious, cultural, medical, or parental choice reasons. Ritualistic circumcision has been carried out in West Africa for over 5000 years.<sup>1</sup> Male circumcision is one of

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Moses, Robert C. Bailey, and Allan R. Ronald. "Male circumcision: assessment of health benefits and risks." *Sexually transmitted infections* 74, no. 5 (1998): 368.

the most commonly performed procedures in Africa, with a wide variation between the different regions on the practice. This is because circumcision is often done for religious and cultural or traditional reasons, which includes being part of rituals or rite of passage to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> There had been few medical indications for the procedure until the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic, which is prevalent in many of the countries in the region. Evidence from randomized controlled trials conducted in the continent had shown that male circumcision could be instrumental to reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS in heterosexual couples in high-disease and low-circumcision prevalent areas.<sup>3</sup> Research has also shown that male circumcision prevents penile carcinoma, urinary tract infections, and ulcerative sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>4</sup> However, controversy surrounds the procedure, and its benefits and risks to health.<sup>5</sup> Recent controversies about neonatal circumcision in boys have centered around the variations in the practice between different societies based on underlying cultural norms. This has led to a plurality of opinions on circumcision.<sup>6</sup>

This research focuses on the indigenous Ameru who inhabit both the Meru and Tharaka Nithi Counties of Kenya. The Ameru society is patriarchal where the male dominant offspring are supposed to inherit the property of their fathers. In the traditional Ameru society, the boys and girls were taken care of equally without any form of discrimination until adolescence when the boys were ready to be circumcised. The main purpose of the traditional circumcision ritual among the Ameru was to facilitate a seamless transition of adolescent males to adulthood. This led to participation in adult male roles and privileges which included; raising and caring for a family, prudent ownership, and care of property (Mugambi, 1992; Kenyatta, 1978).<sup>7</sup> It was also through this ritual that the initiates transcended from being children and became adult males. The boys were socialized and introduced to their cultural values while they were recuperating in their seclusion huts. This enabled them to graduate into junior warriors and belong to designated age-set grades. The other key purpose of male circumcision was to instil fortitude and endurance which enabled young men to become disciplined brave warriors.

However, the introduction of formal education and the impact of modernity and modernization have greatly affected the way the Ameru practice the ritual of initiating boys into adulthood. It is one of the key rites of passage that is observed by the Ameru people in Kenya. Other rites of passage include birth and child naming, marriage, death, and funeral rituals. In contemporary society, male circumcision has retained some degree of its traditional practices although it has undergone a great transformation in conduct and associated teachings. Using a mixed methods approach, this paper discusses the background of circumcision among the Ameru, its practice, moral and spiritual teachings, and the need for its continuity in contemporary Kenya.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A Background of the Ameru Tribe

The Ameru are Eastern Bantu-speaking peoples who inhabit both Meru and Tharaka Nithi counties in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> This area lies about two thousand and six hundred meters above sea level and further extends to the semi-arid desert area with less than three thousand feet elevation. The Ameru consist of the following sub-ethnic groups: *Igembe*, *Tigania*, *Chuka*, *Muthambi*, *Imenti*, *Mwimbi*, *Tharaka*, *Igoji*, and *Miutini*. The majority of Ameru engage in subsistence farming. They grow yams, corn, beans, potatoes, sorghum, and millet as their staple foods, while coffee, tea, bananas, khat *miraa*, and cotton are their cash crops.<sup>9</sup> Before the coming of European missionaries in the 20th century, the Ameru practised their Traditional Religion. They believed in one God, *Baaba wetu* or *Murungu* who was not only a supreme being, but was also a superior and good father, provider, and caretaker who was considered immanent.<sup>10</sup> The Ameru also followed the dictates of their religious leader, *Mugwe* who served as an intermediary between God and his people. He invoked blessings from God on behalf of his people at every significant communal activity and interpreted their wishes.

<sup>2</sup> Taiwo Akeem Lawal, and E. Oluwabunmi Olapade-Olaopa. "Circumcision and its effects in Africa." *Translational Andrology and Urology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 149.

<sup>3</sup> Lawal and Olapade-Olaopa. "Circumcision and its effects in Africa." 1.

<sup>4</sup> Moses, Bailey, and Ronald. "Male circumcision: assessment of health benefits and risks."

<sup>5</sup> Moses, Bailey, and Ronald. "Male circumcision: assessment of health benefits and risks."

<sup>6</sup> Moses, Bailey, and Ronald. "Male circumcision: assessment of health benefits and risks."

<sup>7</sup> Jesse N Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Longman Kenya, 1989); Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (East African Educational Publishers, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru* (East African Publishers, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> T. Mauta, *Retracing the Footsteps of Ameru and Their Sub Tribal Differences* (Nairobi: Nkubitu Publishing Co, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Univ of California Press, 2000).

