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### African Transition Rituals Celebrating Gender and Human Sexuality: Implications for African Christian Theology.

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Transition rituals are prominent practices among African traditional communities. Among the Gusii community of western Kenya the ritual is performed for both boys and girls. The boys are taken through circumcision while girls go through clitoridectomy. The ritual for girls is widely criticized and opposed by among others the Christian Church. The ritual for girls is resisted on several grounds, but it still persists. The question which many have asked is, why this persistence? This paper raises a number of arguments among them being that; in Africa, gender and human sexuality are celebrated through painful rituals. Men and women are made rather than born. In this discussion, I argue that opposition to clitoridectomy is ill informed, because it is the element of the pain that accompanies the ritual that is the reason why the ritual persists. The paper draws equivalents between the Gusii traditional transition ritual with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, namely that from a theological perspective, the rituals should be perceived constructively as preparatory for Christian evangelization as they point to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is suggested that the Church should view the rituals constructively instead of opposing them. This situation, among other factors, has over the years rendered ineffective the Church's efforts at evangelization not only in Gusii community but also in other African communities where this ritual is upheld.

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## INTRODUCTION

Transition rituals are prominent practices among African traditional communities. Among the Gusii community of western Kenya the ritual is performed for both boys and girls. The boys are taken through circumcision while girls go through clitoridectomy. The ritual for girls is widely criticized and opposed by among others the Christian Church. The ritual for girls is resisted on several grounds, but it still persists. The question which many have asked is, why this persistence?

Starting from the basis of the theory of altruism that was crafted by Emile Durkheim, this paper raises a number of arguments among them being that; in Africa, gender and human sexuality are celebrated through painful rituals. Men and women are made rather than born. In this discussion, I argue that opposition to clitoridectomy is ill informed, because it is the element of the pain that accompanies the ritual that is the reason why the ritual persists. The paper draws equivalents between the Gusii traditional transition ritual with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, namely that from a theological perspective, the rituals should be perceived constructively as preparatory for Christian evangelization as they point to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is suggested that the Church should view the rituals constructively instead of opposing them. This situation, among other factors, has over the years rendered ineffective the Church's efforts at evangelization not only in

Gusii community but also in other African communities where this ritual is upheld.

The circumcision of boys is perceived as normal and necessary because it is Biblical<sup>1</sup> That of the girls has been passionately opposed not only by the Church but also by the government and non-state actors. It is deemed unbiblical, unhygienic and unhealthy. However, the practice goes on undercover. According to African Woman and Child Feature Magazine, the preference rate of the ritual in Gusii community is 96% only comparable to Somali, 98% and Maasai, 73%<sup>2</sup>. On December 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, three Kipsigis women from Mauche, Njoro sub-county, Nakuru County, Kenya were arrested and appeared before a Magistrate in Nakuru and charged with the offence of undergoing Female Genital Mutilation.<sup>3</sup> In mitigation, the three married women claimed they had unbearably suffered isolation and ridicule in the hands of fellow womenfolk for being "unclean".

Second, on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 in Machakos High Court, Kenya, along practicing medical practitioner, Dr Tatu Kamau petitioned the government to legalize clitoridectomy.<sup>4</sup> In her petition before Justice David Kemei, Dr Kamau argued that the Prohibition of FGM Act 2011 which outlawed clitoridectomy was an infringement of the rights of women to carry out respective cultural roles. She further argued that her desire was to safeguard the dignity and rights of women.

<sup>1</sup> From the Gospel according to Luke, we learn that Christ was circumcised a week after birth according to Jewish traditions. There is no evidence of girl circumcision (see Luke 2:21).

<sup>2</sup> African Woman and Child Feature Magazine (file:///Users/Admin/Documents/FGM IN KENYA.html)

<sup>3</sup>Judiciary, Kenya. <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/12/women-tell-court-peers-pushed/> retrieved 12/06/2018

<sup>4</sup> Tatu Kamau. [www.kcb.co.ke/ruling-case-legalise-fgm-kenya-known-thursday/](http://www.kcb.co.ke/ruling-case-legalise-fgm-kenya-known-thursday/)retrieved 12/06/2018.

