

THE ROLE OF CIRCUMCISION IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE KIKUYU IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

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ABSTRACT

During the pre-colonial period, traditional education was given to young people before they integrate the world of adults. With a slight difference, this kind of education is the same in all parts of Africa. It takes the form of initiation at every stage of life: babyhood, childhood, adulthood and old age. In *The River Between*, this initiation is rooted in a well-organised society to the point that it had become the determining factor of social and political ascension in the Kikuyu society. So, the initiation in the Kikuyu society involves a second birth which is the passage from babyhood to childhood, and circumcision which marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. During the initiation from childhood to adulthood, the neophytes receive teachings on their culture and lessons of endurance and wisdom. Circumcision in the Kikuyu society gives access to social and political life. It is the source of spiritual and social cohesion and order, in spite of the risks involved in the way the surgery is done.

KEYWORDS: Kikuyu Society, Circumcision, Social and Political Life, Social Cohesion & Risks

RESUME

Durant la période coloniale, les jeunes gens recevaient une éducation traditionnelle avant d'intégrer le monde des adultes. A quelques différences près, ce genre d'éducation est le même dans toutes les régions d'Afrique. Cette éducation prend la forme d'une initiation à chaque étape de la vie : petite enfance, enfance, âge adulte et vieillesse. Dans le roman *The River Between*, cette initiation est enracinée dans une société bien organisée à tel point qu'elle est devenue un facteur déterminant dans l'ascension sociale et politique dans la société Kikuyu. Elle inclut donc une seconde naissance qui est le passage de la petite enfance à l'enfance, et la circoncision qui marque la transition de l'enfance à l'âge adulte. Durant le passage de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, les néophytes reçoivent des enseignements sur leur culture et des leçons d'endurance et de sagesse. La circoncision dans la société kikuyu donne accès à la vie sociale et politique. Elle est la source de la cohésion spirituelle et sociale malgré les risques que renferme la manière dont l'opération est faite.

Mot-Clé : Société Kikuyu, circoncision, vie sociale et politique, cohésion sociale, risques.

INTRODUCTION

Powerful empires emerged and flourished in Africa during the pre-colonial period. These empires were socially and politically well-structured and organised. The Yoruba and the Kikuyu respectively from West and East Africa represented centralised society for the former and decentralised for the latter. In the Kikuyu decentralised society, life stages are clearly defined and established. Life stages determined and also governed not only one's integration to social life but also one's participation in political life. There are mainly four life stages in the Kikuyu society: babyhood, childhood,

adulthood and old age. In between one life stage and the next, there is a bridge called rite of passage such as second birth, circumcision to mention but a few. Circumcision weighs more than any rite of passage as it “*was the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life*”¹. This article contains mainly two parts. The first part focuses on circumcision, its meaning and importance in the Kikuyu society. The second part explores the Kikuyu social and political life. These two parts will be discussed from a socio critical point of view, considering circumcision as a cultural fact to which the Kikuyu assign an importance that goes beyond the individual level on the one hand, and as a practice that structures the Kikuyu’s social and political life on the other hand.

CIRCUMCISION: ITS ASPECTS AND MEANING IN THE KIKUYU SOCIETY

Circumcision is far older than recorded history. According to *Urban Dictionary*, it consists in *surgically removing the foreskin off the male penis usually done at birth or during infancy, but can be done at any time in life*.² Female circumcision known as female genital cutting is

*The ritual removal of some or all of the external female genitalia. Typically carried out by a traditional circumciser using a blade, female genital mutilation is conducted from days after birth to puberty and beyond. Procedures differ according to the country or ethnic group. They include the removal of the clitoral hood and clitoral glans, the removal of the inner labia or/and the outer labia and the closure of the vulva. In this last procedure (known as infibulation) a small hole is left for the passage of urine and the menstrual fluid.*³

This surgery on female external organs is performed for non-medical reasons according to World Health Organisation and United Nations Infancy Emergency Fund⁴. It covers a wider field than these above definitions in some African societies because circumcision is generally a compulsory test for every human being. Both male and female babies are circumcised within the first month of their lives in certain African tribes. Married people undergo circumcision during adulthood in some northern parts of Benin, especially in the Ditamari⁵ society. But, circumcision is a major requirement that paves the way to social and political life in the Kikuyu society. Before the final transition from childhood to adulthood, the Kikuyu children perform a rite called “second birth”. Second birth is a rite performed as the prelude to the final initiation into manhood which is circumcision.