Apart from the religious leader, *Mugwe*, the Ameru had a functional council of Elders, *Njuri Ncheke* which played a key role in instituting appropriate values to the society.<sup>11</sup> However, after Kenya's colonization by Britain, the Ameru traditional institutions that strengthened their cohesiveness became obsolete and were replaced with Western cultural values. These included going to churches, attending formal education in schools, and introducing the money economy and new systems of administration which involved the colonial masters.

The Ameru society is patriarchal where the male dominant offspring are supposed to inherit the property of their fathers. In the traditional society, it was expected that the daughters would just get married and the bride's wealth which was paid for by them would be used to empower the economy of the family. The boys were shown to build their houses near their parents' houses. Indeed, the last-born son constructed his house adjacent to that of his parents and was expected to take care of them in old age and then inherit their land parcel when they died.

This conundrum has further been altered over the years because all children are treated equally in modern society. It is further noted that in some families there could be no male children. Furthermore, there is also an upsurge of some Ameru girls who choose not to get married and opt to stay with their ageing parents and take care of them in old age. This is the reason why they are rightly considered while sharing part of their father's property. In the traditional Ameru society, the boys and girls were taken care of equally without any form of discrimination until adolescence when the boys were ready to be circumcised.

### A Narrative of the Ameru Traditional Circumcision Rite

Circumcision among the Ameru could probably be traced to the ancient Jewish community in the Middle East dating from Abraham who was circumcised at an advanced age with his male offspring (Gen. 17:10-14). It was initially an outward symbol of ritual purity and also signified the covenant relationship that was made between God and Abraham. Circumcision was also used to physically distinguish a Jew from the other tribes of Israel. It is noted that this ritual has been borrowed and adopted by most African Bantus, plain and highland Nilotic communities.<sup>12</sup>

The Ameru circumcised their boys in interludes of between four and five years.<sup>13</sup> Those who were initiated in the same year or within a specified period belonged to the same age set and were assigned a special name, *rika*. Rimita states that the main purpose of male circumcision was to enable an adolescent boy to transition into a responsible adult male.<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that any woman who violated sexual prohibitions, *mauriro* and indulged in abhorred sex with an uncircumcised boy, *mwiji* was declared a social misfit. She was not only a disgrace to society, but she was admonished in derogatory songs during communal or village dances. It was taboo for an uncircumcised male to get married and raise a family. He was furthermore not entrusted with the secrets of the Meru society.<sup>15</sup> This is the reason why any form of violation related to circumcision by the offenders was met with a heavy penalty of a mature bull, *ndegwa*. This penalty was paid by the father of the errant culprit. The ritual cleansing animal was presented to Ameru warriors who slaughtered it and offered a sacrifice to ameliorate the negative predicament in life.

The climax of seclusion was observed during the symbolic ritual burning ceremony where the initiates were purged of the wrongs that they had committed in their youthful stage. This was observed before the initiated boys could graduate and be accepted into the wider Ameru community as junior warriors. This corrective ritual was conducted when the boys' wounds had healed. Circumcision ascertained the level of moral, physical, social, and intellectual maturity of males in society. It was observed that the age at which male circumcision was conducted in the traditional society ranged from between eighteen and twenty years.<sup>16</sup>

The decision to sanction the beginning of the circumcision session was agreed upon and announced to the public by the traditional society's council of elders, *lamala* which drew its membership from the current ruling age set.<sup>17</sup> The council decided on when to hold this ritual based on whether there was sufficient food to

---

<sup>11</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>12</sup> John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Katheru Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys," *Black Theology* 11, no. 2 (2013): 240–68.

<sup>14</sup> David Maitai Rimita, *The Njuri-Ncheke of Meru* (DM Rimita, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Wilcken, Thomas Keil, and Bruce Dick, "Traditional Male Circumcision in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Systematic Review of Prevalence and Complications," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 88 (2010): 907–14.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Fadiman, *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya*, (University of California Press, 1993).

feed the initiated boys while they were in their seclusion period.<sup>18</sup> They also ascertained that the boys were guarded against any foreign attack from their enemies. The council further invoked God's blessings, granted permission, and commissioned the commencement of circumcision. One week before the onset of this ritual, the chief priest, *Mugwe* who was accompanied by other ritual elders inspected the site where the adolescent boys were to be circumcised. Each clan selected a special secluded site of communal land within a forest or a thick bushy area not far away from the river or stream. This land was protected and could not be used for any other selected purpose by the clan members. The designated chief priest prescribed the selected site from any interference by human activities or animal grazing. He sprinkled a mixture of honey with some water which was drawn from the nearby river or stream that was mixed with cattle blood. This blood was collected from the vein of the neck of a selected sacrificial bull that had been pierced by a sharp arrowhead. The priest then uttered the following words of blessings for the candidates:

"May the God of Mount Kenya ward off any bad omens and help you to heal faster. May He also guard you against the evil eyes of your adversaries"- "*Murungu o kirimaara arabweberia uthuku buunthe. Arabuthia kwora na mpwi. Metho jamathuku jakarobwona.*"

