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Negotiating Identity: The Intersection of Colonialism, Christianity, and Male Circumcision Among the Abagusii

Machoni M. Haron^{1*}, Mallion Onyambu¹, Evans Nyamwaka¹ & Peter Gutwa Oino¹

¹ Kisii University, P. O. Box 408-40200, Kisii, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6376-5248>; Email: haronmachoni@gmail.com

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This paper examines how the Abagusii community navigated the imposition of colonial and Christian ideologies on their traditional practices, with a particular focus on the cultural institution of male circumcision. Pre-colonial male circumcision held profound significance within the Abagusii community, serving as a cornerstone rite of passage into manhood. However, the advent of colonial rule and the influence of Christian missionaries precipitated seismic shifts in this practice, upending its traditional significance and social functions. Drawing upon the frameworks of Cultural Diffusion and Diffusion of Innovation, this paper meticulously traces the historical evolution of male circumcision among the Abagusii, delineating the trajectory from age-old rituals to more contemporary practices imbued with colonial and Christian influences. Using a qualitative research design and approach, data was methodically collected from 30 participants selected through purposive sampling. Through descriptive data analysis, thematic patterns emerged, illuminating how external forces gradually reshaped this pivotal cultural institution. Furthermore, the study uncovers how the introduction of Western medicine and education precipitated shifts in the community's perceptions of health and hygiene, catalysing a transition towards medically supervised circumcision procedures. Despite external pressures, the Abagusii community demonstrated resilience by integrating select elements of colonial and Christian practices into their traditional rites, resulting in a hybridised form of circumcision that retained cultural significance while accommodating evolving norms. In essence, the evolution of male circumcision practices among the Abagusii of Southwestern Kenya epitomises a nuanced interplay between tradition and modernity under the sway of colonialism and Christianity. While colonial and missionary interventions sought to suppress age-old rites, the community's adaptive responses ensured the preservation and metamorphosis of these practices. The study advocates for future policies and interventions pertaining to traditional practices to be underpinned by cultural sensitivity and community engagement. By recognizing and honouring the cultural import of

practices such as circumcision, stakeholders can facilitate more efficacious and sustainable transformations.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of culture, as described by Oino et al. (2023), highlights its multifaceted nature, encompassing a unique way of life that integrates belief, art, law, custom, morals, knowledge, and abilities acquired by individuals as members of society. This definition underscores the holistic and dynamic aspects of culture, emphasising how it shapes and is shaped by individuals' collective experiences and practices within a community. Such a perspective recognizes that culture is not static but evolves over time, influenced by internal developments and external interactions. This comprehensive understanding of culture reflects its central role in forming the identity and functioning of societies. To understand the culture of a community, one must observe every aspect of living, which encompasses the dress code, social ceremonies, songs, dances, food, and architecture. However, all aspects of culture are subject to transformation due to interactions and the influence of other cultures. When communities interact, various aspects of culture are likely to be borrowed willingly or unwillingly, as in the case of Male

Circumcision (MC) among the Abagusii during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Male Circumcision (MC) is the most common form of initiation rite in most African communities, which plays a crucial role in transforming boys into men. The Abagusii, an ethnic group residing in southwestern Kenya, have a rich cultural heritage, with male circumcision being a pivotal rite of passage. Traditionally, circumcision among the Abagusii is not only a medical procedure but a significant cultural and social event marking the transition from boyhood to manhood. Among the Abagusii, male circumcision was the only way of attaining adulthood status and community identity (Akama & Maxon, 2006). MC among the Gusii is known as *Okwaroka*, which translates to getting out of the nest, demonstrating a permanent change in an individual's life. The Abagusii MC followed well-elaborated procedures, starting with preparation, seclusion, and the final ceremonies that marked the end of seclusion (Mayer, 1953).

Gusii boys got circumcised at the age of 12 and 15 years and formed an age-set, *Ekiare*. With a series of cultural guidelines and rituals, MC played a crucial role in preparing Gusii men for adulthood

responsibilities and values, including marriage and teachings against infidelity. For example, Mokua et al. (2024) assert that the Abagusii emphasised positive social values, such as morality in marriage, which were instilled in boys, especially during the circumcision period. Bogonko (1977) illustrates that after circumcision, the novices, *Abaare*, were secluded for a period to help heal properly and receive both formal and informal education, which included social values such as infidelity, marriage, responsibility, and bravery. Mokua et al. (2024) explain that values such as infidelity were emphasised among the Abagusii during adulthood and were instilled through teachings during circumcision and curses that aimed to deter the behaviour of individuals. Thus, each male initiate was supposed to have a guide or sponsor known as *Omoségi*, who could educate him through the entire process. However, the advent of colonialism and Christianity introduced new dynamics that profoundly influenced these practices. Colonial authorities often perceived indigenous rituals and education as backward and sought to suppress or modify them to align with Western norms. Simultaneously, Christian missionaries condemned many traditional practices, including circumcision, viewing them as incompatible with Christian teachings. Despite these pressures, the Abagusii community navigated these external influences, leading to the transformation and hybridization of their circumcision practices.

