



The Moral and Normative Foundation of *Idumi* Circumcision Ritual among the Tiriki of Hamisi Sub-County

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Article History

Received: 2024-03-22

Revised: 2024-06-22

Accepted: 2024-07-03

Published: 2024-08-06

Keywords

Circumcision

Foundation

Idumi

Ritual

Socio-political

How to cite:

Ifire, B. W., Omare, S. & Njure, S. (2024). The Moral and Normative Foundation of *Idumi* Circumcision Ritual among the Tiriki of Hamisi Sub-County. *Research Journal of Education, Teaching and Curriculum Studies*, 2(2), 1-9.

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Abstract

This paper relates to the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi* circumcision ritual to explain the reasons for its persistence in many African communities. The main objective of the study was to explore the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi* circumcision ritual among the Tirikis. The study was guided by Stuarts Hall's Cultural Identity Theory to explain its persistence and continuity. A qualitative exploratory design which was phenomenological was adopted for the study. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select twenty - six (26) respondents for the study including; four (4) Tiriki elders, four (4) initiates, four (4) ritual leaders, four (4) counselors, four (4) women, four (4) initiation chiefs and two (2) sub-chiefs. Twelve (12) key respondents were interviewed and fourteen (14) respondents participated in two focus group discussions of seven (7) members each. Data was analyzed qualitatively using the thematic method and presented by reporting key findings using appropriate verbatim quotes. The study revealed that there is moral and normative foundation of *Idumi* circumcision ritual which contributes to the persistence and continuity of this cultural ritual.

Introduction

Hamisi is one of the Sub-Counties of Vihiga County and the homeland of the Tiriki people. Its two divisions are Tiriki West and Tiriki East. Tiriki West has four locations with 20 sacred groves in a total area of 22.8 ha and Tiriki East has two locations with 16 sacred groves in a total area of 26.9 ha (Kassilly & Tsingalia, 2009). This region has two Catholic parishes, namely, Buyangu and Erusui. The Catholics are a minority group compared to other members of Protestant and Pentecostal denominations (Burgman, 1990: 72).

This research is referenced to the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi* circumcision ritual. It explores the moral justification, significance and legality of *Idumi* circumcision ritual. Other Luhya communities refer to it as *eshishebo* and *embalu* for Bukusu (Egesah et al. 2014). *Idumi* is greatly valued in its traditional elaborate form of Kalenjin origin and held at four- or five-year intervals. It was handed down to the Proto-Tiriki by a Terik elder man named Diligin, who allowed a young Tiriki



man by the name of Ambulavu Khwakhoba to be circumcised among his people (Simani, 2005, p. 209) and henceforth, adopted by the Tirikis.

Eldar (2014) discussed the moral and normative justification of neonatal circumcision apart from the argument of therapeutic circumcision but also stated that circumcision could also be morally justified for social, cultural and religious benefits (Eldar, 2014). For Tirikis, the ritual is the basis of cultural, moral, social – political and religious significance. Barasa (2018, p. 246) explains the cultural significance of the initiate’s incorporation into the tribe with a unique identity with rights, obligations, responsibilities and duties. For Mbiti (1991), the uncircumcised is “a child” and “an anguished man.” In the Xhosa community, a man could only inherit property, marry and officiate ethnic rituals after the circumcision ritual (Mandela, 1994, p. 62). It is only through circumcision that all the initiates are bound together as belonging to the same community (Magesa, 1998).

In pre-colonial times, the rites of passage were equivalent to formal schools and the circumcision rite was seen as “a school of learning” for the initiates (Njiru, 1981, as cited by Kimani, 2010). As a school of morality, initiates are empowered with moral teachings about mysteries of life and death, religion, domestic and social virtues, sex and sexuality and lastly, the absolute value of life in general and the community (Mbachii & Iikoko, 2013). Papu and Verster (2006) explained that, during circumcision, the initiates are instructed on how to behave “as men” after circumcision.

There is also a religious foundation by which the initiates are connected with the past generation, present community and future generation (Magesa, 1998). Ancestors are also invoked during circumcision and seclusion periods. With a successful circumcision ritual, initiates become part and parcel of the community of the living, living dead, and those yet to be born (Magesa, 1998). Therefore, this study sought to explain the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi* to comprehend its persistence among the Tirikis of Hamisi Sub-County, Kenya.