An appropriate day was then selected and set aside preferably in December for the start of the circumcision ritual. The families whose sons were ready to undergo this ritual brewed beer, *nchoobi ya nthungutho* in preparation for the actual day to commence the ritual.<sup>19</sup> In preparation for the ritual, the candidates went around the villages singing and informing their relatives that the operation day was soon approaching. They were presented with gifts which they took to their parents for custody. These gifts included fowls and domestic animals which would then be accumulated and contributed to wealth creation that could in turn be used to pay bride wealth. The boys' parents were also expected to contribute and provide food and other forms of liquor for the male elders and older warriors on the actual day of circumcision.<sup>20</sup> They also replenished food supplies on the subsequent days that the initiated boys resided in their respective seclusion huts. The parents then shaved and cleaned the boys' heads before assembling them at the selected site.

The eve of the circumcision day was presided over by chosen male soloists, *itharia* who were assigned the role of overseeing and advising the candidates before the actual initiation day. They led the candidates in singing songs the whole night that had significant moral teachings to the candidates. In these songs, they admonished their childhood days which were deemed to be over and were now being prepared to begin a new life.<sup>21</sup> All male candidates who were ready for circumcision were blessed by their parents while their eyebrows were marked with grey ochre, and *ira* by their maternal mothers or close female relatives. After this blessing ceremony, each boy was assigned a ritual sponsor who was appropriately chosen by the family. The ritual sponsors were expected to take care of the neophytes, counsel them, and protect them from inevitable admonishment and physical beatings that were associated with circumcision.

The busy day began at 6:00 a.m. when the boys stripped naked of their garments at a designated secluded place in the forest. They were categorized according to their clans and villages. The selected morally upright male elders from the Ameru community and the ritual elder *Mugwe* aspersed some honey on the initiates' bodies while uttering verbal blessings to the candidates.<sup>22</sup> The nude boys were accompanied by circumcised men, their sponsors, and supporters who escorted them in groups to a nearby river where they dipped themselves in the cold water several times in turns, *kurita mwiji ndiindi*.<sup>23</sup> The water symbolically purified them from their ancestral youthful impurity. The cold water also slowed down the flow of blood to their bodies and by extension to their male organs making them slightly numb. It also acted as some form of anaesthesia which made the candidates endure the pain that was to be inflicted by the circumciser's knife. The boys were led to the operation site in songs and dances by elderly men, while women and children stayed indoors and were not allowed to witness the matching troops of the candidates.

A male surgeon was invited from the neighbouring Samburu or Maasai ethnic community of Kenya because the Ameru did not have their own traditionally trained circumcision surgeons.<sup>24</sup> The Maasai and

<sup>18</sup> Jens Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya," Retrieved. From <http://www.Bluegecko.Org/Kenya/Tribes/Meru/Beliefs.Htm> L, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>20</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>21</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>22</sup> Fadiman, *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya*.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen I. Akaranga and C.K. Moywaywa, "Pre-Modern and Modern Male Circumcision Rites among the Tharaka of Eastern Kenya," *Journal of Education and Entrepreneurship* 4, no. 10 (2017): 48–59, <https://doi.org/10.26762/jee.2017.40000004>.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob M Kanake, "Transformation of the Traditional Circumcision Rite of Passage for Meru Boys in Kenya: A Critical Response to HIV/AIDS and Gang Formation," 2007.

Samburu circumcisers were preferred by the Ameru because of their high skills, dexterity, and the belief that they possessed divine potency.

The candidates were guided to the circumcision site by elderly men and were ordered to sit in a semicircle on bare ground facing east which was associated with the Manda Island, *Mbwaa*. This symbolically represented their ancestral home of origin and dispersal area that was presumably located on the Kenyan Coast.<sup>25</sup> The circumciser was then summoned from his hideout to the circumcision site. He ran around the marked site where he was set to operate while uttering immutable words of blessings to the candidates. The circumciser was a mature elderly man of good moral character who was expected to abstain from indulging in sexual relationships with any woman before and even after commencing the operations. The chief circumciser had also about nine assistants who were his apprentices. The odd number nine was considered sacred among the Ameru because it was split into five and four to avoid any occurrence of bad omens.<sup>26</sup> These experts were expected to maintain sexual purity until all the boys were completely healed of their wounds and had graduated from their seclusion huts. It was the role of the community members to identify one special hut where the circumciser and his assistants were hosted during the entire circumcision period.<sup>27</sup> Here, they were well fed with food rations that were donated by the entire community.

On the actual day, the circumciser's assistants carried his bag which contained an assortment of operation knives. The apprentices watched carefully how the circumciser performed the operation with dexterity and replenished the blunt knives with sharp ones. This enabled the circumciser to carry out his operation fast and without causing a lot of pain to the candidates. At this time, the boys were not only pensive, but they sat courageously on bare ground with their legs astride in readiness for the ordeal in turns. The ritual was only witnessed by circumcised men, while women, girls, and uncircumcised boys were barred from getting nearer to the circumcision sites. The circumciser started operating on the boys beginning with the older ones, preferably a boy from the family where he was residing during the whole of the operation period. He did so by operating from the far right and moved courageously but progressively to the left. He started his operation on a brave adolescent boy of impeccable character who would in turn encourage others to face the ordeal with brevity.<sup>28</sup> The candidates were expected to tolerate the pain without showing any sign of flinching, crying or even screaming.

