



COLONIAL POLICIES AGAINST FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AMONG THE NYAKOE PEOPLE FROM KENYA BETWEEN 1907 AND 1963

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to establish the colonial policies against female circumcision among the Nyakoe people, Kisii County, Kenya, between 1907-1963. This study used Cultural Attraction Theory (CAT) as a tool for analysis. Methodologically, qualitative research was applied; hence, the study used the descriptive study design. This study was carried out in the village of Nyakoe, south of Kisii County, because of the continued female circumcision among the Nyakoe people. Fifty Respondents were purposively sampled using snowball techniques. The data was collected from primary, archive, and secondary sources that were corroborated to ensure the reliability and objectivity of the study. This survey collected data through oral interviews and focus group discussions. Data were analysed and presented by qualitative data analysis. The main research findings were that Christian missionaries and the African chiefs in the local native councils, the building of schools, forced labour of Gusii men, the narrative of European superiority, taxation, prosecution of the participants, trade and evangelisation used to protest against female circumcision. Female circumcision continued in the study area despite the colonial government's efforts to stop it.

Key terms: Colonialism, policies, female circumcision, Nyakoe people.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many societies around the world have different alternative enrolment ceremonies that members must undergo. These rituals include birth, naming, circumcision, marriage, and death (Gennep, 1999). Circumcision has affected men as well as women as a rite of passage in some societies. There are various definitions of female circumcision. According to the World Health Organization (1986), female circumcision is the procedure of partial and/or complete amputation of a woman's external genitalia. In addition, female circumcision can be described as a practice that damages the female genitals for non-medical purposes. Moen (1978) describes female circumcision as a conservative expression that includes a series of procedures that are classified as genital deformities. Female circumcision involves removing the clitoris and separating the initiate for a period (Magesa, 1998). It is reported that 1 billion and 1.49 million women and girls are circumcised globally. This occurred primarily in Africa and some Middle Eastern countries, especially in Islamic communities such as Yemen, Kurdish communities, Saudi Arabia and Asia, as well as other tribal communities in Latin America (Snow, 2001). In Africa, female circumcision is considered a precious rite and symbolises the transition from childhood to adulthood. Mbiti (1990) argues that circumcision of young girls prepares them for marriage and their role as wives to be. Wilhelm (2009) opines that this practice aims to reduce women's sexual desire and subjectivity to their husbands. Therefore, young women who were willingly circumcised and married off as soon as possible to gain wealth and fame. Such a view of Somali women's future is unhealthy. In this respect, female circumcision makes girls hygienic, clean and beautiful. In addition, the long clitoris is thought to cause a strong sexual desire for girls (Oluga, 2010).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the archival source, KNA/DC/ CN / 1/5/2: Annual Report, Kisumu District 1919-1923, missionaries believed that female circumcision was harmful and tried to abolish it altogether. For example, the Church Missions Association tried to abolish them. In 1916, the CMS sought to ban female circumcision among the Abagusii. The work of another archive source also endorsed this view, KNA / PC / NZA / 4/19/3: Nyanza's Church Missions Association, that in 1922 the Christian missionaries tried to persuade parents not to circumcise their daughters. As a result, parents who circumcised their girls were excommunicated from the church. The church also called on the colonial government to end the circumcision of Abagusii women. Many left the church, seeing these efforts as an interference with their cultural practices. However, the Abagusii were very enthusiastic about making this transition from childhood to adulthood, despite the pain that accompanies it. Against this background, a historical study was conducted on the colonial policies against female circumcision among Nyakoe people, Kisii County, Kenya, from 1907 to 1963.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Influence of Representative Politics on Social Development of the Kadimo Clan of Yimbo during the Colonial Period

Female circumcision among the Abagusii was locally referred to as *Gosara*. It was reported that female circumcision was a customary law that every Gusii girl had to undergo. The aforementioned observation was supported by Moraa and Nyaboke (2022) that Abagusii girls were circumcised between the age of thirteen and sixteen. The practice involved removing the clitoris (*Eng'ende*) without touching the labia majora and labia minora, which was done annually after harvest and was a very important step for all Omogusii women. These observations mean that female circumcision was a cultural practice that was

highly respected and cherished in the Abagusii community, marking the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Special elderly men did this rite for boys and women for girls.

