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Morality and Community Behaviour in Africa

A Case Study of Bukusu Circumcision

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Abstract

Societies that thrive are those that have mechanisms for enhancing moral values amongst their growing generations in a sustainable way. This study singled out traditional initiation rites as a mechanism used by the Bukusu people of Kenya to cultivate morality among the youth, with an intention of raising men that are morally upright, and who are able to provide leadership in a similar way. It was envisaged that observance of the lessons and principles given through the initiation process would be effective in sustaining morality and virtuousness in the community. This was an ethnographic study, where 20 participants were interviewed. They were accessed using snowball technique. This study operated with four objectives: (i) to find out how the process of initiation of boys into adulthood was fashioned to inculcate moral lessons; (ii) to explore how the nurture given during initiation process had been helpful in enhancing moral values among the ‘graduates’ of traditional initiation; (iii) to probe areas, if any, where traditional initiation rites resulted in immoral behaviour and why; and (iv) to explore whether the rites had been revised in light of available information in medicine, education, and religion. The study found that while traditional Bukusu initiation rites were designed to raise men that were morally upright and virtuous, and while the traditional process of initiation has been widely successful in the past, unfortunately, this study found that due to lapses in control mechanism of the process, traditional Bukusu rites have sometimes failed to produce ‘graduates’ that were morally upright and virtuous. This study concludes that, while the initiation process remains an important stage for inculcating good morals among the youth, checks and controls should be applied on the system, the process and the mentors, to make sure the purpose of the rites of initiation into adulthood are achieved. The study recommends that the checks and controls should be guided by available information in medicine, education and religion.

Key Words: Morality, Bukusu traditional initiation, behaviour, community responsibility, moral values

Introduction

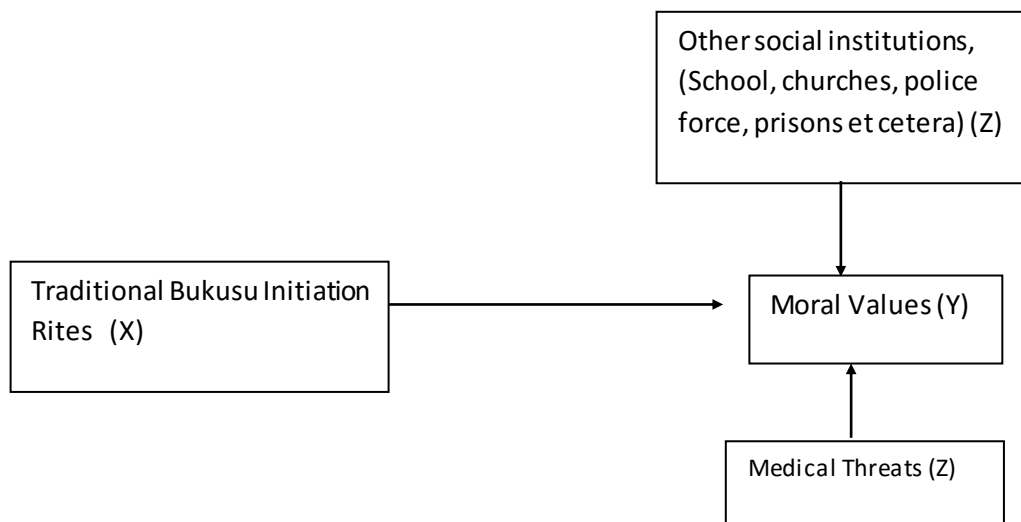
The strength of any society lies in its capacity to raise people that are morally upright, and who demonstrate proper values that promote human development. In many societies in the world, various mechanisms have been put in place, to ensure that boys and girls are initiated into adulthood in a way that responsible living and moral values become the target objectives. Parents and adults in

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societies find fulfilment in raising generations of young people that uphold certain values that are esteemed in their societies, for example, integrity, hard work, love for one’s neighbour, respect (in regard to people older than oneself), *et cetera*. In the recent decades, moral decadence has been witnessed, with girls being abused by boys, theft and robbery being on the increase, murder of one’s parents or siblings, drug abuse, and gambling. The social values and morality have been gradually relegated into the periphery, and regarded as no longer important, an attitude that threatens to break and shatter the entire Bukusu system.

Traditionally, Bukusu man was prepared for the roles he would take as an adult man, related to responsible living, leadership, parenting, and husband roles. This preparation took place in the initiation stage, where boys were given a lot of induction and mentorship. The curriculum was designed to produce ‘graduates’ that would be good examples to the young and responsible people that would receive leadership roles from the aging members of the community. The current trend of degradation of social ethics, however, puts into question the kind of mentorship program that the initiates have received in the recent past.

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework shows that the traditional Bukusu initiation rites (X) is conceived as influencing moral values (Y) of the boy-graduates. Initiation is the process surrounding circumcision of boys, which includes training, mentorship, circumcision, some form torture meant to harden the initiates *et cetera*. Moral values are acceptable behaviour in the community, for example honesty, hard work, protection of minors, respecting people, listening to advices, good discipline, protection of property, *et cetera*. The study is also aware that other confounding factors (Z) such as institutions in the society (schools and churches) or modern health condition (such as the possibility of contracting cancer from smoking, or HIV and AIDS from having irresponsible sexual behaviour). Nonetheless, this study focused on the traditional Bukusu initiation rites alone, and put sufficient controls to ensure that other confounding factors did not compromise the finding of the study.