The Abagusii MC adopted new ways of life that saw the decline of cultural practices that incorporated Western practices, including the abolition of rituals, and singing of Christian songs instead of traditional MC songs, *Esimbore*, a familiar male circumcision song among the Abagusii. Male circumcision evolved to match contemporary standards, such as conducting the practice in the highest safety environments, such as hospitals. Besides, the role of traditional circumcisers ended as they were replaced by medical practitioners who utilized modern

medicine equipment to ensure safety in MC (Akama, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Colonialism and Christianity drastically altered the traditional male circumcision rituals among the Abagusii community of Southwestern Kenya. Before colonial intervention, male circumcision held profound cultural significance, serving as a pivotal rite of passage into adulthood within the Abagusii society. However, the imposition of colonial rule and the influence of Christian missionaries led to significant transformations in the practice, disrupting its traditional meaning and social functions. Colonial African regimes viewed many traditional practices with suspicion and aimed to regulate them.

In Kenya, the British colonial government implemented policies to control and often suppress cultural rituals, including circumcision, which they deemed primitive (Berman, 1990). These interventions were part of broader efforts to "civilise" and integrate African societies into the colonial state structure. Colonial health campaigns promoted Western medical practices over traditional methods. For instance, male circumcision was encouraged to be performed in medical facilities to reduce health risks (Iliffe, 1998). This shift was often resisted by local communities, who saw it as an erosion of their cultural identity.

Despite this understanding, there is a dearth of comprehensive historical documentation on the pre-colonial male circumcision rituals among the Abagusii. A thorough examination of archival records, oral histories, and indigenous knowledge is essential to reconstructing pre-colonial practices and understanding their significance. While some studies acknowledge the colonial influence on male circumcision rituals, there is a need for a deeper analysis of the specific mechanisms through which colonialism reshaped these practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Review

Based on the literature reviewed, Pang and Kim (2002) attest that in South Korea, male circumcision was not widely practised by 1945. However, MC has increased drastically since then due to health campaigns associated with the practice (Pang & Kim, 2002). The authors also explain that ninety percent of high school boys in S. Korea are circumcised, which presents an extraordinarily high rate. The study shows that the increase in these changes results from aspects of modernity, which emphasises Medical MC across the globe. In the United States, changes in male circumcision are evident (Hirji et al., 2005). The author illustrates the criticism of MC as a violation of the bodily rights and dignity of the initiates. Hirji et al. (2005) further observe that the continuous practice of male circumcision in the United States has shifted from a cultural or religious procedure to a medical practice. Although these studies present valuable literature on changes in MC, they do not examine the influence of elements such as Christianity and colonialism on male circumcision and the efforts made by the relevant communities to negotiate these changes with culture.

Chaim et al. (2005) explain that the history of male circumcision (MC) in Israel dates back thousands of years as a cultural practice that involves conducting the ritual when the infant is only eight years old. The study explains that modernity continues to question the legality of Jewish infant circumcision, especially on whether parental decision-making violates the rights of the initiates, which continues to pose a dilemma across the globe. However, the Jews closely relate the practice with their cultural identity, religious practices, and social norms (Remennick, 2022). Although these studies present valuable literature on the influence of modernity on culture, they do not examine how modernity leads to the hybridization of culture as communities negotiate their identity.

Coene (2018) has written about the issue of changes in male circumcision in Europe due to modernization and illustrates that the practice has become a subject of legal, political, and ethical controversies since 2012. The author cites the case where a Cologne court sentenced a doctor who circumcised a four-year-old male who developed severe bleeding (Coene, 2018). Whether male circumcision is a violation of human rights continues to pose a challenge in the ever-changing socio-environment. For example, Jacobs (2015) explains that male circumcision is not a human rights issue. The author argues that infant circumcision does not violate human rights but can be a violation of local norms (Jacobs, 2015). Although these studies by Coene (2018) and Jacobs (2015) present essential literature on the influence of modernization on MC among communities, they were conducted in different places, demonstrating a geographical gap.