The pre-colonial female circumcision of the Abagusii was highly elaborate. One respondent from the Nyakiogiro clan of Nyakoe village, Kisii County, could see this from the report. This was an 83-year-old respondent, Riogi (2022), who reported that the girl asked permission from her parents to be circumcised. After being granted permission, she was taught how to behave before and after the cut. On the circumcision day, she was told to seat and ordered not to move or twist her legs in any manner that would prevent the operator from doing her work. It was also taboo if she held the hand of the operator or cried. The cut took place very early in the morning. This report was supported by another respondent Karagacha (O.I, 2022), from the same clan that a place for excision was prepared, and the girl was made to sit on a low stool or log of wood. The legs were wide open and apart and supported by women who escorted her, including the sponsor. The operator then would use a small knife or blade to cut the clitoris. The operation took a few minutes, and the operator led in ululation (*Ekeiririato*) singing and was followed by the women who had brought the girl for the cut. The girl was no longer uncut, *Egesagane*, but a cut woman (*Enyaroka*). After the cut, the circumcised girl (*omware*) was given a *wimbi* stalk (*oroboba*) to carry to signify she had been circumcised. She was covered with animal skin as clothes to keep her warm. Women escorted her to her home, singing traditional songs (*Esimbore*). In the homestead, the circumcised girl was placed behind the granary until around 2.00 pm. After this time, the people would sing as the girl was taken to the house. A traditional brew - *Ebusa*, made of *wimbi*, was prepared and given to men and women to celebrate the circumcision of the girl until late in the evening (Karagacha O.I, 2022).

Another respondent, Nyanchera (O.I, 2022), supported the above reports that the uncircumcised Gusii girl was despised and was considered a child. Their failure to go through the ceremonies and rituals made them not be raised to the ranks of the initiates, and they failed to be admitted as full members of society. They do not qualify as adults and hence found marriage difficult. To some extent, they were cut by force. Those women who were married to the *Ekegusii* and were from other tribes, which did not practice female circumcision, were cut at the time of giving birth.

According to Marita and Itira (O.I, 2022), during the colonial epoch among the Abagusii, the campaign against female circumcision had been led around 1906 by Christian Missionaries. As a result, the missionaries banned those who had participated in the practice from attending churches. In addition, the Nyakoe people who had accepted conversion to Christianity were also asked to denounce the act of female circumcision. This was supported by archival data, KNA/DC/KSM/1/10/45/113, that in 1928, the issue of female circumcision among the Abagusii brought a lot of controversy when the Gusii elders announced that they would contest elections to the Native Council, as a response to defend their culture, including female circumcision, which the colonial government disregarded.

Oral respondents also reported that the missionaries in Gusii land made a declaration that all baptised members must offer a declaration of loyalty by swearing their opposition to female circumcision (Ateka O.I, 2022). Several other church missions followed this declaration to show the colonial and missionary solidarity against female circumcision in Kenya, especially among the Agikuyu community of central Kenya. For instance, an Archival source on Annual Reports, Kisumu District 1919-1923 (KNA/DC/CN/1/5/2) also indicates that in 1929, a Scottish missionary began referring to the procedures of FC as the sexual

mutilation of women rather than female circumcision, as was traditionally referred to as by the native Africans and the Kenyan Missionary Council followed suit. Among the Nyakoe people, a missionary Dr John Arthur started referring to the practice of female circumcision as female genital mutilation. He aimed to connote its negative effects on the females with a view of discouraging the residents from the practice.

The colonial administrators also introduced various forms of taxes among the people of Gusii and, by extension, the Nyakoe people. The methods of tax collection were very brutal and were majorly done by the local administrative leaders under the colonial District Commissioner. It was reported that those who did not pay the taxes were arrested and detained by the chiefs who the colonial government appointed against the wishes of the natives. The tax was paid in the form of money and livestock, and it was the responsibility of the Gusii men to pay the tax, while the Gusii women were exempted from taxation by the colonial administration (Okinyi O.I, 2022). By taxing the Gusii people, Gusii men were recruited for wage labour elsewhere, especially on the settler farms in Kikuyu land. This meant that Gusii women were left alone to face the patriarchal colonial authority onslaught against the practice as their husbands were looking for money to pay the imposed tax on them.

According to Kwamboka (O.I, 2022), the circumcised girls from Nyakoe village were allowed to be Christians in the Catholic Church. Nyabururu Catholic Church was the first to be built in Gusiiland in Nyakoe. This missionary station served as a centre for converting the Nyakoe people from some of their cultural practices. However, the Nyakoe women who converted to Christianity did not stop the practice of female circumcision. It was reported that the missionaries did not look down upon them. This explains why the Abagusii of Nyakoe village did not abandon the practice of female circumcision. Indeed, the practice of female circumcision was one of the cultural practices that the missionaries considered to be retrogressive and backward among the Africans hence the need to stop it.