If any boy showed any sign of cowardice during this operation, he was forcefully circumcised or withdrawn from the operation site and had to wait until the next season when the operation was sanctioned. Such a boy was isolated and barred from interacting with his age mates. In essence, he brought disgrace to his family. There were also rare cases where an uncircumcised boy would escape the circumcision ritual and go to live at a far place with his relatives, possibly his maternal parents to escape from being circumcised.<sup>29</sup> However, such a boy could be easily detected because he was shunned from bathing together with his age mates. Upon discovery, he was forcefully circumcised regardless of his age. In some rare cases, the boys who were mentally or physically retarded were circumcised later in life. The pain that was endured during this ordeal taught the initiates to be courageous, defend the community against foreign invasion, and withstand challenges in life.

At the end of the day, after all the boys had been operated on, they were escorted to various seclusion huts *keraro* by male adults and sponsors to the well-prepared seclusion huts. The circumciser moved around the circumcision site in the evening and cursed anyone who could have any ulterior motives of bewitching the initiated boys by picking the severed prepuces.<sup>30</sup> A warning was further sounded in the villages regarding the routes that the boys were to follow as they returned to their respective homes from the circumcision sites. All women and children were warned to stay indoors as the initiates passed because any violation attracted a severe fine.

In the evening and on the following day, the circumciser and his assistants were taken around the homes of the circumcised boys by elders to collect the operation fees.<sup>31</sup> These dues were paid either in the form of goats or some foodstuff. All the collected animals and foodstuffs were not taken to the homesteads of the operators or their assistants. They were instead sold and the money was distributed accordingly among the circumciser and his assistants.

<sup>25</sup> Kanake, "Transformation of the Traditional Circumcision Rite of Passage for Meru Boys in Kenya: A Critical Response to HIV/AIDS and Gang Formation."

<sup>26</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>27</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>28</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>29</sup> Fadiman, *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya*.

<sup>30</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>31</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

The initiated boys stayed away from their parents and siblings in their seclusion huts for three months. But, they could only be visited by young male warriors.<sup>32</sup> The male sponsors who were responsible married men were adult males of flawless character that could be emulated by the initiated boys. Their task was to feed the initiates and instruct them on how to bathe and sleep properly so as not to cause further injuries to their wounds. They dressed the initiates' wounds with traditional medicines, instilled good character in the newly circumcised boys, and informed their parents about the health and healing conditions of their sons' wounds.

Sexual purity and other related social prohibitions were highly observed while in seclusion. During this period the newly initiated boys were encouraged to recant the evils which they had committed in their youthful lives.<sup>33</sup> This included cases where they could have participated either knowingly or unintentionally in petty crimes such as lying, or menial pilfering. It was during this period that responsible male tutors mentored the initiates in the society's social, political, and moral values. The initiated boys were taught how to identify their kin members and uphold their clan system. This was important in the selection of brides for marriage which was in essence exogamous. The initiated boys were also instructed on how to work hard in their daily lives, to create and sustain their wealth. The domestic animals that were gifted to initiated boys at the end of the seclusion period multiplied in number and were used to pay bride wealth. The boys were also taught how to be responsible fathers and how to take good care of their wives and children after marriage. The Ameru ethical teachings also comprised various prohibitions that forbade the initiates from stealing communal foodstuffs or engaging in petty fights with their siblings, close relatives, or friends.<sup>34</sup> This resonates well with the biblical teachings in Deuteronomy 26.

During this time, the healed initiates were frightened with a one-foot-long, one-inch-wide and one-tenth-inch-thick iron bar which was used to brand and mark cattle, *kioro*.<sup>35</sup> It would be heated hot and brandished in the air to scare the observers that it was going to be used to further severe the boys' male organs. This narrative was meant to frighten women and uncircumcised boys about the pain associated with this important ritual.<sup>36</sup>

The selected men and sponsors who presided over this scary ritual applied a clear thick sap that was extracted from the *muchumaru* tree and courageously touched the hot iron bar which emitted a thick choking smoke that engulfed the atmosphere. It created a terrifying experience for the candidates. Other men who were present at this occasion would throw some dry leaves and twigs from the khat *mira*, *mikilinyai*, and *mthara* plants onto the hot iron bar resulting in explosions of fire balls which rented some form of firework impressions in the air.