A study by Kimani (2015) examined the transformation of MC and masculinities among the Agikuyu of Kiambu. She illustrates that colonialism's influence transformed MC to match the social environment. In support, Were (2014) shows that the circumcision process among the Bukusu of Kenya significantly changed after colonialism, but the community has retained several procedures. Besides, colonialism brought Western education to promote high hygiene levels and enhance the development of a "modernised" Gusii man. The studies by Kimani (2015) and Were (2014) present crucial literature on the transformation of MC among the Agikuyu of Kiambu and the Bukusu, respectively. However, the studies were conducted among different communities and cannot reflect the changes in the Abagusii community. Besides, there is a time gap as the studies were conducted years ago.

Another study by Wanyama (2007) clarifies that the Bukusu community believed in the practice of male circumcision and accompanied the initiation with rituals and songs; however, the practice is no longer

the same due to colonialism and Christianity that forced society to readjust. The author shows that the adjustments that resulted from colonialism have played a role in straining the social-cultural patterns of African rituals and ceremonies, leading to changes in the form, significance, and content of music in circumcision ceremonies (Wanyama, 2007). This study shows a dilemma in the Bukusu community on balancing modern and traditional perspectives in the content, form, and performance of circumcision music. Although the study demonstrates the changes in Bukusu MC, it was conducted among the Bukusu, and research has yet to be conducted among the Abagusii community.

Mwandi et al. (2011) examine the emergence of Voluntary Male Circumcision (VMC) in Kenya. The authors explain that Kenyan communities have embraced MC as a means of preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS. This study presents the modernization and medicalization of MC among Kenyan communities because of cultural interactions and Western influence. For example, the authors illustrate that although more than 80 percent of Kenyan men are circumcised, MC coverage varies according to geography and culture (Mwandi et al., 2011). Further, the study illustrates that the emergence of VMC in Kenya results from modernity, which emphasises the medical benefits of MC and targets the no circumcising communities. Although this study presents important literature on the medicalization of MC, it majorly focuses on the voluntary and health benefits of MC and does not examine the cultural and social importance of the practice.

Barasa, Nyanhoga, and Lilechi (2020) have written about the transformation of MC among the Bukusu. The authors illustrate that the boys are no longer secluded in their homes as most tend to go to hospitals, leaving the process to doctors and healthcare workers, who treat it as a medical and health practice without social, religious, or cultural significance. The research also explains how the Christian missionization of MC among the Bukusu

led to church teachings before and after circumcision. This study plays a crucial role in examining the transformations in MC among Kenyan communities and how the Bukusu negotiated their cultural identity to balance culture and modernity. However, this study was conducted among the Bukusu, a different community in Western Kenya, and research has yet to be conducted among the Abagusii community.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Cultural Diffusion and diffusion of innovation theories. The basic tenets of Cultural Diffusion Theory include the dynamic nature of society due to cultural borrowing and the role of trade, colonisation, and education in cultural diffusion (Wagoner, 2014). The theory is premised on the fact that despite the independence of societal inventions, there is mutual borrowing of values and culture across cultures, demonstrating the reasons for behaviour change within and amongst communities (Levitt, 1998). Cultural practices, such as initiation rites, are developed and changed through cultural diffusion, which was evident in pre-colonial Africa and among the Abagusii. This theory was used to scrutinise the borrowing of cultural elements, especially those related to male circumcision among the Abagusii in the colonial era. Furthermore, it helped to analyse the practice of Abagusii male circumcision in the colonial period and the changes that occurred in traditional male circumcision practice among the Abagusii in the postcolonial period because of the diffusion of cultural elements. On the other hand, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory helps to examine the rate at which the new ideas, practices, and behaviours that relate to MC gradually spread through the Abagusii community (Rogers, 2003). Besides, the theory is used to gain insights into the changing aspects of identity negotiation among the Abagusii. The theory examines the adoption process, factors that influence the adoption, and the outcomes of cultural changes and the formation of new identities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to detail events, culture, and customs, providing a comprehensive understanding of Abagusii male circumcision practices during the colonial period and the impact of modernity and colonialism. The researcher utilised data from primary and secondary sources to examine the influence of colonialism and Christianity on Abagusii male circumcision. Oral interviews were conducted with individuals in Kisii County, selected for its historical significance. Kisii County was chosen because it hosted the first missionaries and colonial administrators. Participants included male members of the Abagusii community aged 60 and above who experienced traditional circumcision practices, as well as religious leaders and teachers. Purposive sampling with a snowball effect was used, resulting in 30 informants. Secondary data was sourced from books, journals, newspapers, online sources, theses, and dissertations. The data was transcribed, translated, organised into themes, and reported through descriptive texts and direct quotations. Ethical considerations included obtaining participant consent and assuring informants of data confidentiality. The study received ethics approval from Kisii University and was licensed by the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation in Kenya (License No: NACOSTI/P/24/35100).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Understanding the Pre-colonial Male Circumcision Rituals Among the Abagusii