Third, the persistence of this practice in spite of much pressure against it by governments, faith-based organizations and non-state actors<sup>5</sup> provides the context of discussion. This is, interrogating the question of circumcising boys and girls as a compelling cultural practice among some African communities and in particular, the Gusii of western Kenya. Building on the theory of altruism as proposed by Emile Durkheim<sup>6</sup>, five arguments are advanced regarding African transition rituals namely;

That this practice amounts to celebration of gender and human sexuality through pain since the practice transforms boys and girls into Men and Women and confers on them statuses, roles and identities;

That in Africa, men and women are made rather than born. It is not enough that one is born of a particular gender, it must be confirmed through ritual and ceremony;

That opposition to this ritual is culturally ill informed;

That it is possible to draw comparisons between this traditional African ritual and the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

That from an altruistic theoretical perspective, this ritual is perceived as preparatory for Christian evangelization in Gusii and elsewhere in general.

Considering the arguments above, the thesis that informs this discussion is that gender and human sexuality in Africa are celebrated through elaborate rituals and ceremonies that confer statuses, roles and identities. Therefore, the traditional practice of circumcising boys and girls in Gusii community of western Kenya is an expression of altruism because it implies belonging, acceptance and community sustainability. The discussion is presented thematically as follows; circumcision as a compelling cultural practice; exploring accompanying rituals and ceremonies and their social, psychological and religious significances;

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Kipkemoi. "Factors Undermining Adoption of Alternative Rites of Passage for Girls Among the Catholic Faithfuls of Olenguruone Division, Nakuru County, Kenya. Egerton University, M.A Thesis, 2017.

the culturally ill-informed struggles against circumcision of girls in Africa; the value of pain as means of instilling societal values; drawing comparisons between circumcision ritual and the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ.

### **The Significance of Transforming Boys and Girls into Men and Women in Gusii Community**

Among the Gusii of western Kenya, transition rituals of boys and girls is a culturally accepted method of celebrating gender and human sexuality. However, the way in which it is carried out has changed over the years due to sustained pressure by a number of factors including the modern school system, urbanization, the Church and modern technology. The discussion here seeks to explore the essence of this ritual in celebrating gender and human sexuality as found in a typical African traditional society (TATS) as represented by the Gusii community of western Kenya. The substance of analysis are the songs that traditionally accompany the ritual both for boys and girls.

### ***The Songs Accompanying Clitoridectomy***

Girls in Gusii community traditionally face the ritual of at a tender age of below 10 years. The practitioner who is traditionally a middle-aged woman severs the nip of the clitoris using a sharp object. This is done early in the morning before daybreak after the girls have bathed in cold stream water, meant to numb their bodies to reduce pain. The candidates should demonstrate courage by not screaming during the process and after. When the process is over, the practitioner ululates loudly and is joined by supportive women who usually accompany candidates. This ululation symbolizes the success of the process. After the cut, the initiates are made either to squat or sit on stones to allow blood to flow freely on to the ground. Once all candidates have been done, the practitioner cites

<sup>6</sup>Emile Durkheim. *Suicide* translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, New York; New York Free Press, 1951. p.44 cited widely in Marshall B. Clinard (First published 1957 then 1963, 1968, and 1974 by Holt, Rinehart. And Winston) 626-652

relevant chants and the escorting troupe of women takes up. It goes as follows;<sup>7</sup>

**Practitioner solo:** Yaye goye hee!

**Women:** yayee goye!

**Practitioner:** Yaye Kebutoke yayee!

**Women:** Yayee goye! (The escorting woman leader takes over from the practitioner and the song is recited all the way home to a thunderous reception and feasting).