It is very significant in that it represents the first rite of passage in the Gikuyu society. Every Kikuyu child aspires to undergo his second birth. After a dispute over being a Demi⁶ or not, once at home, Waiyaki told his mother “*I must be born again*”⁷. As a father’s duty, Chege reminds Waiyaki, “... *tomorrow is the day of your second birth*”⁸. Happily and excitedly he runs to his mother’s hut to inform her. The father’s reply does not surprise him because he is psychologically prepared to undergo his second birth. Ngugi clearly portrays how the second birth is performed in the Gikuyu society through Waiyaki’s experience:

His mother sat near the fireplace in her hut as if in labour. Waiyaki sat between her thighs. A thin cord taken from the slaughtered goat and tied to his mother represented the umbilical cord. A woman old enough to be a midwife came and cut the cord. The child began to cry. And the women who had come to wait for the birth of a child, shouted with joy.⁹

The second birth is combined with some rituals which are performed for the enrichment of the ceremony. Thus, after the second birth, Waiyaki's mother takes him to Honia River where "*she dipped him into the water and he came out clean.*"¹⁰ The second birth is not only a rite for the child who performs it and his family but also a rite for the whole tribe as it represents the readiness "*for the biggest of all rituals, circumcision*"¹¹. For the Kikuyu, the second birth gives the first *laissez-passer* to integrate and also to participate in the life of the community. After Waiyaki's second birth, he is ready for the great initiation, his circumcision. Now, he has passed from the state of ignorance to the state of knowledge. Chege can tell him the ways of the land and the secrets of the tribe after his second birth. So, Chege and Waiyaki have a journey to Kerinyaga during which Chege teaches Waiyaki traditional medicine, the history of the Kikuyu and the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro¹² is also revealed to him. After this journey, Chege sends Waiyaki to Siriana mission to go and acquire the white men's knowledge. The second birth is Waiyaki's first initiation.

As in most African societies, initiation represents the most important rite of passage in the Kikuyu society. Initiation is commonplace in Africa but not all initiations involve circumcision. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Season*¹³, the Fundi is a gathering of young people from many parts of Africa in the forest where they receive many forms of training and teaching to become accomplished adults. Initiation is a multidisciplinary traditional practice. It prepares the body and the mind through various physical, moral and psychological tests for a harmonious insertion of the individual into the community. Above all, the Fundi are "*warned never to turn the skills to the service of things separate from the way*"¹⁴ The most precious teaching given to the Fundi during their initiations in the forest is the orientation of the use of the different skills they have received. Without this orientation, anyone who undergoes the initiations can use the acquired skills for his own interests or for the interests of a force of domination. This orientation is the bond which unites all the Fundi together for life. According to their teachers, "*The skills themselves were light skills, needing to be filled out with substance coming from our souls.*"¹⁵

In the context of *The River Between*, initiation can be defined as a period during which teenagers are withdrawn from the society to a secret place where they undergo circumcision; then they receive secret instructions and they are finally taught the fundamental elements of life. In the Kikuyu society, initiation is well organized and circumcision which is a cardinal part of it "*was the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life*"¹⁶ It involves a festival and the rite.

The circumcision ceremony gives rise to celebrations that the Kikuyu organise before the circumcision ritual. The circumcision rite is performed during a given season before which sacrifices are offered to Murungu, their god and the

ancestral spirits are invoked. The candidates are teenagers of almost the same age and are put into age-group called riika. Weeks before the circumcision rite, they were gathered to sing, dance and enjoy themselves together across the ridges:

The sacrifices went hand in hand with the preparation for the coming circumcision. Everywhere, candidates for initiation were gathering. They went from house to house, singing and dancing the ritual songs, the same that had been sung from the old times, when Demi were on the land.¹⁷

On the eve of the initiation day, the Kikuyu organised the circumcision dance. Ngugi perfectly describes the circumcision dance in this passage:

The dance was being held at an open- air place in Kameno. Whistles, horns, broken things and anything else that was handy were taken and beaten to the rhythm of the song and dance. Everyone went into a frenzy of excitement. Old and young, women and children, all were there losing themselves in the magic motion of the dance. Men shrieked and shouted and jumped into the air as they went round in a circle. Women, stripped to the waist, with their thin breast flapping on their chests... but always keeping the rhythm.¹⁸

Early on the initiation day, the candidates have to perform a ritual bath in the River Honia. The significance of the ritual bath is to soften their body and to make the operation less painful. Then, the candidates sit along the banks of the River. The circumciser passes from one candidate to another doing his surgical work of circumcising using the same blade or knife. After the operation is done the candidates will be covered with sheet. The women around the initiates will shout, praise the brave among them and celebrate their success. There are specialists to treat and care for the candidates' wounds.

After the candidates have been circumcised and the treatment follows, they are taught the Kikuyu values and code of behaviour, the history of the land and some secrets of the tribe. "*Circumcision was the gate to the mystery of the hills*"¹⁹. The instructions are given through stories and riddles. The girls receive instructions on the household's management, womanhood, motherhood and women role in the community whereas the boys receive instructions on the protection of the tribe and on social and political issues.