Abagusii MC was a rite that traditionally marked boys' transition from childhood to adulthood. The ritualistic practice was done every year as opposed to other communities that held it in intervals of 3 to 5 years (Orera, Kakai, & Gimode, 2023). The Abagusii circumcised boys at puberty. Oral sources show that it was the boy who showed the desire to be circumcised. One of the key informants stressed that he consented to the practice. He stated that:

I realised one of my agetates, whom we used to engage in wrestling games together, had been circumcised. I knew I had to ask my father for permission to circumcise me so that I did not feel inferior to my friend. So, I rushed home and told my father, who agreed and told me to prepare for the practice (Ondabu, O.I., 1/05/2024).

The findings above imply that MC among the Abagusii was not done against the boys' consent, regardless of age. The parents had to wait until the young boys showed the desire to be circumcised. In support, Mayer (1953) states, "A boy is trusted to volunteer the suggestion that he would like to be among the novices, *Abaare*." Further, Akama and Maxon (2006) explain that it was the boys who showed explicit desire and willingness to undergo this initiation ceremony. Similarly, Mbachii and Likoko (2013) also explain that it was the boys who first showed interest in getting circumcised among the Bukusu. However, the parents had criteria for examining whether the boys were ready regardless of their desire to get circumcised. One of the participants stated that:

The approval depended on the young boy's maturity and ability to carry out specific duties. The young boy ready to get circumcised is given some examination to establish whether he is prepared to join adulthood (Maragia, O.I., 29/04/2024).

The findings above suggest that among the Abagusii, boys often express interest in circumcision before their parents consider them ready. However, parental approval hinges on the boy's maturity and ability to fulfil specific responsibilities rather than solely on his desire for the procedure. Parents assess the boy's readiness through examinations to determine if he is prepared to transition into adulthood.

During the material day, the boys are escorted by older boys who are circumcised a season early to the circumciser's home or any other place decided by

the circumciser (Mayer, 1953). According to Akama (2017), after finishing with the last novice, the circumciser starts singing the first lines of *Esimbore*, "Oyo-oyo-o-o! x2," "Here He is, here He is!" Then, the initiates and the boys accompanying them continued the singing as they disbursed to their villages. Throughout this time, the initiates held *Ekerundu* grass and *Oroboba*, symbols of fertility, as illustrated by Nyatuka, one of the key informants.

I was given Ekerundu and Oroboba, which I took home. I was taken to Kiage at home as my grandmother prepared a place for me. I was later led into the seclusion house through a unique gateway of Omosabakwa and Omosocho (Nyatuka, O.I., 01/05/2024).

These findings show the ritualistic nature of MC among the Abagusii. These rituals had significant meanings, which changed or transformed after colonialism. *Ekerundu* grass among the Abagusii was a sign of fertility because the grass does not quickly dry. Besides, the singing of circumcision songs also transformed. For instance, A key informant noted that she prefers current Christian songs over the old circumcision songs that have lost value and meaning in modern society (Osebe, O.I., 04/04/2024).

In support, Mayer (1953) explains that the initiates entered the seclusion period, where they were subjected to various rituals, which supports the above assertions. Among these rituals are the seclusion fire, the planting of the *Esuguta*, a ritualistic grass, and the *Esubo* ritual. Similarly, another informant supported this assertion that during seclusion, his grandmother planted the ritualistic bed, *Riburu*, made of *Amabuko* plants (Nyatuka, O.I., 06/05/ 2024). Nyatuka further observed that his grandmother had planted *Esuguta* grass, which he watered throughout the seclusion period. The informant further revealed that *Esuguta* grass is unnecessary due to a transformation in MC incorporating Christian views, Western values, and beliefs opposing these rituals.

Akama and Maxon (2006) illustrate that the seclusion fire was sacred and was crucial in educating the initiates to develop a sense of responsibility and duty. This study further found out that the teachings of obligation and duty among the Abagusii during circumcision prepared the young boys for the parental responsibility of taking care of a child from infancy until maturity. This aspect of responsibility and duty can also be seen in nourishing the ritualistic grass, *Esuguta*, another important ritual. LeVine (1959) asserts that during this time, the initiates learned about their new adult roles and embraced their new stage. This was when the ritualistic was destroyed, the ritualistic bed was thrown outside, and the initiate was asked to go to the river to take the first bath and take the cows to graze.