Methodology

This was an ethnographic study, employing in-depth interview, observation, and focus group discussion. Seven community leaders were selected to share their experience, and expert opinions

concerning initiation into adulthood. Five initiation ‘graduates were chosen to participate in a focus group discussion. Five adult and married and 3 respected women were chosen for in-depth interview and focus group discussion to give their view in how traditional initiation was instrumental in influencing moral values and virtuousness in the community. The research participants were accessed using snowball technique. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis method, and the themes presented as a narrative. The four objectives examined are:

- (i) The process of initiation of boys into adulthood was fashioned to inculcate moral lessons.
- (ii) Exploring how the nurture given during initiation process had been helpful in enhancing moral values among the ‘graduates’ of traditional initiation.
- (iii) Probing areas, if any, where traditional initiation rites resulted in immoral behaviour and why.
- (iv) Explore whether the rites had been revised in light of available information in medicine, education, and religion.

This study is based on the works of Bandura (1971) and Emile Durkheim (1958-1997). Bandura (1977) observes that human behaviour is as a result of socialization throughout an individual’s life cycle. It stresses that behaviour as a learned phenomenon and a product of cultural orientation can be influenced through beliefs and thinking that promote a peaceful co-existence in society. According to the theory, there is need to promote and influence socialization process for youth moral behaviour through such initiation rites. Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) in the structural- functional theory equally advocates for the need to co-exist together; in this case, both male and female need to co-exist harmoniously together to make society whole and complete. Youth need to co-operate and work together to promote social stability for long term survival of the society (Weber, 1947). It is out of such understanding that youth need to be influenced and socialized to respect women and to appreciate all types of work in order to create and promote equilibrium because both male and female are indispensable for a peaceful co-existence (Lukes, 1985, p. 64).

Literature Review

According to Stephen B. I. Akaranga (1996) African communities had a system of mentorship, where senior members of the community imparted knowledge and values to the growing members of the community. In his study of the Logooli community, he found that the elders, leaders, founding fathers and heroes behaved in a way to be emulated. He reckons that the adults played a significant role in educating the young people in proper living. Young people were given guidance on how they needed to be hardworking, respectful, and responsible.

Steve Nwosu (2004) conducted a study about morality among Igbo community in Nigeria. He concluded that, moral nurture was influenced by locality. He submits also that among the Igbo community, religion and value system was regarded as one. Moral agents, in this case mentors, played a big role in shaping individual and public morality. Initiation therefore played a significant role in determining how moral individuals and societies would be. Initiation among the Igbo was a religious activity. The enforcement of society code of conduct, in as much as it was seen to be coercive, resulted in the society that was moral, civilized, disciplined, peaceful, harmonious, and obedient. A. O. Mojola (1988, p. 31) argues that communities determine moral conducts expected of people living in that community. He avers that an act is right if, and only if it is consistent with the established rules and regulations. This highlights the role of a community in inculcating morality, and is relevant in this study, to understand how Bukusu community determines moral tenets of their society, and how they transfer that knowledge to the initiates.

Similarly, Y. Turaki (1997) avers that community morality can be retrogressive if youth grow up believing that the tribe is the only locus for justice. Through the practice, youth are socialized to believe and perceive ‘outsiders’ as strangers and inferior. He posits:

What is right and wrong can only be committed against a member of the own group, race or tribe, but not against a stranger or an outsider. An outsider has no rights or protection and anything done to him has no moral or ethical value. It is an insider who has rights, privileges and protection under racial and tribal laws. Thus killing or discriminating against an outsider is not a crime (1997:68).

In relation to the value of traditional songs, Wasambo Were (2014) opines that the framing of the entire process in Bukusu language, and in strict adherence of cultural practices helps in the sustenance of basic moral tenets. Traditional Bukusu circumcision is sung in Bukusu language, and through it, moral values are taught. Were (2014) observes that Embalu, which is so culturally embedded, is effective majorly because of the African language used; coded with relevant message that can best be understood by people with experience of that language. The *kibukusu* language used carries a sense of belonging, and the songs sung help to express the activities pertaining to the ritual (2014, p. 64).

The use of Lubukusu language only, which is a deterring mechanism to those who do not belong, is also helpful in inculcating a sense of belonging to those who are of Bukusu origin, giving them some sense of self-esteem. This process helps to keep those who belong feeling elated, and thus is a powerful way of sustaining the culture.

Augustine Shuttle (2001) avers that traditional mechanism of maintaining morality is fundamental. He points out that in the event that a tradition is removed from a community, and nothing is offered as a replacement, there is a danger of a ‘moral vacuum, where something has gone and nothing has replaced it’ (p. 1). In that respect, morality which is mixed together with Bukusu culture would be effective if maintained in that way, to avoid a vacuum.

The value of liturgies in inculcation of morality is aptly captured by Seymour Bernard Sarason (2004). He avers that liturgies are a powerful tool to capture the imagination and immerse the thinking of the mind. Likewise, rituals have the capacity to tell stories as they speak a lot. They set a tone and impact climate in ways that help to create a productive context for learning. Liturgies and rituals therefore have emotionally charged connotations associated with ceremony, the sacred and religious acts that provide a detailed sequence of actions that are regularly followed to create a routine that mediate people’s attention. This is also noted by McClaren (1997) as playing a pivotal role in social and emotional learning.