Some male circumcision rituals have persisted in some communities for reasons deeply rooted in cultural and traditional beliefs. An example of such rituals is the *Idumi* circumcision ritual of the Tirikis in Hamisi Sub-County. It is the foundation of cultural, social, moral, religious and political significance. Cultural unity and identity is achieved through *Idumi*, and one is fully accepted in the community with all rights, duties and obligations. Again, all social interactions are regulated by *Idumi*, including the living and the dead or ancestors. *Idumi* allows one to participate fully in social life and assume community leadership positions. Consequently, this study sought to fill knowledge gaps on the moral and normative foundation of the *idumi* circumcision ritual to explain the reasons for its persistence among the Tirikis of Hamisi Sub-County, Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Stuarts Hall’s Cultural Identity Theory (Yang et al. 2021) to explain the persistence and continuity of *Idumi* circumcision ritual. Cultural continuity means the potentiality of any culture to endure through the processes of historical transformation with identifiable past of traditions (Kirmayer et al. 2016). It is because of this cultural identity that the Tirikis have been slow to abandon the *Idumi* circumcision ritual. This study revealed that the *Idumi* circumcision ritual among the Tirikis of Hamisi Sub-County determines the cultural identity and continuity of the Tirikis.

Research Methods

This section covers the research design, study area, sampling procedures and data collection methods.



Research Design

This Study adopted a qualitative exploratory design in collecting and analysing data to allow a deeper insight into the experiences, perspectives and behaviour of individuals or groups and to identify patterns or themes within data (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). It utilised the phenomenological (study) method since the research is about beliefs, practices, teachings, opinions, behaviours and attitudes. The study sought to understand *Idumi* from individuals' narratives of their experiences and feelings to produce an in-depth description of the moral and normative foundation of the *Idumi* circumcision ritual.

Sampling Procedures

The study started with cluster sampling by selecting Hamisi as the target area. While at Hamisi, purposeful and snowballing sampling (Lipa et al. 2021) was employed to select the participants. Purposive sampling was employed to select respondents who understood the *Idumi* circumcision ritual for interviews and focus group discussions.

Methods of Data Collection

The main tools for collecting data were interviews and focus group discussions. An interview explores individuals' views, experiences, beliefs and motivations on specific matters (Gill & Kate, 2008). A total of twelve (12) key informants were purposefully sampled for interviews comprising two (2) Tiriki elders, two (2) women, two (2) initiates, two (2) ritual leaders, two (2) initiation chiefs and two (2) Counselors / Guardians. All the respondents were interviewed about the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi*. Fourteen (14) respondents were purposefully sampled and exposed to two focus group discussions of seven (7) each. Each group was composed of one (1) Sub-Chief, one (1) Tiriki elder, one (1) woman, one (1) counsellor/guardian, one (1) initiation chief, one (1) initiate and one (1) ritual leader. The focus group discussions addressed the question about the moral and normative foundation of *Idumi*.

Results and Discussions

The findings address the study's main question: what is the moral and normative foundation of the *Idumi* circumcision ritual?

Cultural Foundation of Idumi

The majority of the respondents agreed that, through *Idumi*, the initiates acquire tribal identity, and many agreed that boys who go through *Idumi*, become true and pure Tirikis. Even immigrants who accept *Idumi* are regarded as Tirikis, and those who do not go through it are strangers (Personal communication, August 23, 2023). The ritual marks the individual with a unique identity. Therefore, any child born out of wedlock who does not go through this ritual is never accepted as a Tiriki (Personal communication, August 14, 2023). An uninitiated man has no sense of belonging since he does not belong to any age group (Shiyuka, 2012).

In the opinion of the Tiriki elders and the initiates themselves, *Idumi* is the foundation of cultural unity (Personal communication, September 23, 2023). The age-group social categorisation is the most important institution that bonds the initiates (Barbara and Jürgen, 2007). Seven age groups, namely: Sawe, Nyongi, Juma, Maina, Jimigeyi, Ngurunguru and Ndaro, are named after their ideal ancestors (Personal communication, August 23, 2023). All the boys circumcised at the same time are believed to have shared the blood and so belonged to the same age group (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). The ritual binds the community together through dances, songs, and eating and drinking (Asitiba, 2017).