**Woman leader:** Yayee goyee!

**Other Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman leader:** orange egesagane!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman leader:** obeire omokungu!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Soloist:** orange mokabaisiaa!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman soloist:** Obeire mokabamura!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman leader:** Otigire egosorio getii!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman leader:** Ise amosikee!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

**Woman leader:** Anyore omosacha babiare abana!

**Women:** Yayee goye!

The interpretation of the song is that having been a lass (a girl) she has become a woman; She was a wife of lads (boys) and now she has become a wife of men; She has now abandoned childish games on

grazing grounds and matured; Her father should respect her; She should get a man to marry her and they get children.

### Initiation Songs for Boys

Equally, the boys traditionally went through a painful procedure of becoming men. They face the practitioner early in the morning before daybreak. He then cuts their foreskins using a sharp knife after they have bathed in cold stream water. Trapped with their backs on to a tree and faces turned upwards towards the sky, with several men holding them tightly, the circumciser, usually a priestly looking old man, severed the foreskins using one knife on several boys. After the cut, the boys were made to squat on the ground a few meters from the ritual tree and bled freely holding to their genitals with their own hands. When all are done, the practitioner recites the song as follows;<sup>8</sup>

**Practitioner soloist:** Iyoyo iyoyooo!

**The men:** Iyoyoyo!

**Practitioner:** Obeire omomura bono mambiaa!

**The men:** Iyoyoyo!

**Practitioner soloist:** omomura obororo bwamorire;

**The men:** bwamorire! x 2

The practitioner then handed over to the team leader to solo the song all the way home to be received mainly by women with pomp and feasting. The song then went on as follows;

**Leader soloist:** Iyoyo iyoyoo!

**The Men:** Iyoyoyo!

**Leader soloist:** Obeire omomura mambia kinyii!

**The Men:** Iyoyoyo!

**Leader soloist:** Anyiome omokungu amoire borere!

<sup>7</sup> Onyancha, Boaz. "African Response towards Western Christianity with Particular Reference to Abagusii and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Ogembo Division", Kisii District, Kenya" (Nairobi University, M.A Thesis, 1989) 57

<sup>8</sup> Onyancha, Ibid. pp.58

**The Men:** Iyoyoyo!

**Leader soloist:** Ngina amosike tamotoma rochee:

**The Men:** Iyoyoyo:

**Leader soloist:** Ise mokebi oirire!

**The Men:** Mboro chiabo!

**Leader soloist:** Ise mokami oirire!

**The Men:** mboro chiaboo...

**Leader soloist:** Ise mokami oiriree.

**The Men:** Mboro chiabo. mboro chiabo...

**Leader soloist:** Otureirwe itimo!

**The Men:** Nanguba mbibo!

**Leader soloist:** otureirwe itimo!

**The Men:** Nanguba mbibo.

**Leader soloist:** Otureirwe itimo. nanguba mbibo  
\*2

**Leader soloist:** Arwane sigisi!

**The Men:** Nabotende!

**Leader soloist:** Arwane sigisi!

**Men:** Nabotende. arwane sigisi... nabotende... x 2

The interpretation of this song is that the boys have been transformed from boys into Men through a painful process very early in the morning. Their ancestor has taken their penises; They have been given strong shields and spears to fight the Kipsigis and the Kuria; They should marry and take women to bed; Their mothers should respect them from now

henceforth. They should not send them on errands including fetching water.

From the songs above, we deduce that circumcision ritual among the Gusii community is a very significant activity in the lives of individuals involved. From the surgical operation and the accompanying songs, the community focuses on gender and sexuality in a celebratory mood. That being born a girl or a boy is something to appreciate and celebrate about. The dancing and feasting accompanying the ritual are status affirming.

The painful surgery is an act of altruism<sup>9</sup> and masochism<sup>10</sup> or even martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> The voluntary pain persevered by the individuals underlines individual self-sacrifices and surrender to the nomos (values or norms) of the community, the values of gender and sexuality. These values are at the very nerve centre of the existence of the community and they are to be respected religiously. They are worth the sacrificial love, the wilful pain, self-denial and symbolic death which essentially is a form of martyrdom.