In respect to the dilemma of traditional and Christian cultural role in inculcating morality, Keith E. Eitel (1986) argues that the present African person is one in between two worlds: unable to part completely with the old and not yet of the new world (p. 1). And in a state of limbo between these two worlds a dichotomy permeates his moral behaviour. These views are further echoed by many other writers. Hannah Wangeci Kinoti (1992) for instance affirms that moral fabric in the contemporary African society is falling apart, a situation which casts a negative shadow to the future as far as behaviour is concerned. (1992, pp. 75, 86).

He further illustrates the current moral situation by use of a symbolic folk tale of a hyena. He retells the story:

A hyena was following the general direction of the smell of meat. But when his path forked into two he was not so sure which one would lead him to the meat. In his uncertainty he put his legs astride the two paths and tried to walk along both. He ended up splitting in the middle! (Kinoti, 1992:73).

Glen H. Elder (1994) argues that the transitions during the formative years have significant impact on the individual moral development and well-being throughout their life course. This view

point is justifiable in relation to the initiate’s age of circumcision considering that things learnt at an early age of an individual’s developmental stages are likely to stick more as compared to what is learnt later in life.

Parents are called upon to be ready and willing to invest quality time with their children. Muhia Kirianjahi (2008, p. 3) argued that parents play a pivotal role in the morality of their children. Parents as key participants are required to own the initiation rites in accordance with the scriptural mandate of Deuteronomy 6:7. This helps in reinforcing the importance and seriousness involved in the initiation rite. It also reinforces the moral values at every given stage. In relation to this, Kigongo (1991, p. 23) noted that “ethical education was the ultimate aim of education in traditional society.” The initiation process, which was a formalized education phase, became the most rigorous time where ethics and morality became cultivated in the lives of the youth. In order to provide parental guidance and meaningful mentorship to initiates, Blumenkrantz (1996) opines that communities in Africa today need to create and participate in experiences which are perceived to be transformative to the youth. This will facilitate their healthy transition through adolescence. (p. 21) Indeed parents need to be encouraged to be there for their children, to promote candid conversations with children from an early age for character formation and building because the presence of parents makes children to feel secure.

The tutors need to be carefully selected so as to lead the way as character and value mentors. They need to provide a tight grip among youth through a mentorship programme in form of a mirror put in front of them as a yard stick to enable them reflect and emulate their character. As observed by Blumenkrantz and Goldstein (2010, p. 45), in mentoring the youth, one can only help someone in areas he has successfully experienced in person. Initiators need their own initiatory experiences to become effective initiators. They need to be trained and professionally developed to build their personal awareness, skills and resources. More so, since change starts with every individual, this study argues that people need to stick on positive values as individuals, to amplify and focus more on role models. We need to appreciate and celebrate right behaviour by profiling visibility of good moral character in society.

Blumenkrantz and Goldstein (2010) seem to concur with this idea as they suggest that adolescent moral development should be connected to community development rather than being individually oriented. This further suggests that in order to help adolescents to transition successfully to adulthood, the initiation process should be the responsibility of the entire community.

In relation to community change, Shorter (1998) avows that societies usually change to adopt changing moral perspectives. According to Shorter, human societies and cultures are not static. They are constantly changing; subject to regular internal changes (p. 29). Since change is inevitable in society, informants acknowledged the need to constantly evaluate the initiation rites in order to come up with the best practices for a holistic value-based approach to youth empowerment. These changes are however implemented as long as they are helpful to maintain cohesion in the society.

David G. Blumenkrantz (2009) brings to the fore, the value of control mechanisms and managing culture. He points that the future of cultures needs to be managed so that it brings together the positive roles of the past and present, in the framing of the desired future. He avers that “if you don’t know where you are and have no connection with where you have come from. How could you know where to go in future?” (p. 47). Sarason (1974) and Luov (2005) argue that there is a need for the community to develop the youth. The admonition that ‘it takes a whole village to raise a child’ implies the physical existence of the home community. The modern means of communication have resulted in the popular ‘global villages’ and on- line communications , however research

indicates that connection to an actual geographic place is crucial to allow youth contact with nature (Louv, 2005) and a psychological sense of community (Sarason, 1974) while separation from nature has negative consequences for child and human development (LaChance, 2006).

Kenneth H. Cohn, Carol L. Sale, and Gary R. Yates (2011) observe there are very good lessons and practices in any cultural initiation process. Since future changes are inevitable, Sentara argues that best practices will be used to develop programs that are useful in the past. This suggests that we can attain best practices that are comprehensive and holistic in terms of offering moral values during the initiation process. For example, societies could adopt enculturation. In respect to enculturation, Ezenwake and Kanu(2012) observed, enculturation facilitates the incorporation of the culture of particular peoples into the life of the Church. Evangelization thus is not a one-way traffic. It is an interactive and complimentary process. It is through enculturation that the Church would re-appraise her evangelizing mission so as to grow and even surpass the present successes in evangelization (p. 236).