Colonial Impact

Colonialism profoundly impacted the Abagusii's social, economic, and cultural structures. The imposition of colonial rule led to significant changes in traditional practices and worldviews (Ondigi, 2018). Colonial encounters resulted in cultural hybridity, as the Abagusii adapted to new realities while preserving elements of their indigenous culture (Mokua, 2019). Colonial authorities sought to suppress indigenous cultural practices, including male circumcision, viewing them as primitive or barbaric (Abuya, 2017). The activities of the colonial government impacted the Abagusii social customs and culture, including the model of circumcising the Gusiiland boys. This includes the medicalization of MC, modernity, and Western education. Cultural Diffusion theory supports these changes, which holds that culture is easily copied and merged as communities interact.

Medicalization of Male Circumcision

Western medicine had a considerable influence on male circumcision in Gusiiland. For example, medicalized male circumcision was introduced in Gusiiland through the activities of Kisii district hospital, which championed Medical Male

Circumcision (MMC) that emphasised the use of modern medical equipment and personnel. However, the Abagusii did not embrace medicalized male circumcision at first and started discriminating against those who went to the hospital. Oral sources show that it was around 1970 that most Abagusii boys were taken to hospitals for circumcision. However, the traditionalists believed that medical novices were "less of men" considering they did not feel the pain as compared to traditional male circumcision. In an oral interview, a participant narrated that: "I could not bring myself to take my son to the hospital for circumcision due to the stigma from our community. So, I arranged for a nurse to perform the procedure at home, but we had to keep it secret. Despite our efforts, when word got out, my son faced rejection from our age set, "Ekiare" (Ongote, O.I., 07/05/2024).

These findings show that some minority members of the Abagusii were not ready to accept a transformed MC easily but opposed it by discriminating against those who spearheaded the transformation. The findings align with Cultural Diffusion Theory, which holds that although some individuals oppose cultural change, expansion diffusion might happen as the majority embraces cultural shifts.

Modernity and Urbanization

Colonialists aimed to transform the Abagusii into a modern community that does not practise "primitive rituals." For the colonialists, modern society does not practise "primitive" cultural customs and embraces new changes such as Western medicine and education. From oral sources, modern urban centres in Gusiiland enhanced the interactions between the Abagusii and other communities who lived in Kisii town, which reshaped ideologies and cultural beliefs (Ongote, O.I., 07/05/2024). The Abagusii interacted with different communities and realised the need to embrace cultural change, especially social norms such as the rituals surrounding MC. This is also an element of direct

Cultural Diffusion Theory, as several cultures had a close relationship in a modernised and urban environment.

Against this setting of urbanisation and modernization, the practice of male circumcision among the Abagusii underwent significant transformations. An oral interview revealed that the educated Christians developed modernised villages for the educated *Bosomi*, which embraced different lifestyles and cultures (Moindi, O.I., 6/05/2024)—such influence encouraged the desertion of certain indigenous customs in favour of modern ways of life, potentially affecting the importance of male circumcision among the Abagusii. Modernity relates to Cultural Diffusion Theory, which supports the evolution of cultures through interactions with other cultures. Colonialism, therefore, enhanced the expansion diffusion aspect of cultural diffusion theory, which aimed to pass colonial values and beliefs on to colonised nations.

In an oral interview, a participant narrated that: "around 1970, a person who stayed in a metropolitan area such as Nairobi or even Kisii town was highly respected in the Gusii community and believed to be a modernised Kisii" (Moindi, O.I., 29/04/2024). Similarly, another informant explained that he was influenced by his neighbour while living in Kisii town to embrace medical MC. However, he realised that hospital circumcision did not prepare the boys adequately to fit into the Kisii community (Bichage, O.I., 28/04/2024).

These findings demonstrate that the Abagusii realised that some of the transformations in MC were not better than their old model. These changes eroded the positive aspects of their culture, such as the medicalization of MC, which failed to play the educative role of circumcision among the boys. Thus, people like Bichage are now pointing out the shortcomings of a transformation in MC, such as hospitalisation and modernity.