One of the respondents, the initiation chief, stated that, through *Idumi*, there is cultural continuity where culture is passed on to the younger generation (Personal communication, September 24, 2023). Asitiba (2017) acknowledges that one of the ways culture is passed on is through participation in the dances before circumcision, known as *vukhulu* (the dance of community ancestors). The shedding of the blood in the sacred groves also unites the initiates and their forefathers. The initiates are taught about the community values and life skills that will help them in their future lives (Personal communication, September 1, 2023). For Kirwan (2008), the circumcision period is when special knowledge, skills and attitudes are passed on to the initiates.

Most of the initiates and elders agreed that through *Idumi*, one acquires a sense of maturity (Personal communication, September 2, 2023). Before *Idumi*, one was considered a child who must graduate to adulthood with all the rights and obligations after circumcision. Therefore, circumcision transformed the irresponsible and intractable boy into a man with adult dignity and self-respect (Papu & Verster, 2006, p. 181). After *Idumi*, one is treated as a mature adult (Personal communication, September 2, 2023).

One acquires a personal identity that attaches him to a particular age – group, giving him all the rights and responsibilities that the Tiriki people enjoy, such as participating in social gatherings of elders, sharing a drink, marrying, starting a family and his place in the community is made clear (Personal communication, August 10, 2023). For Tirikis, a mature man who has not gone through *Idumi* circumcision ritual is total “nothing” before the community members (Personal communication, interview, September 22, 2023).

According to Tiriki understanding, a stranger is anybody who has not gone through *Idumi*. However, anyone, regardless of his tribe, who undergoes the *Idumi* circumcision ritual is no longer a stranger (Personal communication, August 23, 2023). Strangers include those not circumcised in the Tiriki tradition. However, they are accorded a little bit of respect as compared to the uninitiated men who must undergo the ritual known as “buying of *Idumi* or buying initiation” for them to fully belong during the ceremony of “the beer of the back” referred to as *malwa gi shigongo* where those who were not circumcised in a Tiriki way are incorporated into Tiriki community (Personal communication, August 15, 2023).

Moral Foundation of “Idumi”

According to the view gathered from the counsellors, they attested that *Idumi* is regarded as a school of morality where initiates are inducted into the community's cultural heritage (Personal communication, September 25, 2023). For Magesa (1998: 5), the seclusion period is a time for formal instruction given to the initiates on their way to adulthood in matters of religion, the mystery of life and death, domestic and social virtues, sexuality, sex, marriage, procreation and the absolute value of life. Therefore, *Idumi* period is the time of mentoring of the initiates into adulthood (Sitawa & Langat, 2022). Through the age – group, the initiates learn to follow the customs and develop solidarity with other initiates (Personal communication, August 23, 2023). Through the age – group, the initiates learnt to follow the community's rules and develop solidarity with other initiates (Personal communication, August 23, 2023).

During seclusion, the initiates are made aware of their moral responsibilities as mature community members since they have acquired higher statuses than those of women, children, and strangers (Personal communication, September 4, 2023). They have responsibilities, rights, obligations, and duties in the community (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). The initiates are taught to be



responsible community members; therefore, they feel much more important and valued as community members (Mbachii and Kariuki, 2013).

Idumi is a source of moral values imparted to the initiates through the circumcision songs (Personal communication, August 26, 2023). Wanyama and Egesah (2015) strongly believed that the induction into the new status is done through music performance. The initiation rite is laddered with heavy messages, some of which are passed to the initiates through the community myths, such as the virtue of patience (Kasomo, 2009) and the virtue of docility, where initiates are ready to silently listen to one's critic as well as have the courage to face the difficulties in life are taught to the initiates. The values of obedience, courage and respect are key virtues taught to the initiates, especially towards the senior age group (Personal communication, August 21, 2023). A Tiriki initiate (personal communication, August 23, 2023) narrated that one of the songs entitled "*Mushevi Yangimira Mukona*" meaning the circumciser got hold of his hand, is through which the virtue of courage is transmitted:

Yangimira mukona, mushevi yangimira mukona x 2

(The circumciser got hold of his hand)

Yangimira mukona, mushevi yangimira mukona x 2

(The circumciser got hold of his hand)

Ayee! Yangimira mukona, mushevi yangimira mukona x 2

(Ayee! the circumciser got hold of his hand)

Ahooo! Yangimira mukona, mushevi yangimira mukona x 2

(Ahooo! The circumciser got hold of his hand)

What the circumciser wants to instil among the initiates is the virtue of courage as they go to face the circumcision knife but also to be courageous to face life in future as they graduate into adulthood (Personal communication, August 23, 2023). Another song is song is entitled, "*Ndari Murumbi*" meaning I was in seclusion as follows:

Ndari murumbi mama wari wainyanza

(My mother loved me when I was in seclusion)

Ndari murumbi senge wari wainyanza

(My Aunt loved me when I was in seclusion)

Ndari murumbi kuka wari wainyanza

(My grandfather loved me when I was in seclusion)

The excerpt highlights one of the moral values of love about the mothers and aunts of the initiates during seclusion. The song expresses clearly how the mothers manifested this value of love to the initiates through care and food preparation.

Idumi season is considered a sacred and peaceful moment where fights and quarrels are prohibited (Personal communication, June 10, 2023). During *Idumi*, the morality of decency, sobriety and calmness was to be cultivated to avoid fights, quarrels and other conflicts during circumcision (Sitawa



& Langat, 2022). *Idumi* creates an opportunity for the initiates to learn something about their community's history, especially how it was adopted from the Terik community of Nandi tribe, the social organisation, culture, traditions and religion (Personal communication, August 23, 2023).

Social Foundation of "Idumi"

Most respondents believed that *Idumi* is a communal activity where all people, regardless of age and sex, are called upon to participate in different roles. The ritual leaders or elders decide whether to have *Idumi* season or not. This is passed on to the sub-tribal leaders, the sub-tribal chief and the council of community elders to the initiation chief and his junior collaborators (Personal communication, September 3, 2023). The dance, which is for all the people, men, women, boys and girls is originally known as *vukhulu* and is performed in the public arena where the initiates dance with masks on to disguise their identity. Asitiba (2017) states that dancing symbolises that young men are still children and, therefore, not ashamed to show their nakedness publicly, but they will soon graduate to adulthood. The initiates dance without a sense of shame since they have not matured enough to understand the implications of showing their nakedness publicly. But still, this public dancing gives them the confidence they need to face the knife of a circumciser (Asitiba, 2017).

According to the Tiriki elders, the age group is the basis of all social interactions revolving around seven age groups, namely Sawe, Nyongi, Juma, Maina, Jimigeyi, Ngurunguru and Ndaro (Personal communication, August 26, 2023). These names have ancestral origins and were given as an honour to a Tiriki ritual elder with exemplary repute or an event of major occurrence. At times, immigrants who integrated well and were assimilated into the community, like Juma and Hamisi, would earn recognition (Personal communication, August 22, 2023). Each age group lasts for two circumcision seasons, roughly ten and fifteen years, before transitioning to the next age group. For instance, in 1980, Ndaro I and Ndaro II were named in 1985 up to 1990 to complete the circle, and the new age group Ngurunguru was named (Personal communication, August 25, 2023). Each age group has certain responsibilities and expectations to affirm their statuses and contribution to the community (Personal communication, August 26, 2023).

The ritual dictates how an initiate should relate to the other members. After circumcision, the initiate is told not to be in the company of women and girls but always with other men who have gone through the ritual. He is no longer a child, so he can now socialise freely with the other men. He can share a meal and a drink with men and fully participate in the community's social life (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). It determines the horizontal relationship between the initiates and other members, while the vertical relationships involve ancestors. The initiate, through circumcision, contacts the living dead. It is taught to respect and honour the ancestors by adhering to the community customs and carrying forward the ritual to its progeny (Papu & Verster, 2006). Sitawa and Lang'at (2022) added that, during the pre-colonial period, when there were no calendars, the age-group categorisation served as a calendar to the community. All events were referred to using the age-set names to guide periodisation, and one needed knowledge about age-set operations to identify the time an event took place.