Findings

In this study we found that the Traditional Bukusu initiation rites influenced societal value systems among youth in several ways. Traditional Bukusu initiation lays emphasis on community code of conduct. Individual decision on what is right or what is wrong is not accepted. Everything and everyone is expected to obey the will of the community. It can be argued therefore, that the consequence of moral behaviour is the responsibility of the community. It can further be argued, thus that the community system is to blame in case of moral decadence. When initiates were asked to state the values gained from traditional Bukusu initiation, they cited values such as obedience, unity, respect, co-operation and responsibility. Initiates further affirmed that they had learnt endurance, tolerance, courage as well as family morality. They acknowledged to have been exposed to character traits including resilience, bravery, carefulness, concentration and steadfastness through the initiation activities. In an interview with selected community leaders, some of these values were highlighted, and reasons why they stood out was given. The findings were categorized according to major themes. The first theme was ways in which Bukusu traditional initiation rites were fashioned to support morality. The second theme includes ways in which initiation nurture helped in enhancing moral values among the initiates. The third theme is related to ways in which traditional initiation process resulted in immoral behaviour. Finally, the fourth theme examines the influence of information age on traditional Bukusu initiation.

Morality Design in Bukusu Initiation

Firstly, boys are educated in the traditional history of the Bukusu people, highlighting areas of historical flourishing. The history of the Bukusu initiation rites and rituals provides meaning of specific acts done during the initiation. Important moral aspects are to be found in several myths presented systematically in the initiation process. Elders acknowledge that the oral tradition as recorded in myths and circumcision songs addresses the origin of circumcision. *Sioyaye*, for instance, is cited as a special initiation song and signature tune that explains the origin of the traditional Bukusu circumcision. The song is said to bind the community together in ownership, preparation and practice of the ritual.

Secondly, the traditional Bukusu initiation helps to build an attitude of inclusivity among the initiates and their parents. When people go through the process, they feel accepted, and included

into the community. The rituals done are to make the initiation perceived as a communal activity that embraces inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity. An elder observed:

In my own opinion, Bukusu traditional initiation rites are good because through them, inclusion is built. I have noticed that the members of the community who go through the rites, or who have their sons go through the process, exhibit a feeling of achievement, and attitude of being at home with the rituals. The extended family, friends and neighbours are all invited to witness as their son transits to adulthood. Together they play significant roles to guide, teach and counsel the initiate because the child does not just belong to the biological parents. This often sends a clear message that the well being of the initiate is a collective concern of the entire community. (A traditional Bukusu Initiator, 8th December 2017)

Since moral knowledge is a communal responsibility, youth grow up appreciating and respecting every member of the community. This eventually promotes a strong bond of unity among community members to live up to the community values and beliefs. More so, by involving the entire community, the moral teachings target a wider population of people.

Thirdly, Bukusu traditional initiation is rigorous; employing the use of various people, and systematized liturgies to cultivate a culture of seriousness in life. The long process, punctuated with a systemized liturgical expression, the timing and the organization from May to December, the rituals, symbols, and processes, all contribute to the psychological and social elements of cultivation of moral values. The community have invested a lot of energy in the process and the elements, so that every step is treated with seriousness. It is an activity involving every member of the family, young and old, male and female. An initiate said:

When I went through the process, I perceived that the initiation is not just about circumcision. No. it is a long process, involving many people, several related events, and touching on every aspect of life. We are taught by many people including our father, paternal and maternal uncles, aunties, the father's age mate and the circumciser at different stages of circumcision. This includes during *Khuchukhila*, *khulonga*, *khukhwingila*, *Lubito* and *Khukhwalukha*. At each stage we experience and learn something. Right from pre-initiation to graduation we are taught many things by different people. Those who have recently been circumcised for example act as mentors who help us go through the circumcision rite successfully. They take us around the villages during *Khulanga* to invite the participants as they are believed to know most homes that they visited before. They also provide safety as we trek through thick bushes and plantations, and assist us to cross delicate bridges on the way to the relative's homes. (A 14 year – old traditional Bukusu circumcision initiate, December 04, 2016)

This indicates that traditional circumcision introduces initiates to communal life through a unified code of teachings and counsel led by specified mentors, sponsors, tutors and counsellors at every stage of the circumcision process. The involvement of every member communicates that initiation is a serious business, and initiates are expected to conduct themselves with similar seriousness from that time. It was established that traditional Bukusu circumcision has laid down strict rules and restrictions on various participants to reinforce the importance and seriousness involved in the ceremony. Another initiate explained:

Once the circumcision process starts, we are given rules that we must observe. At pre-initiation, we are told that *Omusinde* is not supposed to stumble and fall down. During *Khuchukhila*, we are warned against looking back as you carry the water pot on your way home to brew the traditional brew. After circumcision, we are told that *Omufulu* is not supposed to shelter against the rain elsewhere except in the seclusion hut. We are forbidden from shaking hands with the common while greeting. Instead, we use *Kumwasi*- a small stick to either touch or be touched on the toes as a greeting. We are also not allowed to eat from other homesteads except in another initiates home

and we cannot spend a night outside the seclusion hut. (A14 year- old traditional circumcision initiate, December 04, 2016)

Another important moral value inculcated during the process is respect for one’s own age mates (*bakoki*); an attitude that is meant to cultivate solidarity. People that were circumcised together will be expected to act as brothers, treat each other’s wives and children as though they were their own, and protect one another from danger. Even the circumcisers were not allowed to circumcise their own children, or children belonging to their *bakokis*.