Western Education

Western education in Gusii acted as a means through which the colonialists changed the social practices of the community. The values and skills attained during the period considerably changed Abagusii's culture and perception of MC. According to Ondari, education changed Abagusii's culture. He explained that:

I remember when I attended school and the teachings I was given. The Catholic Father asked us to avoid all those beliefs and practices, including the old rituals that do not have meaning in the new ways. Among these rituals included the old ways of conducting male circumcision. That is why I took all my three sons to the hospital in the 1960s to get circumcised while other members of my village embraced the traditional model (Ondari, O.I., 23/04/2024).

These results show that colonists used education and schooling as tools to change the Abagusii perspective of MC. As young boys graduated from mission and government schools, they started to question the traditional model of MC and embrace transformations in MC. Likewise, Bogonko (1983) elucidates that the colonial educators believed that the Abagusii culture was inferior and primitive, making it difficult for them to feel equal. Education had one common aim: to civilise the Africans, which shows they were against what they termed "primitive and savage" traditions. These traditions include the rituals associated with male circumcision. Thus, they encouraged the newly educated Abagusii to question the practices and "primitive rituals" associated with Male circumcision (Ondari, O.I., 13/03/2024). This aspect of contagious diffusion is a Cultural Diffusion Theory element that supports rapid cultural borrowing when individuals are in close contact, such as in school.

In an oral interview, Bichage explained, "From 1934, colonial education became common in

Gusiiland, and the school calendar disrupted several aspects of Abagusii life as young boys started to attend school."

He also noted that:

During the 1950s, the circumcision of boys had to conform with the school calendar as we began to embrace the newly introduced festivals such as Christmas and Easter, which replaced the celebrations during and after circumcision rituals (Bichage, O.I., 28/04/2024)

From the above findings, this study revealed that schools and hospitals became major centres where MC was transformed to accommodate Western cultural values and procedures during the colonial period.

Christian Missionization

From the existing literature, Christianity introduced new belief systems and moral frameworks to the Abagusii, challenging traditional practices (Ondigi, 2018). Christianity and indigenous beliefs often coexist in complex ways, leading to syncretic practices where elements of both traditions are integrated (Nyamwaya, 2020). The spread of Christianity has influenced attitudes towards male circumcision, with some Abagusii adopting Christian beliefs that discourage the practice (Mokua, 2019). Christian missionaries viewed traditional rites such as circumcision as morally questionable and sought their elimination (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). Missionaries established schools and churches that became centres for promoting Christian values and discouraging traditional practices.

Among the Abagusii, missionaries' efforts led to a decline in the elaborate rituals accompanying circumcision. Instead, a simpler, medically supervised procedure became more common, reflecting the missionaries' emphasis on hygiene and morality (Thomas, 2003). Mission education played a crucial role in influencing the Abagusii model of male circumcision. It was a tool the

missionaries used to influence the locals to drop the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects considered "barbaric." Besides, Christianity, as a separate institution, also transformed the practice of male circumcision among the Abagusii. This study established that during the early years of missionary education, the Abagusii were reluctant to this new system as some believed that the young boys in mission stations were wasting time instead of cultivating and grazing cattle (Bogonko, 1983). It took the efforts of educated people, such as Senior Chief Musa Nyandusi from Nyaribari, to encourage the people to seek Western education (Mariba, O.I., 12/04/2024).

In support, Nyakundi, a religious leader, explains that as a Christian, he circumcised his sons to follow biblical teachings. According to him, God instructed Abraham to circumcise to mark His covenant (Nyakundi, O.I., 13/04/2024). His views are supported by Obegi, a catholic priest, who explained that the church was not against traditional male circumcision among the Abagusii but somewhat discourages all unhealthy practices and emphasises following Christian values and teachings on MC. On the same note, another informant illustrates that it is the will of God to get circumcised and that the pastor should be invited to bless the initiates to give them good luck (Ondiba, O.I., 04/04/2024). Again, this demonstrates an element of contagious cultural diffusion in which culture is rapidly transformed when people are in close contact, such as in mission stations in the colonial period.

Osebe, a religious leader, also explained that she embraces infant circumcision, which the Jews practise according to the Biblical teachings. She believed young boys should get circumcised when they are young to avoid a lot of medical complications. To her, circumcision is a religious and medical practice that must be done to all males (Osebe, O.I., 04/04/2024).

Social Dynamics

This study established that the clash between traditional values and the impacts of colonialism and Christianity has significantly influenced the social dynamics surrounding male circumcision among the Abagusii community. Colonial authorities and missionaries viewed the traditional MC practices as primitive and sought to replace them with more hygienic and morally acceptable procedures (Bogonko, 1983). This shift created a division within the community, where those who underwent medical circumcision were sometimes perceived as less courageous compared to those who endured the traditional method without anaesthesia. In an oral interview, a key informant claimed that:

The missionaries and colonial administrators saw our traditional circumcision as barbaric and dirty, and they promoted hospital circumcisions. This medical approach stripped away cultural significance. Those who underwent it were often seen as less brave than those who endured the traditional way, creating a divide in our community (Nyakundi, O.I., 13/04/2024).