Shading blood in an African community is significant. It is the very essence of sacrifice. There is no sacrifice without shading blood. In the 1960s, Africans shade blood to liberate themselves from colonial rule. Jomo Kenyatta wrote that the tree of freedom is watered by blood.<sup>12</sup> Now the focus is on the young girls and boys voluntarily shading their own blood to satisfy the demands and aspirations of the community. The blood binds them to their ancestry as contained in the accompanying songs to the effect that their ancestor has taken their genitalia. By shading their own blood, they have become full members of the community with obligations and responsibilities including defence and marriage.

It is believed that all children are not gender and sexuality conscious up to around seven years of age.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of altruism is associated with the prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Emile Durkheim in his typology of suicide. See Emile Durkheim. *Suicide* translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, New York: New York Free Press, 1951. p.44 cited widely in Marshall B. Clinard (First published 1957 then 1963, 1968, and 1974 by Holt, Rinehart. And Winston) pp. 626-652

<sup>10</sup> Peter Berge. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, NY: Double Day. 1967.

Salient points of the book available at <https://libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/berger-sacredcanopy-pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Alisdare Hickson. see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alisdare/6414153161>

12. Jomo Kenyatta. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/thomas\\_jefferson-109180](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/thomas_jefferson-109180)

They are without self-consciousness and innocent in terms of sense of identity. This painful ritual instills into their consciousness these identities. “They enter into the state of responsibility: they inherit new rights, and new obligations are expected of them by society”.<sup>13</sup> The painful ritual wakes them up. They are painfully told that they have changed status to become men and women. It is no longer business as usual. They must henceforth respect themselves, accept the new status along with its obligations and responsibilities. Thus, men and women are born ritually and psychologically.

The annual ritual of circumcising boys and girls provides an occasion for prayer and renewal of community solidarity. Every other activity including farming are suspended in favour of this ritual. It is a time of feasting hence making the entire ritual attractive to the young and old alike. Children who witness the feasting crave for circumcision long before they are of age.<sup>14</sup> I can give testimony of this from my personal experience which is still fresh in my memory. When my eldest brother underwent the ritual, I was hardly six years old. But I was conscious of the heavy feasting that followed in our home late into the evening. He was circumcised along with his age-mates. Lots of food and drinks were prepared for the occasion and eaten in common. It was an emotionally electrifying moment. That evening, after all had left and my brother was recuperating in some seclusion hut, I remember sitting next to my mother at the fireplace, naked, as she prepared our evening meal. I told her;

Me: “Mum, I also want to be circumcised”.

Mum: “My son, you are still young. It is painful”

Me: “No. I am ready. I cannot cry”.

Mum: “OK, you will have it in the new year”.

From that time, I exerted too much pressure on my parents unrelentingly until my father finally yielded with lots of bitterness. He felt I had bothered him too much. On the eve of the ritual, preparation of candidates takes various forms including deliberate

subjection of candidates to physical pain to gauge their preparedness. Crying is perceived as a weakness and could lead to disqualification. My father could not hide his frustrations with me. He assumed full responsibility to discipline me. He beat me very hard but I persevered. I did not cry. I refused to give my father an excuse to disqualify me from the ritual that could make me a man.

In the socialization processes that go on to prepare boys and girls for this ritual, it is often clear that one strong objective is to psychologically give the youngsters ethnic identities. They are made to believe that they risk “being excommunicated to join some neighbouring community which does not circumcise its boys.” That is a serious threat which no boy or girl wants to risk.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this ritual gives Kisii boys and girls ethnic identities, a sense of ethnic belonging without which one is not. In essence therefore, the Gusii transition ritual is loaded with ethnic prejudices and a sense of superiority over neighbouring ethnic communities and more especially those who do not practice this ritual. The song tells the boys that they have been given “a spear and a strong shield” to fight the Kuria and the Kipsigis.