The Nyakoe people were against these colonial policies, as some decided to resist while others became collaborators. Women gathered together and instilled fear in the girl that was to be circumcised if she was afraid during the process, which made her brave during the whole circumcision process. The clitoris was cut to indicate circumcision. It marked that the girl could now be considered a woman and was accorded respect, and could be married off to a better suitor. It was reported that female circumcision also provided identity to a Gusii woman, and it made her not to be cursed by being married off to the neighbouring communities of the Gusii people like the Luo who did not practice female circumcision (Kwamboka O.I, 2022).

The Abagusii of Nyakoe village did not offer much resistance to the British. However, it was reported that a Gusii war hero, Otenyo used a spear to kill (Nyarigoti)-Northcot, a white colonial administrator in Gusii land. Indeed, other respondents also pointed to the Gusii woman called Moraa Ng'iti, who briefly led the Gusii resistance against the British rule in their land. They were resisting the British invasion of the Gusii land by extension, the colonial attitude, which disrespected the Gusii culture of female circumcision. They also wanted to gain their political independence from the foreigners, the British (Ochora O.I, 2022).

According to one respondent, Getate (O.I, 2022), the colonialists arrived in Gusiiland first, then missionaries. During this period, there was a fight between Abageka and Abagisero, neighbouring

Nyakoe's clan, over grassing areas. When Abagisero were defeated, their leader, Ombati, vanished and later came with the colonialists for reinforcement against the Abageka. This marked entry of colonialists into Gusiiland. When the colonialists and the missionaries arrived in Gusiiland, they generated a lot of conflicts as the later began interfering with the people's cultural practices. For example, the respondent noted that the Whiteman took that the circumcised girl would later become barren (*Riteba*). This was done to deter the people against the practice. This explains one of the reasons why the colonial government and the missionaries were against the practice of female circumcision among the Abagusii of Nyakoe village during the study period.

Female circumcision was highly valued for several reasons. One of the important roles that it played among indigenous peoples was to reduce libido among Gusii women. It also increased the likelihood that the girl would marry (Okinyi O.I, 2022). This scenario led to the control of Nyakoe's female sexuality. This was supported by Geiger (1997), who explains that both African and European men frequently have a common conscious belief in dominating women in Africa and making them essentially and properly men. From this observation, it is understood that this mutual notion between Abagusii men and the colonial government encouraged them to control various aspects of Nyakoe women's sexuality and reproductive.

This historical ideology of women's subordination in the British Empire puts women's products exclusively in the private or domestic territory and in the dominant economic philosophy of encouraging men's work in the public or commercial territory where it was related. The concept of "Victorian women may best explain this" goes beyond this study. This process was a process in which a woman's body was analysed and certified, and disqualified for permeation of sexuality. Therefore, European women were identified by sex and reproduction. To equate a woman with sexuality assigns or denies a particular role, space, or privilege to the woman.

Similarly, British perceptions of the Nyakoe people's gender and communal control interconnected in a colonial context and were assigned to the female body of Abagusii in the village of Nyakoe (Getate O.I, 2022). This agrees with Geiger (1997) that the variety of sexuality and reproduction of Abagusii women allows both Abagusii men and British men to expand their own economic, political and social power. Supported by an archive source that claimed to encourage and enable control of aspects. Certain cultural and economic problems of colonialism emphasised the desire for gender-based communal power over both Abagusii and British men. The social and economic impacts of colonialism, such as the alienation of rural lands prevailing in the central highlands of Kenya, have made the management of sexuality and fertility of colonial Nyakoe women even more important.

Traditionally, Nyakoe women played a dominant reproductive role in agriculture and families. As explained in the archive sources, Abagusii peasant women played a major role in food production, so their workforce was important in agricultural production during the study period in Nyakoe village, Kisii County, Kenya (Getate O.I, 2022). Oral respondents reported that economic goals stimulated British men's interest in managing the sexuality and fertility of Abagusii women by discouraging female circumcision practices. Colonial men were interested in maintaining the traditional gender system of Nyakoe agricultural labour and family breeding. The colonialists theorised that the Abagusii structure would encourage women to choose commodity production over wage labour, which would, in turn free men to join the wage labour force for the use of the colonial economy. This was crucial in promoting the colonial economic dominion

over the natives of Nyakoe village and, by extension, prohibiting the practice of female circumcision (Moraa & Nyaboke O.I, 2022).