From the above findings, we can deduce that as more people moved to urban centres and adopted Western lifestyles, the cultural significance of MC began to wane, and the practice increasingly became viewed through a health-oriented lens rather than as a cultural rite of passage. This has led to a blend of practices where some families try to incorporate traditional elements into the medical procedure to maintain cultural continuity. According to Cultural Diffusion Theory, urban centres, schools, and hospitals are key areas for contagious diffusion in which aspects of a culture spread widely.

One of the key informants explained that:

When I moved to the city and adopted a Western lifestyle, I saw how circumcision lost its cultural significance and became more about health. To

maintain cultural continuity, my family and I tried to blend traditional elements into the medical procedure (Ondari, O.I., 23/04/2024).

The findings suggest that with the urbanisation and adoption of Western lifestyles, the traditional cultural significance of male circumcision (MC) in Gusiiland has diminished. Instead, it is perceived through a health-oriented perspective rather than as a cultural rite of passage. This transformation has prompted some families to integrate traditional aspects into the medicalized circumcision procedure, aiming to preserve cultural continuity amidst changing societal dynamics. The account from Ondari highlights a personal experience reflecting this adaptation, where adopting a Western lifestyle led to a re-evaluation of the cultural significance of MC and efforts to maintain ties to tradition by blending traditional elements with modern medical practices.

Contemporary Perspectives on Male Circumcision

Today, the Abagusii view MC primarily through the lens of health benefits, such as preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), rather than its traditional cultural significance. This health-focused perspective is reinforced by government policies and international health guidelines, which promote male circumcision for its medical benefits. For instance, the Kenyan Constitution provides the right to the highest attainable health standard, including access to safe and high-quality circumcision services.

A key informant said that:

Nowadays, our views on male circumcision are a mix of sticking to tradition and adapting to modern health practices. I see circumcision mainly for its health benefits, like preventing STIs, rather than its traditional cultural significance (Moindi, O.I., 6/05/2024).

The above findings illustrate a transformation in Abagusii's perception of male circumcision, where

traditional and modern health practices coexist. While recognizing the health benefits, like prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), the emphasis has transformed from its traditional cultural importance. This transformation entails a balanced consideration of cultural heritage and health factors in circumcision decisions.

This study revealed that this shift has not been without controversy. Debates continue around issues of bodily autonomy and children's rights, with some arguing that circumcision should be delayed until the individual can provide informed consent. These discussions highlight the tension between respecting cultural practices and adhering to modern human rights standards. Religious influences also play a significant role in contemporary views on MC. Many Christians in the community see circumcision as a continuation of biblical traditions, aligning the practice with religious teachings and values. Osebe, a religious leader, claimed that:

As a religious leader, I see circumcision as a continuation of biblical traditions. Our community has integrated religious rituals into the process, including prayers and blessings. This adds a spiritual dimension to the procedure, aligning it with our faith and values (Osebe, O.I., 04/04/2024).

The findings above highlight a transformation of Abagusii's perspective on male circumcision. Further, they transformed MC, which is facing ongoing discussions about balancing traditional customs with modern ideas about rights. Christianity has a significant influence, as many see circumcision as part of their religious heritage. Leaders like Osebe believe in adding prayers and blessings, showing how circumcision transforms into spiritual elements. This transformation reflects the changing blend of tradition, rights, and religion among the Abagusii views on male circumcision.

The spread of ideas from leaders such as Osebe to other members of the Abagusii community reveals

an element of hierarchical cultural diffusion. From the foregoing discussion, it can be deduced that despite these external pressures, the Abagusii adapted by blending traditional and modern practices. This hybridization allowed them to maintain their cultural identity while conforming to new social norms imposed by colonial and Christian influences (Lonsdale, 1992). For example, while the medical procedure was adopted, the cultural ceremonies surrounding circumcision persisted, albeit in modified forms. Studies have shown that this blending of practices is a common response among African communities facing external influences. It allows for the preservation of cultural elements while integrating beneficial aspects of new practices (Nyamnjoh, 2004).