Socio-Political Foundation of "Idumi"

Idumi determined the administrative structure, and the people at its helm were men who had gone through the ritual called *headmen*. The Tirikis could not contemplate uncircumcised leaders at all levels (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). At the lowest level of the community, we have nineteen subheadmen, each taking charge of a community. However, the structure of leadership is changing.



For example, while still maintaining that a stranger or a man who has not gone through the *Idumi* is still a child and therefore cannot lead, they have allowed women in community leadership positions such as the village elder, the sub-chief and even the chief of the community (Personal communication, August 25, 2023). A woman should take leadership roles than somebody who is not circumcised. The uncircumcised man cannot be allowed to socialise freely with others and even address social gatherings of any kind (Personal communication, September 10, 2023).

The political leadership is different in that only those who have gone through *Idumi* are comfortably elected. Regarding the election, the Tirikis will likely not elect somebody who has not gone through *Idumi* since it bestows leadership qualities, especially courage and perseverance (Personal communication, June 10, 2023). According to the Tiriki people, one who is not circumcised cannot marry and raise the family. Therefore, they are unlikely to allow somebody who is not married to lead politically (Personal communication, August 13, 2023).

Religious Foundation

Circumcision ritual has a religious dimension manifested in prayers, sacrifices, invocations and propitiation to ancestral spirits to ensure the successful accomplishment of the ceremonies (Kasomo, 2009). Before circumcision, the ritual leaders had to make supplications and benedictions for those to undergo the ritual (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). However, it is quite clear that for anyone to perform a religious duty, he must have been one of the community's elders. Therefore, *Idumi* provided religious functionaries to the community (Personal communication, August 24, 2023).

The connection between the living and the dead was achieved through the circumcision ritual of *Idumi* (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). The ritual creates a new relationship with the ancestors, the deities, and God (Kasomo, 2009). The relationship between the living and the dead manifests through shedding blood into the ground. This act binds the initiates mystically with the living dead, who many African communities believe to be living on the ground (Mbiti, 1969). The ritual leader explained that it is for the same reason that circumcision must occur in the sacred groves where we have the community shrines. It is also believed that, by shedding blood in the forest or sacred grove, the initiate is directly connected with forefathers and ancestors (Personal communication, August 14, 2023)

The supplications offered by ritual elders to the dead were meant to restore the broken relationship between the people and the living dead. The killing of animals during the circumcision ritual was said to be dedicating the initiates to the ancestors of the community to which they belonged, and the animals' meat eaten by the initiates is meant to give courage and protect them from evil influence (Personal communication, August 24, 2023). The person chosen to anoint the initiates when they are coming out is believed to pass his good virtues and charisma to the initiates (Papu & Verster, 2006).

Conclusion

They explored the moral and normative foundation of the *Idumi* circumcision ritual, bringing out its justification and significance. This significance explains the reasons for its persistence. Using Stuarts Hall's cultural identity theory, one can understand why *Idumi* has persisted in the Tiriki community. During the interviews with the respondents, most cited the cultural foundation of *Idumi*, such as the tribal identity and unity, without which one is not a community member. *Idumi* is also handed down through culture and tradition to future generations.



The study revealed that *Idumi* is understood as a school of morality where young men are inducted into the traditions and moral aspects of the community. During *Idumi*, moral values and virtues are imparted to the young initiates for better and upright living in the future. It is also a source of moral responsibility towards himself and the community. The study also revealed a social foundation of *Idumi* exemplified in the social age-group categorisation system on which all other community structures are built. It categorises the initiates into the warrior, judicial and ritual age groups with different roles in the community, giving the initiates that social responsibility to play. Lastly, the study also revealed a political foundation of *Idumi* on which all leadership positions were formally based. Therefore, the circumcision ritual is very important for various reasons, such as cultural, moral, social, political, and religious reasons, which explain the persistence of the cultural heritage among the Tirikis of Hamisi Sub-County.

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