The interviewed respondents noted that before the onset of the above ritual, a specially designated adult male was adorned in scary garments to conceal his identity. But, he was in essence a medicine man *mganga/mugaa* who was escorted by his assistants. He carried his magical paraphernalia in a special leather bag while blowing loudly a cattle horn.<sup>37</sup> The medicine man entered the candidates' homes in a frenzy mood. The ritual warriors would then announce that there were evil spirits in the homes that needed exorcism.<sup>38</sup> The initiates' fathers and other male relatives symbolically collected some soil or pieces of grass in their palms and scattered them out in the compound as a sign of casting away the evil spirits. The medicine man was further led to the seclusion huts that were being inhabited by the initiates. He was further assisted by adult male elders to sit down on a special stool in one of the seclusion huts from where he beseeched the candidates in a hoarse and witty voice to confess their evil deeds.

The healed initiated boys' heads were shaved clean. Then they were carried shoulder high and laid on their backs as one of the ritual leaders branded a glowing metal bar, *kioro* outside the hut. He summoned the mesmerized relatives to spit on it as a sign of blessings to their sons.<sup>39</sup> After these pronouncements, the ritual leader further requested for some water to cool the burning hot metal bar which symbolized that the candidates had bravely withstood the circumcision ordeal. The initiated boys were then declared young warriors. The burning metal bar

---

<sup>32</sup> Stephen I Akaranga, "Birth and Initiation into Adulthood in Relation to Baptism and Confirmation among the Amalagolu of Kenya" (University of Nairobi, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>34</sup> Kanake, "Transformation of the Traditional Circumcision Rite of Passage for Meru Boys in Kenya: A Critical Response to HIV/AIDS and Gang Formation"; Kiambati Mbabu, "Contribution of Ameru Elders in Educating the Central Imenti Youth, Meru County, in Light of Jesus the Liberating Teacher" (University of Nairobi, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>36</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>37</sup> Fadiman, *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya*.

<sup>38</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>39</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

marked the climax of the liminal stage which was then followed by incorporation ceremonies as the boys graduated from their seclusion huts, *gutura-nyumba*.<sup>40</sup>

The initiated boys were instructed on how to hold and use a spear, club, and shield in war.<sup>41</sup> The young warriors were also taught to be brave as they prepared to go to war. They gained fortitude and were encouraged to defend the cherished Meru Nation.<sup>42</sup> The young warriors were led out of the seclusion huts to dramatize a mock fight and escape from their main adversaries the Maasai, *uru* after receiving blessings from their parents. It is further noted that although the Maasai were presumed to be the greatest enemies of the Ameru, the circumcision ritual was emulated by them. During the dramatized mock raid, each initiate was expected to symbolically subdue and kill one Maasai warrior, while the captured warriors were tied with ropes and carried by the initiates as prisoners of war.<sup>43</sup> The procession of young warriors returned to their homes while singing:

**Leader:** "One young warrior has annihilated the whole of the Maasai nation...."

**Response:** "He indeed has."

**Leader:** "*Mwana umwe athria....*"

**Response:** "*Oh jaii!*"

After accomplishing the first incorporation ceremony, the initiated boys were ushered into the second ceremony of literally shooting the fig tree, *kuratha mukuu*.<sup>44</sup> The young warriors aimed their arrows at the designated trees to figuratively absolve themselves from the repercussions arising from any inter-tribal death-related cases. They abandoned the remaining arrows and bows at the site and ran to their respective homes where they were warmly received at a common venue, *gaaru* by adult men.<sup>45</sup> The young warriors, *lamala* were now not only accorded the opportunity to enjoy family and communal rights but they were also expected to carry out their well-defined obligations in society while observing the Ameru moral values. They now officially joined a new age set which comprised one of the following rotational set names:

*Kiramunya, Gichunge, Buantai, Miriti, Lubetaa, Ratanya, Michubu, Ithalii.*

Each age set was further divided into three more age groups:

*Ndingurii, Kobia and Kaberia.*

The young warriors in each age set were circumcised in one of these age groups within an interval of three to five years from one age group to another. Then there was a 12–15-year interval from one age set to another. The young warriors were warned not to spill the blood of their kin and were expected to be submissive to their parents and sponsors. They were further taught to take care of their ecological environment and were advised not to discriminate against any children in the Meru community.<sup>46</sup> In this way, they were inculcated with requisite skills and tactics which enabled them to graduate into a new defence council of warriors. The young warriors were now ready to get married, own property and inherit it. The interviewed respondents averred that the instructions that accompanied the circumcision ritual focused on morality, bravery, and defending the Meru community from their enemies. This enabled the initiates to be fully integrated into the Ameru community.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were adopted in the study because of the flexibility in collecting, analyzing and interpreting information and data. The mixed methods approach proved appropriate for this study since the empirical data gathered from the field is important in examining the contemporary male circumcision ritual among the Ameru of Kenya. The sample size for this study consisted of 6 sub ethnicities in Meru County which were arrived at based on the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table.<sup>47</sup>

**Table 1 List of respondents**

Category of respondents	Number
Njuri Ncheke Elders	24

<sup>40</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys"; Finke, "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya."