Most importantly, the ritual gives the boys and girls a sense of personal achievement and fulfilment. They feel they have become men and women capable of undertaking serious responsibilities including marriage, family and security. It is the responsibility of circumcised men to defend the community. It is the responsibility of initiated women to marry circumcised men and create families.

### **The Question of Persistence of the Clitoridectomy in Gusii**

Over the years since the advent of Christianity, now slightly over a century, the cutting of girls has faced opposition. However, the ritual has persisted. Those opposing the ritual have seemingly valid reasons. They consider it a form of mutilation, hence the use

<sup>13</sup> John S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi; Henemann Kenya LTD, 1969) 121

<sup>14</sup> See Dirie Herzi, Saida Hagi. “Against the Pleasure Principle” in Ayeibia Clarke, *Half a Day and Other Stories: An Anthology*

*of Short Stories from North Eastern and Eastern Africa* (Nairobi; Macmillan Kenya LTD, 2004) 70-77

<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, Luo women married to Kisii men were circumcised before burial when dead.

of the term Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).<sup>16</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) is particularly against the ritual. The world body perceives it as a horrific abuse of power that reflects deep rooted inequality between the sexes, a form of child abuse and a violation of a girl's or a woman's health, security and physical integrity.<sup>17</sup>

One obvious but untold reason for the persistence of the ritual of circumcising girls is the belief that it reduces a woman's libido, to help her resist premarital sexual acts.<sup>18</sup> However, a very current study in Gusii region has proved that this belief is false. A study by Everlyne Chetambe<sup>19</sup> has demonstrated that so many young people engage in premarital sexual activities as manifested in many premarital births. Indeed, if all girls in Gusii presumably undergo the cut to manage their libido, then the widespread occurrence of pre-marital births among the youth weakens the entire theory on which the practice anchors.

There has been some experimentation with Alternative Rite of Passage (ARP) proposed by WHO and other Non Governmental Organizations (NGO)<sup>20</sup>. Even if such experimentation was to be done among the Gusii, it would be defeated by the local structures and circumstances as is the case among the Kipsigis.<sup>21</sup> Over the years, this ritual has largely become a private affair. Perhaps because of the amount of pressure exerted against it. It has virtually disappeared from public limelight. There are no ceremonies. Yet it goes on under cover at 96% preference rate.

The ritual involves shedding blood. It is an experience of pain imposed on an individual by the society which the individual accepts altruistically. At the centre of the pain are societal values that the

individual internalizes. Since ARP approach involves neither bloodshed nor pain and neither does it fulfil the underlying traditions of the people<sup>22</sup> but simply ceremonies, chances are that it would be of little help in Gusii region.

African transition rituals and especially those involving pain are largely acts of altruism. Individuals voluntarily compel themselves to undergo the rituals to satisfy local cultural requirements. In other words, in the face of such local cultural requirements and demands, individuals do not have choices to make. They face, own up and internalize pain and even accept destruction of their individualities for the sake of societal values.

### **The Cross as the Ultimate Representation of Altruism**

In an article, "The Hidden Christ in African Traditional Religion" Judith Mbula<sup>23</sup> argues that Jesus Christ is not a stranger to Africans. That God's revelation to mankind is not a onetime act. It is a continuous process through generations. He revealed Himself to African ancestors as expressed through African languages, rituals and belief systems. African Theologians only require an act of faith to discover the hidden Christ in African traditions.

In his studies of African religions and philosophy, John Mbiti<sup>24</sup> has argued that although the main contribution of African Traditional religion is in the past (Zamani) and may not be useful in dealing with modern challenges and changes confronting Africa, it prepared Africans for Christianity. Africa is now experiencing a new dawn in futuristic mythology in

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Kipkemoi, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.28toomany.org/blog/do-alternative-rites-passage-arp-approach>.