The morality of decency, sobriety and calmness were cultivated. Initiates were nurtured to avoid fights, quarrels, and any forms of conflicts during and after initiation. In general, the culture prepared people that would act with decorum and decency, behaving as sober adults. Parents were even forbidden from attending any funeral during the process, so as not to get in contact with any form of struggle, wailing, or the spirit of death. It was believed that attending funerals would increase the likelihood of one catching the spirits associated with pain and violence, and this would be transferred to initiates, and produce ‘graduates’ that were not morally upright. One of the parents attested:

In 2014, I experienced a very tricky situation during the circumcision period. I had made arrangements to circumcise my second-born son when my brother died. I was forbidden from mixing the two rituals. For this reason, I never attended my brother’s funeral. I had to circumcise my son first. I only went to his grave days after he had been buried. Yes, for us after brewing the circumcision beer, then the initiate must be circumcised no matter what happens. (A traditional Bukusu circumcision parent, December 4, 2016)

An elder further added that in the case of death of an initiate after initiating the process, then he cannot be left uncircumcised; special arrangement is made for him to be circumcised before he is buried. The rules and regulations therefore target all members of the community and point to the seriousness involved in the circumcision process. The rules aim at reinforcing the moral teachings in order to achieve unity of purpose among the participants of the traditional Bukusu circumcision.

Initiation clusters and age-sets as a convention are also cited as avenues in which initiation of boys was fashioned to build morality among the initiates. According to the respondents, boys were put into age-set categories, and were expected to behave in a certain way, as a group. If one of their group members behaved contrary to the expectations, the rest of the set would call him to order, lest the entire set be viewed as ill-prepared and weak. The age-set learning and counseling is considered as a preparatory stage moral conduct associated with adult life. During this stage, initiates learn to adhere to the norms of the community and solidarity with peers. The Bukusu community believed that a shared morality helped to build cohesion in the society. To reinforce solidarity, men in one age-set were allowed to perform the *lubaka* ritual, which involves sharing of age-set meat, during the process of initiation, and later on in life. Those who do not belong to the age-set do not participate in these ceremonies. Members of the age-set behaved in a manner worth respect, failure to which they would be dismembered from the age-set, and would not participate anymore in the *lubaka* sharing. This acted as a powerful reinforcement of morality. The initiation counseling, which was also the primary formalized traditional education, focused on promoting respect and co-operation among members of the Bukusu community. Traditional Bukusu circumcision therefore is considered as a starting point for formal education when initiates are exposed to adult roles and responsibility as well as to community values.

Another crucial way in which Bukusu traditional initiation was designed to build morality was in the seclusion nurture called *Lubito*. This was reported to be a crucial formal session that is confined and exclusively undertaken by only those who are traditionally initiated. *Lubito* is cited by

respondents as the other strength of the traditional Bukusu initiation. The session involves teaching and counselling of the initiates by the circumciser in the presence of parents and close relatives. The respondents interviewed during the focus group discussion acknowledged that the session provides ample time for the circumciser to give moral education to the initiate. It is a time when the circumciser clarifies on the initiate’s place and role in the transition process. Circumcisers emphasized that the session is meant to instil morality, and clearly communicating the expectations of the initiate as an adult Bukusu man.

Initiation Nurture and Moral Values

Some initiates interviewed noted that the process of *Lubito*, was effective in inculcating morality in their conduct, because during this time, they had ample time to internalize what was expected of them; to behave and relate well with everyone in society. *Lubito* therefore is considered as a session of great significance in the traditional Bukusu circumcision as it provides opportunity for the initiates to learn accepted manners, laws, avoidance, taboos and a vigorous code of morality in line with the Bukusu values.

Bukusu traditional initiation nurture has been instrumental in causing positive moral living, and maintaining social virtues, not just of boys, but also of girls. A female respondent aged 62, and who is a respected community leader posited:

I have observed over the years, that the focus given to initiation of boys has had ripple effect on the nurture of girls in the society. I think the more the society is thinking about what the boys are expected to do and not to do, have also prepared girls to behave in similar ways. For example, ‘graduates’ are not expected to mingle with women as they prepare food. While it is the boys that receive this form of nurture, women are aware of this lesson, and are training girls to behave respectfully when interacting with initiated men. For example when men and women are present in a public function, girls are nurtured to sit with their legs tightly held together, so as not to compromise the respect that initiated men are supposed to maintain.

In this respect therefore, initiation of boys is helpful in enhancing moral aptitude of both men and women, and one of the main elements that holds the society together. It can be argued therefore that although only boys are circumcised in the Bukusu community, the traditional Bukusu initiation also enhances morality of boys and girls, men and women. It results in both boys and girls receiving teachings of moral values. Girls are involved and participate in nearly all the activities of traditional circumcision. During the circumcision process, older members such as grandmothers and aunties teach girls about their adult responsibilities. They expose them to sex education and family care. Elders claimed that there are sanctions designed to promote and ensure that proper behaviour is maintained among girls. For instance, those who are well behaved are recognized and chosen to serve as *Namachengeche*; care takers to the initiates while those who misbehave are ridiculed and mocked in the initiation songs. This is said to cause them a lot of shame and embarrassment as they may never get appropriate suitors for marriage in their later life. In the process, the initiation of boys helps to ward off deviant behaviour, not just of boys, but also of girls, and help to encourage moral uprightness among both girls and boys in society.