Getate (O.I, 2022) noted that the control of female circumcision among the Abagusii of Nyakoe village was also important to the colonial men from a social point of view. The idea of a civilising mission was important to the spread of British colonialism at the grassroots level. The Europeans were to lead the Nyakoe people to the more advanced stages of enlightenment through imperial rule and direction. Furthermore, the concept of imperialism's mission to civilisation is rather gendered. Across its various colonies, the British constantly searched for indigenous traditions and customs. It is seen as proof of the necessity of imperialism and the rule that they oppress and debase indigenous women. These customs and traditions, including female circumcision as emphasised by the British, were primarily concerned with women's sexuality and women's physical management.

Hunt (1996) states that British Africans focus on female circumcision, spousal inheritance, and polygamy practices as proof of the absence of African civilisation. Therefore, in Africa, women were at the centre of Britain's justification for colonialism. In summary, Manicom (1992) argues that in the case of gender-based colonialism, the composition of native women was highly sexualised, and presented as a communal problem.

Christian missionaries have made considerable efforts to abolish the practice of female circumcision, but the Nyakoe people, like other African communities such as the Agikuyu, did not abandon that practice as people ignored the ban. This is consistent with Kenyatta (1978) and Murray (1974) that Africans regarded the practice of female circumcision as an important unity in the anti-colonial struggle in the Kikuyu community in central Kenya. This was also in agreement with an archival source, KNA: Annual Reports (political records) 1908-1913, that this was in line with the provisions of the Chiefs' Act of 1912, which prescribed the prosecution of anybody found practising female circumcision in the colony (KNA/PC/NZA/2/3). Yet, despite these mechanisms, the Abagusii of Nyakoe village continued to circumcise their women.

It was also important to note how colonial management communicated information about the practice of anti-female circumcision to the study population. The oral interviewee reported that information on anti-female circumcision came primarily from colonial district officials (D.Os) and was disseminated to locals through the African chiefs of the village of Nyakoe, appointed during the colonial era. The chiefs' organised meetings known as the Barazas, where the information was communicated to the people. Therefore, the chief Barazas became very important for missionaries through the local chiefs to convey such information to the local people during the colonial era. Despite trying to stop it, this practice was reported to have continued even more frequently. Oral interviewees reported that even a very young girl, three years old, was circumcised. This was to ensure that their daughters would have passed the ritual when the colonial government punished the practitioners. Even data from elders in focus group discussions showed that the colonial government tried to stop their culture with no success. They argued that the British colonial government sought to destroy the cultural practices of women's circumcision but did not understand why the colonialists were eager to ban their culture. They argued that the law was there to protect them and not interfere with their traditions, including the circumcision of their wives and girls (Moraa & Nyaboke O.I, 2022)

Oral data from the field in Nyakoe among the members of the focus group discussion also indicated that the Gusii culture played a key role in why the practice continued among the Abagusii of Nyakoe village. Many respondents reported that they practised it to please their ancestors, while others continued because of their husband's demands. Other respondents also observed that if all communities stopped practising female circumcision simultaneously, the Gusii would stop, but nobody would stop as long as others continued. One respondent revealed that her husband tricked her in the past. He sent her to celebrate Christmas with her parents leaving her children behind. When she came back, she found her children circumcised. The husband explained that he had the children circumcised because he did not want to lose his Gusii identity.

The foregoing is evidence that the respondents' attitude towards the ban against the practice hindered the efforts to have the practice abandoned. They regarded their practice so highly, although it was a health hazard. They cherished the practice to the extent of trying not to be the first to abandon it. The fact that other communities must stop first shows a state of insecurity as well as a lack of alternative group identity. The groups that campaigned against the practice did not educate the people on the dangers of the practice but instead just thought it was a barbaric act that had to be stopped altogether to achieve the civilising mission of the coloniser.

It was also interesting to note that data from oral interviewees showed that the minority was unaware of the campaign for female circumcision. These were mainly farmers in Nyakoe village. Campaigns against female circumcision can barely reach the problematic grassroots and end with the chief Baraza and Catholic Mission Church. This is because urban dwellers may have read from a daily newspaper that was not in the colonial era about a campaign against the practice of women's circumcision, so information was sent to the urban population earlier than the rural population.