<sup>41</sup> Mbabu, "Contribution of Ameru Elders in Educating the Central Imenti Youth, Meru County, in Light of Jesus the Liberating Teacher."

<sup>42</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>43</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>44</sup> Gichaara, "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys."

<sup>45</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>46</sup> Nyaga, *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*.

<sup>47</sup> Robert V Krejcie and Daryle W Morgan, "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30, no. 3 (1970): 607–10.

Traditionally Circumcised Males	32
Males circumcised in Hospitals	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

Purposive Sampling was applied in selecting the sample used for the study. The sampled respondents included 24 Njuri Ncheke Elders, 32 males from the eight age sets among the Ameru who underwent the traditional circumcision rite and 32 youthful males from the Ameru age sets who underwent modern hospital circumcision. Questionnaires and interview schedules served as the main modes that were used to gather information for this study. The respondents were issued with questionnaires which consisted of close-ended and open-ended question items. The elderly respondents were interviewed, because the majority of them could neither read nor write. The secondary data was obtained from available written sources on the Ameru circumcision ritual. The reading materials were obtained from published books, theses, and journal articles in public libraries and the Meru Museum. The researcher presented data based on specific thematic areas and prepared a summary of information from selected recipients of Njuri Ncheke Elders and eight representatives of each age set. The data obtained from the field was corroborated with secondary data obtained from a literature search and formed the findings for this study.

## FINDINGS

After discussing the Ameru traditional understanding of male circumcision, and elaborating on the methodology that was adopted for the study it is appropriate to examine the changes or modifications that have taken place in contemporary society. This has impacted the purpose and significance of this important traditional ritual. The findings revealed that the changes in male circumcision were occasioned by the introduction of Christianity in Meru in 1911 and 1912 by the Roman Catholic Missionaries and the Methodist Church Missionaries respectively. This led to the adoption of Western ways of life which included education and hospital circumcision operations among the Ameru. It is noted that the first modern male circumcision operation was performed in 1929 at Chogoria Presbyterian Mission Hospital.<sup>48</sup> This contemporary form of operation has gained popularity not only among Christians but also among the common and erudite Ameru populace.<sup>49</sup>

According to the respondents, boys are circumcised at an average age of between twelve and fifteen years. This operation is observed when the boys have completed their primary school education, and have sat for their examination awaiting their results. The circumcision ritual is observed timely to enable the healed initiated boys to join various day and boarding secondary schools of their choice and study amicably. It would be a great disgrace and stigmatizing for an adolescent uncircumcised boy to undress and bathe with his peers in an open or common bathroom. He could be further exposed to mockery and ridicule by his peers and other senior students in the school which in turn could affect his academic performance. It was however widely observed that many Ameru families decide of their own volition to circumcise their young male children even before they complete their primary school education.

This, according to the traditional leaders is contrary to what was expected in the indigenous Ameru society, where circumcision was an important stage in life that was of great significance to adolescent males. The respondents stated that this ritual was embraced by all members of the community. Each one of them had an important role to play in the preparations, the actual moment of the ritual, and the teachings in seclusion huts. Traditional male circumcision is perceived primarily as an agent of socialization. Interviewees claimed that this was one of the reasons for undertaking the ritual. They described the experience as resulting in a behavioral change necessary for the transition to manhood.

## DISCUSSION

The findings have established that Ameru circumcision was observed in the traditional setup among adolescent males and continues to be practised in contemporary society. But, when Christianity was introduced by the European missionaries in the early 20th Century, it led to gradual changes or the abandoning of their indigenous religious and cultural values. Variations within the environment have resulted in significant changes in its practice and principles. The physical ordeal and the associated teachings which are imparted to the initiates

<sup>48</sup> Kanake, "Transformation of the Traditional Circumcision Rite of Passage for Meru Boys in Kenya: A Critical Response to HIV/AIDS and Gang Formation."

<sup>49</sup> Akaranga. and Moywaywa , "Pre-Modern and Modern Male Circumcision Rites among the Tharaka of Eastern Kenya."



during and after circumcision influence the behaviour and conduct of male youths who grow up to become mature and responsible adult males.

Male circumcision has however been affected by modernity and has been transformed from just being a communal practice into an individual or family affair. It is no longer an elaborate rite of passage but is rather seen as a physical operation that has little or no moral obligations associated with it. The bond that was cultivated during the communal observation of this ritual is even lacking.

The extensive preparations that were witnessed in the traditional Meru society are no longer witnessed in the contemporary society where children spend most of their time with their teachers in school. Growing up, children of today have very little time to interact with their parents or guardians while in their houses or homes. Most indigenous practices and value systems have been influenced by the adoption of modern forms of culture and medical practices. The introduction of education and modern ways of life have also affected the circumcision of male children. The operation is observed in hospitals and clinics under the deftness of qualified medical practitioners. This is to a great extent a healthy and hygienic exercise that is practised worldwide that negates the traditional practice of exposing initiates to the health hazard of contracting HIV/AIDS where one surgical knife was used to operate on multiple candidates.