Identity Negotiation and Male Circumcision from the Lens of Diffusion of Innovation Theory

In examining the intersection of colonialism, Christianity, and male circumcision among the Abagusii through the lens of the diffusion of innovation theory, we can gain insights into the dynamics of identity negotiation within the Gusii community (Rogers, 2003). The application of this theory sheds light on how the adoption process, factors influencing adoption, and outcomes shape cultural transformation and identity formation.

Adoption Process

The Abagusii community's adoption of Christianity and colonial ideologies followed the trajectory outlined in the diffusion of innovation Theory. Initially, missionaries and colonial authorities introduced Christianity and colonial values to the community, serving as innovators and persuaders (Ondigi, 2018). This introduction sparked curiosity and interest among some community members, who became early adopters of the new beliefs and practices (Nyamwaya, 2020). Over time, the early majority followed suit, influenced by the visible changes in the community and the perceived benefits of adopting Christianity and colonial norms (Mokua, 2019). However, there are also those who

resisted these changes, representing the late majority and laggards who clung to traditional beliefs and practices (Abuya, 2017).

Factors Influencing Adoption

Several factors influenced the adoption of Christianity and colonial ideologies among the Abagusii. The relative advantage of Christianity, including access to education and social status, made it appealing to many community members (Ondigi, 2018). Additionally, the compatibility of Christianity with existing cultural norms and values facilitated its adoption, as it aligns with the Abagusii's spiritual beliefs and moral framework (Nyamwaya, 2020). The complexity of colonial laws and Christian doctrines posed challenges to adoption for some individuals, particularly those who struggled to reconcile the new ideas with their traditional worldview (Mokua, 2019). However, the observability of Christian rituals and colonial practices, such as church services and administrative structures, made them more tangible and accessible, encouraging adoption among the community members (Abuya, 2017).

Outcome

The diffusion of Christianity and colonial ideologies among the Abagusii led to significant cultural transformation and identity negotiation within the community. Male circumcision, once a central cultural practice, undergoes reinterpretation and decline in significance in light of these external influences (Ondigi, 2018). As Christianity becomes increasingly integrated into the community's social fabric, it shapes norms, values, and social interactions, influencing how individuals perceive and negotiate their identity within the context of colonialism and religious conversion (Mokua, 2019).

From the foregoing analysis and discussion, it is evident that male circumcision holds deep cultural and symbolic significance among the Abagusii, representing rites of passage and markers of

identity. However, the intersection of colonialism, Christianity, and indigenous traditions complicates identity negotiation among the Abagusii, leading to tensions and debates over cultural authenticity, as noted by Nyamwaya (2020). As well it can be observed that male circumcision is often associated with masculinity and social status, shaping gender roles and relationships within the community. This calls for future research on how male circumcision intersects with gender identity and roles. Additionally, while colonialism and Christianity are identified as influential factors, there is a need to explore theoretical frameworks such as post-colonialism and cultural hegemony further to analyse power dynamics and resistance strategies within the Abagusii community.

Conclusion

From the findings above, it can be concluded that the establishment of colonial rule and the introduction of Christianity influenced traditional male circumcision practices among the Abagusii community. Besides, the evolution of male circumcision practices among the Abagusii of Southwestern Kenya under the influence of colonialism and Christianity illustrates a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. While colonial and missionary interventions aimed to suppress traditional rites, the community's adaptive responses ensured the survival and transformation of these practices. The hybrid circumcision rites that emerged reflect a negotiated identity, balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the adoption of new religious and medical norms. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of cultural practices in the face of external influences and the resilience of indigenous communities in maintaining their cultural identity.

Recommendations

This study recommends that: It is necessary to reintroduce education during the seclusion period to uphold its traditional role in cultural transmission and integrate modern educational content. This

should include teachings on cultural heritage and critical current health issues such as drug abuse prevention and HIV/AIDS awareness. This approach would maintain the rite's educational significance while adapting its content to contemporary health challenges. Future policies and interventions related to traditional practices should prioritise cultural sensitivity and community engagement. Understanding and respecting the cultural significance of practices like circumcision can foster more effective and sustainable changes. Encourage the documentation and support of hybrid cultural practices that have emerged from the intersection of tradition and modernity. These practices can serve as models for balancing cultural preservation with modernization.

Further Research

This study recommends further research on the impact of technology and social media in reshaping the youth's perceptions and practices of traditional rites of passage, such as circumcision. This can provide insights into how digital platforms could be used to promote or preserve cultural heritage in a digital age.

While in this paper we have discussed about male circumcision among the Abagusii, there is a lack of attention to gender dynamics and the experiences of women within this context. Future research should explore how male circumcision intersects with gender identity and roles.

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