<sup>18</sup> This reason has also been cited by WHO as being responsible for persistence of FGM see <https://www.28toomany.org/blog/do-alternative-rites-passage-arp-approach>. See also <sup>18</sup> See Saida Hagi –Dirie Herzi, "Against the Pleasure Principle" Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Everlyne Chetambe. "Influence of Christianity and Modernity on Youth Sexuality in Kisii Central Subcounty, With Reference to SDA and Roman Catholic Churches, Kisii County, Kenya." Egerton University Press; MA Thesis, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> WHO <https://www.28toomany.org/blog/do-alternative-rites-passage-arp-approach>

<sup>21</sup> Kipkemoi Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Judith M. Bahemuka. "The Hidden Christ in African Traditional Religion" in Mugambi a, J.K. and Magesa, Laurent, editors, *Jesus in African Christianity; Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology (Nairobi: Initiatives Ltd, 1989)1-16*

<sup>24</sup> Mbiti, ibid., *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Ltd, 1969) 272-273

all areas of life thanks to the background in African traditional religion.

Two points emerge from the above two thinkers in relation to the matter under discussion here; the relevance of Gusii community circumcision rituals to the cross. The first point is that the rituals remotely pointed to the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The preparation of individuals for the ritual, the voluntary pain, the free flow of blood in a sacrificial mindset, the heavy responsibilities placed on the individual and instant change of status is reminiscent of Christ's voluntary suffering and death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. It is only by an act of faith that the spirituality of the Gusii circumcision rituals can be deciphered in the context of death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection. From the Biblical perspective, the death and resurrection of Jesus is perceived as fulfilling some Old Testament prophecies and Jewish religious indulgences. Equally, Jesus should be seen as a fulfiller of African religious views including circumcision rituals.

The second point is, the Gusii circumcision rituals should be perceived as preparatory for Christianity rather than being condemned as barbaric as the western Christian missionaries did. The rituals teach the value of voluntary pain and the individual's readiness to sacrifice personal comfort for the values of the community. The shared meals and the emotional experiences of the moment that renews and solidifies the community is reminiscent of the holy communion that Christ bequeathed to all his followers. He instructed his disciples to always do it in his memory till he returns (Lk 22.19, TEV).

The point is this; Gusii circumcision rituals are altruistic representations. We see individuals subjecting their lives to almost excruciating pain for the sake of the cherished values of the community. This being the case, Jesus's voluntary death and resurrection constitute an act of ultimate altruism, the universal altruism. The Alfa and the Omega of all acts of altruism. The fulfiller of all human acts of altruism including African circumcision rituals. Christ's was a once for all acts of altruism.

Some Biblical texts would support this view. In John 3:6 (NSV), it is written "for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever

believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" God had voluntarily given His son to die in order to save humanity whom he loved. In the Gospel according to Mat 20; 18-19 (NSV), Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem as he led his twelve disciples into the city. He told them thus; "and the son of man will be delivered to the priests and scribes and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and will be raised on the third day." In spite of this knowledge, Christ still marched on to Jerusalem.

Furthermore, in Mat 20; 20-22, the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him to plead for favours to her two sons in Christ's Kingdom, "One to sit at his right hand and the other at the left." To her plea Jesus responded; "you do not know what you are asking." He went on, "are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" In this regard, Jesus was referring to his impending suffering, that is, crucifixion and death. Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem and was ready for the same. Just like Gusii young circumcision candidates prepare for the painful transition ritual, Jesus faced the pain and anguish of his impending death with courage and equanimity.

Furthermore, Christ's altruistic anguish is described in Luke 22; 14-16 (SRV) at the Passover feast with His twelve disciples. It is written, "when the hour came he sat at table and the apostles with him and he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" This apparent altruistic anguish is further demonstrated at the mountain of Olives (Lk 22; 39-42, RSV)). He withdrew from his disciples a stone throws away and knelt in prayer. "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done" The cup the Lord Jesus is referring to here is his impending crucifixion and death in Jerusalem. He was clearly troubled yet he did not have a way out. He was at the mercy of forces beyond him. Just like the boys and girls in Gusii who face the circumcision ritual, their choices are limited. It is beyond them. The demands of society upon them are quite above their personal interests and must be fulfilled.