In contemporary Ameru society, boys are circumcised in hospitals during the longer school vacation holidays starting from November and extending until early January of the succeeding year. During this time, many parents and guardians alike commit to end the year well culminating in festivities and fresh New Year resolutions. Individual families plan to circumcise their young adolescent male children in both public and private hospitals. This is done privately in some families by the concerned parents and guardians who inform a few relatives about their decisions. The boys are then operated on in hospitals by qualified male gynaecological surgeons comprising nurses, clinicians, and doctors.

After the operation, the caregivers are advised on how to dress the wounds and apply the recommended medicines to facilitate quicker healing. They are further provided with an elaborate feeding menu and programme to adhere to and enable the circumcised boys to undergo the healing process. The circumcised boys are then released to their respective families for home care recuperation and healing.<sup>50</sup> After the boys are fully healed, their parents or guardians arrange and host family parties for them as they have now attained new statuses and roles in life. It is during this get-together occasion that the initiated boys are proudly adorned with new garments and are presented with gifts by their parents, guardians, and guests. A few speeches are made by the parents or guardians who congratulate them and offer a few lessons about their newly acquired statuses. These teachings are however not as rigorous or elaborate as compared to those which were taught in the traditional Ameru setup. The new names given to the initiates after circumcision are no longer observed and adhered to even by relatives of the initiates.

The changes that have occurred due to globalization generally displease the indigenous leaders of Ameru. The Elders (Njuri Ncheke) lamented about the abandonment or neglect of the important teachings that are related to responsible parenthood, respect for elders, wearing appropriate garments, good behaviour towards in-laws, and hard work among other traditional Ameru virtues.

The contemporary procedure negates the feeling of pain that was associated with bravery and fortitude as was the case in the traditional Ameru male circumcision ritual. It is noted that the current mode of circumcision in hospitals is conducted by trained medical experts, some of whom are female doctors, clinical officers, or nurses. This is contrary to the traditional Ameru circumcision ritual where the male surgeons came from the neighbouring Maasai or Samburu communities. According to Gwata, the transition period is intended to be an educational experience whereby boys are instructed on the "dignity of manhood," through sexual instruction as well as instruction in the history, traditions and beliefs of the tribe.<sup>51</sup>

However, Bailey and Egesah posit that the main reasons for resorting to contemporary circumcision are the cost (traditional circumcision is more expensive because of the need to kill a bull and the feasting and celebrations that are sponsored by the family), the need for rapid healing to return to school, fear of injury, desire to be "modern," alternate ways to express manhood (graduation from school, getting a job, earning income), and reduced risk of infection, including HIV infection.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Louise Vincent, "'Boys Will Be Boys': Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no. 5 (2008): 431–46; Ortrun Meissner and David L Buso, "Traditional Male Circumcision in the Eastern Cape-Scourge or Blessing?," *South African Medical Journal* 97, no. 5 (2007): 371–73; Kapa Korta and John Perry, "Squaring the Circle," in *Perspectives on Pragmatics and Philosophy* (Springer, 2013), 291–302.

<sup>51</sup> Feri Gwata, "Traditional male circumcision: What is its socio-cultural significance among young Xhosa men?." (2009).

<sup>52</sup> Robert C. Bailey, and Omar Egesah. "Assessment of clinical and traditional male circumcision services in Bungoma district, Kenya." *Complication rates and operational needs. Special report. Washington, DC: USAID, PSI AIDSMark* (2006): 1-39.

The findings have revealed the importance of the traditional Ameru circumcision rites which instilled discipline among the boys. They thus grew up with these virtues which guided them through out life. Hence, the traditional rites should not be relegated into the background.

The modern male boys' hospital-based circumcision ritual lacks the potential to teach fully the initiates the meaning, roles, and responsibilities associated with this important ritual as was the case in the indigenous Meru society.<sup>53</sup> The circumcision exercise has also become a private family affair for most families. Many parents or even their guardians belong to the educated rural and urban elite class who have little or scanty information about the traditional meaning, purpose, and teachings associated with this essential ritual. It was during the traditional male circumcision that boys experienced physical pain that was inflicted upon them by the circumcision surgeon. However, the contemporary form of circumcision that is conducted in both public and private hospitals subjects the candidates to anaesthesia which makes the boys undergo a painless circumcision experience.<sup>54</sup>