Traditional Initiation and Immoral Behaviour

The ritual of *Lubito*, which is a formalized cultural education to the initiates in the seclusion, and which is beneficial in many respects, has been reported to have a negative effect in one moral aspect. A 61 year’s old elder asserted:

Lubito session includes exposing the initiates to adult activities, such as freedom to have sex. They are informed that there will be ‘open doors’ ahead of them, which are meant for them. They are also told to avoid their ‘mothers’ clothes, and instead put on their fathers’ garments; to signify that as mature men, they should keep off things and places associated with women in genera (interview with a 61 years old elder, Bungoma County, August 16th 2018).

Initiates are given the liberty to act as mature men, and given express permission to engage in sexual intercourse. We found that the initiates are given several lessons, some which come in parables and others in proverbs. In one of the lessons given, initiates are told that opportunities to them come as open doors: ‘the door that is open is yours; the one closed is not yours.’ This means that the initiates would be constantly be looking for ‘open doors’ which they must take advantage of, lest the opportunities vanish from them. The coded language is actually about available girls to have sex with. Initiates would be very careful to notice which of the girls ‘were open doors’ for them. Immediately they notice that there was a possibility of seducing a girl, the boys would not let that chance slip out of their hands. *Lubito* therefore becomes an avenue of propagating sexual promiscuity and irresponsible sexual behaviour. It is important to note that, while boys are going through *Lubito*, girls are made aware of those lessons, and would not get surprised when boys insist that they must sleep with them. Any mature girl would be viewing herself as an open door to someone. Girls would also be wondering about whom they would be open doors for. The teachings sensitize the boys to start running around in search of young girls for sexual pleasure. In the past, initiates got initiated at an advanced age of between 18- 25 years and were immediately expected to get married in order to apply and lessons they learned. However, since initiation in contemporary society targeted school boys, initiates may want to practice the learnt knowledge soon after circumcision using girls of their age; a practice which propagates immoral sexual behaviour.

More so, as initiates graduate, they are told to abandon their mother’s clothes and to put on their father’s clothes. This symbolic teaching is meant to encourage initiates to behave as adult men; to emulate their fathers and to abandon childish behaviour. They are taught and reminded that they should no longer keep close to their mothers and should avoid staying in the kitchen because the kitchen is meant for women and not for adult men. Informants argued that this also is negative socialization because initiates are meant to believe, for instance, that women are inferior and less significant, and the kitchen is their place. This teaching has a negative connotation on women, the kitchen and the activities that go around it. Initiates are socialized to believe that cooking is a woman affair and a man has a right to be cooked for. This could be the reason as to why cooking and serving men is taken as a duty for women. Such teachings promote male chauvinism among traditionally circumcised Bukusu men. And, in this modern era where the society advocates for gender equity and equality, such socialization is likely to cause tension in homes including domestic violence in marriage.

There is also a way in which bravery lessons given during the initiation process results in bad morals. We found that the public circumcision was meant to cultivate an attitude of bravery. Informants reported that acts such as running errands at night, uprooting tough grass and putting a red-hot burning charcoal on to the nail of the initiate, which were meant to build bravery, ended up preparing initiates for unruly behaviour. Other examples cited included candidates dancing with bare chests while playing the bells through the cold night, being smeared with intestinal remains; *buuse*, putting a piece of meat around the neck of the initiate and being stripped naked in the morning for mudding; *khulonga*, to eventually walk back to the father’s homestead to face the knife in full view of the public. Boys were supposed to withstand the actual cut in the full view of the community,

including their mothers and sisters. This was to make them brave and courageous. Traditional circumcision was thus a symbol of courage and bravery. This however resulted in boys that were unruly and intolerant, as observed by one participant:

The rite is weak because it promotes a false feeling of power among initiates. After circumcision, initiates consider themselves as brave and strong men who should no longer take in instructions from the weak especially women. Boys circumcised through the traditional ritual tend to be unruly, uncooperative and disrespectful towards women after circumcision. (A Christian participant communication, 14 December, 2016)

This suggests that the traditional cut as a symbol of bravery and courage promotes a false feeling of power among initiates. More so, it seems to point out that initiates circumcised traditionally perhaps develop a sense of independence to act contrary to societal expectations. Parents of Christian boys when further probed cited that initiates post poor performance in their academic work after traditional circumcision. This is partly attributed to the long disruptive period from school from the month of May through December when they are involved in preparation, actual cut, seclusion and graduation. Besides, initiates are said to develop a negative attitude towards the female teachers once they undergo traditional circumcision.

In another instance of abused process, we found that during traditional ceremony, some relatives also take advantage of the occasion as an opportunity to settle past scores that they may have had with either the initiate or the parents. During one of the focus group discussion, we gathered that some relatives in the traditional Bukusu circumcision mistreat initiates. They slap, pinch and even spit on the face of the candidates as revenge. This is normally out of jealous for not having achieved much economically to the level of the initiate’s parents. Others feel frustrated as a result of their children not performing well in school. Such gestures portray the traditional practice as primitive, punitive, dehumanizing and torturing. Although the initiation rite was expected to foster and promote peace, unity and togetherness among the Bukusu people, such attitude and acts unfortunately are likely to fuel hatred, revenge and unending conflicts among community members.