At the local level, indigenous peoples were somewhat influenced by the practice of female circumcision. Both the catholic missionary church, the colonial government through DO and African chiefs appointed by the colonial government influenced most respondents. The church greatly influenced its members while the colonial government frequently campaigned against local practices. There were no clear signs that health officials banned this practice in the Abagusii tribe in Nyakoe village. As Natsoulas (1998) points out, in an attempt to eradicate female circumcision, missionaries influenced the colonial government and passed legislation regulating its practice. Through evangelisation and asking the Nyakoe people to be converted and accept Christianity, the missionaries thought that they could make the locals realise that some of their cultural practices, like female circumcision, were not allowed in the scriptures.

According to Berman and Lonsdale (1992), in line with their philosophy of integrating features of traditional African social life into colonial plots, colonial authorities are local as a tool for enforcing women's regulations. This is Kenya's local government, appointed by the colonial government and run by ethnic elders; using the female genital mutilation disagreement to take advantage of the patriarchal authority of Abagusii (KNA/PC/NZA/ 2/ 3) is consistent with the archived data indicating that it has been confirmed and enhanced. By exercising the power of LNC in the discussion of female genital mutilation, colonial officers allowed both Abagusii and colonised men to control the sex and fertility of women. Furthermore, it means that you have established a relationship with the group in the village of Nyakoe.

The control of female circumcision by the Local Native Councils posed new challenges to masculinity in colonial societies, including the Abagusii community of Nyakoe village. As observed by Manicom (1992), colonial men were responsible for controlling southern African labour, migration, and the production of food crops. However, control over colonial women was mostly left to colonial men and promoted human rights. Local ruler ship of African leaders (KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/265). The local chiefs in this context used their barazas to communicate the colonial policies against the practice of female circumcision.

Ambler (1989) argues that this shared interest in controlling Abagusii women stems in part from the increased physical and social mobility of colonised women. During their colonisation, Nyakoe women followed the Gusii society's way of life. Despite this, colonial domination created insecurity circumstances as well as new social spaces, including roles. Indeed, elders from African communities often formed LNCs and held chief positions, but by the 1920s, they complained of the growing independence of young African women.

According to the District Intelligence Report from 1930 to 1933, the migration of these African women for economic and social reasons was alarming for both African and colonial men. The two groups were afraid that increased female migration would ultimately adversely affect African population growth and the level of African women's agricultural production (KNA / PC / NZA / 3/45/12). Furthermore, colonised natives were angry because immigrant women were no longer an important source of dowry, in addition to concerns about the general welfare of women who left the community. It explains that between 1907 and 1963, in the colonial epoch, the government had to abolish female circumcision through the local indigenous council of Gusii, especially in the village of Nyakoe.

Members of the LNC and the colonial government recognised that female circumcision plays an important role in maintaining a gender-based social order in Africa. The LNC believed that it played an active role in regulating women to secure its position in the gender power structure. The LNC secured a relationship with the dominant colonial forces by supporting and enforcing the restrictions on the practice by the colonial government rather than joining missionaries to demand the abolition of female circumcision. In addition, the LNC sought regulation rather than abolition, hence alleviating Africa's concerns about the effects of colonialism and avoiding addressing regional political problems that had arisen at the time of KNA/ DC / CN / 1/5/3).

In Strobel (1982), most of the discussions on female circumcision took place in metropolises and colonial capitals, but in rural areas of the colony, LNC presented African customs to colonial authorities in Africa. Guidelines for emphasising their dominance over women, most of which regulate female circumcision. Therefore, LNCs were able to put a lot of power through categorisation and the rise of the common rule. Therefore, the LNC negotiations on the discussion of female circumcision are another example of how groups of men used African women's body control to facilitate their agenda in the context of the colony. This is exactly what the women of Nyakoe village encountered during the colonial era. KNA/DC/CN/1/6/1: Kavirondo District Annual Report 1924-1931, the archival report establishes a school built by the colonial government in Gusiland to provide easy access to education for locals. For this purpose, the Kisii School was established and used to provide Western education. As a result, the Nyakoe people condemned the practice of female circumcision and were hospitalised only after accepting conversion to Christianity.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The study concluded that there were established colonial policies against female circumcision aimed at curbing the practice among the residents of Nyakoe village. Christian missionaries and the African chiefs in the local native councils, the building of schools, forced labour of Gusii men, the narrative of European superiority, taxation, prosecution of the participants, trade and evangelisation were used to protest against female circumcision among the Nyakoe people in Kisii County, Kenya between 1907-1963.

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