The key teachings that are associated with this ritual are very minimal in contemporary society. Surprisingly, most of the erudite young parents do not have the requisite knowledge of their traditional cognition and values that could be imbibed by the young teenagers in matters related to responsible adulthood behaviour that was taught during circumcision.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that more education should be created on the importance of this traditional rite. It is the responsibility of parents, primary and high school teachers to educate male and female children on the importance of circumcision as a rite of passage based on the content that is approved in the school curriculum. Also among the Ameru, there exists a robust council of elders *Njuri Ncheke* whose mandate is to preside over important occasions and pronounce pertinent decisions which affect their people. This council of elders should also educate the youth about their relevant indigenous societal norms and values during cultural festivals that are organized in both the Ameru and Tharaka Nithi counties.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has underscored the importance of maintaining the traditional male circumcision rite of the Ameru tribe of Kenya. The discussion has highlighted that the rite imbibes key virtues into the boys which makes them responsible men in society. Hence, parents and guardians should not relegate this traditional virtue to the background and resort to contemporary modes of circumcision which has no religious or moral attachment. It has been recommended that parents and leaders of the community create more awareness of the importance of this traditional rite so that its value is not lost in the future generations.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akaranga Stephen I., and Moywaywa C.K. "Pre-Modern and Modern Male Circumcision Rites among the Tharaka of Eastern Kenya." *Journal of Education and Entrepreneurship* 4, no. 10 (2017): 48–59. <https://doi.org/10.26762/jee.2017.40000004>.
- Akaranga, Stephen I. "Birth and Initiation into Adulthood in Relation to Baptism and Confirmation among the Amalagolu of Kenya." University of Nairobi, 1986.
- Bailey, Robert C. and Omar Egesah. "Assessment of clinical and traditional male circumcision services in Bungoma district, Kenya." *Complication rates and operational needs. Special report. Washington, DC: USAID, PSI AIDS Mark* (2006): 1-39.
- Brown, Judith E, Kenneth D Micheni, Elizabeth M J Grant, James M Mwenda, Francis M Muthiri, and Angus R Grant. "Varieties of Male Circumcision: A Study from Kenya." *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 28, no. 10 (2001): 608–12.
- Fadiman, Jeffrey. *When We Began There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya. (No Title)*. University of California Press, 1993.
- Finke, Jens. "Traditional Music and Cultures of Kenya." Retrieved. From <Http://Www.Bluegecko.Org/Kenya/Tribes/Meru/Beliefs.Htm> L, 2003.
- Gichaara, Jonathan Katheru. "A Comparative Study of Christian Baptism Vis-a-Vis the Meru (African) Rite of Circumcision of Boys." *Black Theology* 11, no. 2 (2013): 240–68.

<sup>53</sup> Mbabu, "Contribution of Ameru Elders in Educating the Central Imenti Youth, Meru County, in Light of Jesus the Liberating Teacher."

<sup>54</sup> Judith E Brown et al., "Varieties of Male Circumcision: A Study from Kenya," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 28, no. 10 (2001): 608–12.

- Gwata, Feri. "Traditional male circumcision: What is its socio-cultural significance among young Xhosa men?." (2009).
- Kanake, Jacob M. "Transformation of the Traditional Circumcision Rite of Passage for Meru Boys in Kenya: A Critical Response to HIV/AIDS and Gang Formation," 2007.
- Karicha, Jona Mbaabu, Stephen I Akaranga, and Telesia K Musili. "The Roman Catholic Church, Education and Health Care Provision in Meru County-Kenya." *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2022): 61–68.
- Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*. East African Educational Publishers, 2015.
- Korta, Kepa, and John Perry. "Squaring the Circle." In *Perspectives on Pragmatics and Philosophy*, 291–302. Springer, 2013.
- Krejcie, Robert V, and Daryle W Morgan. "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30, no. 3 (1970): 607–10.
- Lawal, Taiwo Akeem, and E. Oluwabunmi Olapade-Olaopa. "Circumcision and its effects in Africa." *Translational Andrology and Urology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 149.
- Mauta, T. *Retracing the Footsteps of Ameru and Their Sub Tribal Differences*. Nairobi: Nkubitu Publishing Co, 2010.
- Mbabu, Kiambati. "Contribution of Ameru Elders in Educating the Central Imenti Youth, Meru County, in Light of Jesus the Liberating Teacher." University of Nairobi, 2014.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions & Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1990.
- Meissner, Ortrun, and David L Buso. "Traditional Male Circumcision in the Eastern Cape-Scourge or Blessing?" *South African Medical Journal* 97, no. 5 (2007): 371–73.
- Moses, Stephen, Robert C. Bailey, and Allan R. Ronald. "Male circumcision: assessment of health benefits and risks." *Sexually transmitted infections* 74, no. 5 (1998): 368.
- Mugambi, Jesse N. *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. Longman Kenya, 1989.
- Nyaga, Daniel. *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*. East African Publishers, 1997.
- Rimita, David Maitai. *The Njuri-Ncheke of Meru*. DM Rimita, 1988.
- Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Univ of California Press, 2000.
- Vincent, Louise. "'Boys Will Be Boys': Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no. 5 (2008): 431–46.
- Wilcken, Andrea, Thomas Keil, and Bruce Dick. "Traditional Male Circumcision in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Systematic Review of Prevalence and Complications." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 88 (2010): 907–14.

## ABOUT AUTHORS

**Jona Mbaabu Karicha (M.A.)** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

**Stephen Akaranga Ifedha (PhD)** is a Professor of Phenomenology of Religion in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

**Telesia Kathini Musili (PhD)** is a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.