In our careful examination of the findings, we concluded that the failure of traditional Bukusu initiation to produce well-behaved ‘graduates’ was not in the design of the initiation process, but in the control. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation were not put in place; a situation which allowed idle men, some with wayward morals and intentions, to enter the system and play negative roles. The Bukusu initiation philosophy, that ‘any mature man is a mentor,’ which was initially intended to cultivate respect for elders, has been abused, to give free and untamed space for bad elements in the society to propagate their behaviour. This study found that due to lapses in control mechanism of the process, traditional Bukusu rites have sometimes failed to produce ‘graduates’ that were morally upright and virtuous.

Information Age and Bukusu Initiation

Information from medicine, education, and Christianity has influenced several traditional processes in Africa. In some instances, certain traditional practices have been abandoned, but others have remained resilient. According to Lagat (2017), Christianity was brought into Africa, to shine as light in an environmental that was deemed dark, by some of the missionaries that came. It was envisaged then that the shining light of Christianity would expel the dark practices associated with evil in Africa. Some missionaries singled out traditional initiation processes as evil, in other parts of the country. This study sought to find out how new information from Christianity, medicine, and education influenced traditional initiation of the Bukusu.

In matters related to health, we found that although Bukusu traditional initiation tried to remain unchanged, information related to spread of diseases such as Human Immune-Deficiency Virus (HIV) had resulted in the use of one knife per initiate; unlike in the past, where one circumcision knife was used for all the candidates (Wanyama, 2005). It was also evident in the year 2020, that in wake of COVID-19 pandemic, where health protocols required keeping social distance between people, circumcision practice among the Luhya community was also redesigned, to make sure that the initiates and other people would be safe. According to Egesa and others, even with the use of one knife, the chances of HIV infections would still be minimal. They observe:

Researchers have argued that sharp cuts such as the one done using the circumcision blade; *lukembe* which is always razor sharp and given the manner in which circumcisions are done i.e., sharp hazing often not involving rubbing nor grazing, blood from the wound gashes out to the blade and not inward into the wound. If this is true, chances of infection are remote. Moreover, the chances that the boys were HIV positive are very remote, since the HIV prevalence rates of boys less than 18 years was less than 1% at the time of the study. (Egesa, Wanyama and Muange 2014, p. 279)

Respondents noted, however, that the traditional initiation process was still carried out in environments that were still not hygienic. The recent ‘Christian circumcision’ processes were focused on maintaining a much clean, hygienic and safe environment where initiates are treated with antibiotics that promote faster healing of the wound. They noted that when ‘Christian initiation processes included circumcision at the hospital, where there was less chance of HIV infection as compared to when circumcision was done traditionally. There have been cases also of sexual organs of initiates being severely mutilated as a result of lack of keenness among the traditional circumcisers; who are always in a hurry to display their prowess and experience conducting circumcision. These practices have made many parents to avoid traditional initiation processes, and opt for modern hospital-based circumcision of the boys; consequently missing out on the entire process of traditional process of initiation into adulthood (Robert & Omar, 2006).

It was also found that traditional initiation process continued happening during certain times of the year only, every even year, and targeting older boys, even with recent scientific findings that boys heal faster when young, rather than when old. This is plausible in relation to the size of the circumcision wound which is likely to be wider in older boys as compared to the younger ones. The religious based circumcision had opted to do have younger boys circumcised because of the propensity for faster heal. Furthermore, circumcision timing had been changed from August to December, to augur well with school calendar, where longer holidays were around December, and which would give initiates ample healing time before going back to school in January. Traditional initiation processes have continued to stick to traditional timings, a factor which is gradually discouraging people from adopting this process.

Recent information from medicine has also brought the use of anaesthetic injection to arrest pain during circumcision. We found that the traditional circumcision was still being carried out without such injections, because of a cultural notion that brave boys ought to withstand the pain, and display perseverance in front of their mothers and sisters. The traditional initiation process has continued the cultural process of inflicting pain, and expecting the initiates to bravely endure, as a show of ‘manly’ behaviour. Other painful activities reported were:

Initiates do go around villages dancing with the bells (*chinyimba*), to call upon relatives, neighbours and friends as witnesses. They are expected to dance with bells in the cold nights, with bare chests, and walk from place to place, informing everybody that they were ready to be initiated. Men treat them with a form of torture, throwing mud at them with ‘contempt,’ a process they are supposed to

withstand, in order to communicate to the witnesses that they are ready for the task of being adult men in the society. (Interview with an elderly Bukusu man, December 4, 2016)

Bukusu initiation process is still designed to be vigorous, intensive and involving; and is meant to test how the boys will bear the exercise without displaying fatigue. In traditional Bukusu circumcision, initiates are stripped naked at the river for mudding, and are made to walk all the way to their fathers' compound for circumcision in full view of the public. This has not changed, even bearing in mind that in the modern society, focus had gone to academic work, which required little or no destruction, especially in the month of August, where most of the boys are expected to write their school national examination.