Most important in the Gusii circumcision ritual for girls and boys is not the act of cutting the genitalia *par se* but the aftermath. The new being that has been transited with social, moral and political and cultural responsibilities to the community. Equally, the crucifixion and death of Jesus on the cross produced a new being, the Christ, the resurrected new being. In Ephesians 1;19-23 RSV), Paul wrote thus, “after raising him from the dead, God made him sit at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, and power and dominion, and above every name that is named not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the Church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills overall.” Thus, from the above reasoning, one can draw apparent equivalents between Gusii circumcision rituals and the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### SEXUALITY, GENDER AND THE CROSS

Christ kept both men and women very close to his earthly ministry all the way to the cross and the resurrection. Although he gave a more conspicuous space to men, twelve of whom were his apostles they were not even there at his moment of need. In fact, they kept a safe distance including Peter who denied him three times. However, it was women especially the two; Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who kept vigil at the tomb waiting for his resurrection on the third day as he had indicated (Mat 28.1-7). At the resurrection morning, these women were the first witnesses who broke the news to the disciples. Thus, by choosing to appear to both genders at his resurrection, there is no doubt that Christ celebrated human sexuality and gender. In Romans 10; 11-13, Paul wrote that both Jews and Gentiles or suffice it to say, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised, and all peoples, male and female, are saved by faith in Jesus. His altruistic death and resurrection embraced all without

discrimination. Both genders stand equal before the saviour in spite of differing roles.

### The Church's Attitude to Circumcision Ritual

In Africa, the Church's attitude and teaching about the ritual of circumcision especially of the girls is informed by 19<sup>th</sup> century western Christian Missionaries. In central Kenya, among the Kikuyu, they condemned the practice along with polygamy as unchristian and unhygienic.<sup>25</sup> They could not allow circumcised girls in their churches and schools. The kikuyu responded by forming their own churches and schools, perhaps with a view to entertain the rejected rituals.<sup>26</sup> The Missionary Church in Africa took leave from the missionaries to demonize the African transition ritual. A situation that has forced African converts to go underground with the practice.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the African response to Missionary Christianity could obviously have been different and perhaps friendly; had the missionaries regarded African circumcision rituals as foundational and preparatory to the gospel as demonstrated in the above arguments. It was a big failure on the part of the western Christian missionaries and by extension the Missionary Church, for not deciphering this point about African circumcision rituals. Attempts by the Church to introduce alternative rites of passage have failed miserably.<sup>28</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Building on the theory of altruism as proposed by Emile Durkheim, this paper has raised several arguments among them being that; in Africa and particularly among the Gusii community of western Kenya, gender and human sexuality are celebrated through painful rituals and especially circumcision. That the activities involved in this ritual are altruistic. Individuals put their lives in the line of pain to fulfil the moral and cultural expectations of the society. It is further argued that men and women are made rather than born through voluntary painful processes. It has been demonstrated that resistance

<sup>25</sup> Jesse N.K. Mugambi. *African Christian Theology; An Introduction*. Nairobi: Henemann Kenya Ltd, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Mbiti. (1969) *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Ltd).

<sup>27</sup>Boaz K. Onyanacha.” African Response to Western Christianity with Particular Reference to the SDA Church in Ogembo Division, Kenya “Nairobi University; M.A Thesis 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Kipkemoi. *ibid*.

or opposition to the circumcision of girls by the missionaries, the Missionary Church, the government and non-state actors is ill informed and this partially informs persistence of this ritual in African communities. The opposition contradicts compulsive cultural dynamics that enforce some of these practices in Gusii community and perhaps, Africa in general.

Finally. This paper draws comparisons between the Gusii traditional circumcision ritual with the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is argued that understanding of the equivalents could have provided the sound theological basis for Christian missiology in Africa. Unfortunately, the ritual and others were condemned as barbaric and consequently forced underground.