Traditional initiation process has not changed over the years, even in respect to changing economic conditions. Traditional initiation process includes the extended family and does entail comprehensive rituals which have economic implications. A participant noted that the traditional initiation has prescribed rituals, for example the slaughtering of certain animals, and involvement of certain important members of the extended family. In the end, the process of initiation becomes costly, something which is devastating to modern economies. This participant noted that many parents would prefer to avoid the expenses especially those that are related to slaughtering cattle, goats and cocks. The rituals are extremely thoroughgoing, and the parents are forced to spend a lot of money to complete the process.

Health information related to abuse of alcohol and drugs have not been regarded as important. The initiation process still adopts the use of traditional liquor called *busaa*. Usually, consumption of this liquor (which is prohibited by the government due to health implication) has in the past resulted in cases of rowdiness, vulgarity and sexual immorality. It is not uncommon to have fights, quarrels, and destruction of property every time people consume *busaa* in the initiation processes.

During singing and dancing on the eve of circumcision day- Khuminya, boys and girls dance indecently throughout the night after taking *busaa*. Rowdy youth engage in hooliganism including destruction of property and food stuff. They exhibit various forms of disrespect including throwing abuses, uprooting plantations, deliberately breaking utensils and damaging other forms of property. The celebrations encourage sexual immorality as often there are many cases of girls who get pregnant and end up dropping out of school after every circumcision year. (Interview with an elderly religious leader, well vast with traditional initiation procession 12 December 2016)

This therefore means that traditional Bukusu initiation has remained unchanged, even in light of new health and economic conditions unique to modern era. Traditional Bukusu initiation is still being carried out in total disregard of effects of sexual promiscuity, and the fate of girls. This seems to suggest that the setting, context and environment of traditional Bukusu initiation generally encourage sexual promiscuity among youth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that, while the initiation process remains an important stage for inculcating good morals among the youth, checks and controls should be applied on the system, the process and the mentors, to make sure the purpose of the rites of initiation into adulthood are achieved. The study recommends that the checks and controls should be guided by available information in medicine, education and religion.

We found the importance of communal responsibility in the maintenance of morality. It can be concluded that community responsibility helps to build community accountability. This study thus recommends the promotion of community responsibility and accountability in all initiation processes,

whether related to circumcision or not. When a morality is attached to community responsibility, evil behaviour is repulsed in the community, and an individual feels accountable to abstain from such behaviours. This pattern needs to be copied, even in instances where traditional initiation model is not adopted. It could still be adopted as a mechanism for initiation girls into adulthood.

The relevance of systematized initiation liturgies in the promotion of morality was also noted as a significant finding. It is concluded that systematic liturgies and initiation processes helps to define important areas of moral relevance. It thus recommends that initiation processes should adopt a systematic and comprehensive liturgy. It should be conducted in organized stages along with explicit rituals, symbols and processes. All the key stages of the initiation rite such as pre-initiation, actual cut, seclusion and graduation should be observed and followed throughout the transition process. The circumcision stages should have well-articulated and outlined format leading to the next stage and should be continued to its very final stage without skipping or diluting the moral teachings. This is important as it contributes to the psychological and social element of the transition process.

We also found that the absence of control mechanism in the Bukusu initiation process; a situation that significantly compromised the process of nurturing the initiates for good behaviour. The lapse in the control process came as a result lack of monitoring forum and increased attention on the process rather than on the purpose. In the long run, the ‘graduates’ lack necessary traits of moral uprightness and virtue.

Thirdly, the role parents play in the development of moral aptitude of their children during the initiation process was noted to be important. Fathers offer mentorship, and mothers act as witnesses. Boys are initiated to be careful not to be viewed by their mothers as being weak or unprepared. In the long run, initiation ‘graduates’ emerge as people who strive to stand out as being morally upright. Parents thus need to ‘own’ and participate fully in the initiation process. The process should be governed by specific rules and laws that bind all the participants together to honour and respect the initiation rite.

Fifthly, this study has elaborated the worth of clustering initiates into age-sets. It can be concluded that age-sets help in peer accountability, which is instrumental in the maintenance of moral virtues. The fact that initiates are trained together as a set, and then expected to behave in a specified manner, help to maintain checks. Initiation ‘graduates’ monitor each other, and keep on reminding each other, lest they be viewed with contempt as a set. It is thus recommended that initiation processes of all kinds should employ the use of peer accountability as a way of cultivating and maintaining moral virtues.

The importance of involving several members of the community in mentorship of initiates was found to be helpful in building morality among the initiates and the adult community. It was found that the process of training and mentorship influenced everybody to want to be a good example. The mentors deliberately used themselves as examples of moral virtues. In the long run, proper conduct is rewarded socially, because well-mannered adults would be recognized and used to mentor the initiates. It is recommended therefore, that initiation processes, should also be a mentorship, using people that displayed exemplary morality in the community. In the process, good morals become rewarded because they are recognized. The rites need to set aside time for personal reflection on values, actions and beliefs. The time also promotes an internal dialogue within the initiate which enables him to be able to narrate and make sense of what goes on around him during the circumcision process. This contributes to their self-awareness and identity formation. As we focus on the diverse happenings in the twenty-first century, where marauding youths have had cases of indiscipline and general unethical behaviours, it is critically important to re-examine our society,

Kenya and Africa, and rethink the Bukusu indigenous ways, noted above, and see whether such practices can bring back the ‘lost morality.’ Who knows!

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