Circumcision is not only vital but also fundamental for the Kikuyu because it is a rite that symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. After circumcision, the boys pass from childhood to manhood and whereby, they become full participants and members of the society. A hut has to be built for them, as they must leave their mothers' hut. Moreover, one "*could more readily trust a man than a kihii, an uncircumcised boy*"²⁰ because if an adult is not circumcised, he is immediately considered as a child. The girls pass from childhood to womanhood after female circumcision and are therefore eligible for marriage. A circumcised woman is looked at with a greater honor and decency. None would marry an uncircumcised girl called an *irigu* which Chege's statements confirm: "*Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who would pay cows and goats for such a girl!*"²¹ The *Kihiis* and *irigus* are considered as the dirtiest beings and impurities of the tribe and they would irritate the ancestral spirits. A *kihii* or an *irigu* lives as an outcast

because he or she is not integrated to the society. As such, he or she cannot participate in the social and political life of the Gikuyu society. Muthoni desirously decides to be circumcised despite the fact that she is a Christian and the daughter of Joshua, the leader of the Christian group in the ridges because although she lives in the ridges, she is not incorporated in the social and political life of the tribe. She is taken as someone who has received a traditional education.

Circumcision is part and parcel of the traditional education in the Kikuyu society. Before the second birth and from there to circumcision, children are educated through the channel of oral tradition in such a way to be prepared for the event of circumcision. The history of the land is taught to them from generation to generation with the purpose of shaping their patriotism whereas tales usually full of proverbs and riddles along with moral lessons, after a working day on a "shamba", a family farm, are used to shape their consciousness. The Kikuyu used to raise the boys and the girls differently. The education and instruction each receives confers them certain responsibilities and duties. The boys' main activity was to herd the family livestock such as goats, sheep and cattle whereas the girls do household chores and take care of the younger children. When Waiyaki, Kamau and Kinuthia were children, they used to herd their families' livestock. The second birth and the circumcision come promptly to reinforce the latent abilities and the personalities of the neophytes.

The Implications of Circumcision in the Kikuyu Social and Political Life

The social life of the Kikuyu is based on clan, family and traditional education. But the social structure has a direct connection with their political life which involves the age-group system, the elders and the practice of justice.

On equal terms of circumcision, men always keep leadership of the community. The Gikuyu community is composed of nine clans based on the nine daughters Gikuyu and Mumbi had. This is a good indication that the Gikuyu society had been a matriarchal society. According to the Kikuyu oral tradition, women were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand and decided to revolt, but intelligently, by conspiring to impregnate all the women at the same time. Women's pregnancy made them vulnerable so that they lacked leadership skills; men took advantage of this to overthrow them and took over leadership. From that time, the Gikuyu society became a patriarchal society.

The Gikuyu community is a decentralised society where power is highly decentralised. Each clan structured into many ridges is made up of several families headed by circumcised men... "*The earth was important to the tribe*²²" as it was a gift from Murungu who gave it to Gikuyu and Mumbi and all their descendants for their establishment. *ngoma cia moherega* "*the clan spirit*" whose immediate and main concern is people's behaviour and the welfare of the nation at the level of the clan. The Kikuyu invoked those spirits for example, when calamities occur in Kameno after the death of Muthoni. Muthoni passed away because of the complications of her circumcision.

The rites of passage and other important ceremonies were the affair and concern of the whole tribe. The integration to the Kikuyu social and political activities as well as their participation in them is determined by circumcision. *Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept the people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to man's life.*²³ It is based on age-group system. Age-group, for the present purpose, can be defined as follows:

Recognised and sometimes organized group consisting of persons (often male persons only) who are of the same age. In Africa, at any rate in East and South Africa, an age-set is normally formed of all those males who are initiated at one time. Once a person enters a given age-set, whether at birth or by initiation, he remains a member of the same age-set for the remainder of his life. In East Africa, where the age-organization is highly elaborated, each age-set normally passes from one grade to another as a whole.²⁴

The age-group system represents the primary political institution in the Gikuyu society. Age-grade forms part of a political structure in which a lineage and clan system are involved. Children that are born within two to three years interval across the community are regarded as peers and are grouped into the same age group to undergo initiation-circumcision. After the initiation, they become one group, one body because they are socially and ritually bound to one another for the rest of their lives. They hold together some responsibilities and social duties. Hence, the Yoruba adage which says: *Ka rin ka po, Yiye nii yen*²⁵ strengthens the age-set. When a *riika* becomes older, he receives respect and esteem in the society. *ngoma cia riika* “the age-group spirit” is a category of ancestors who were concerned with the welfare of the age-groups on occasions such as the rites of passage.

In *Petals of Blood*²⁶, a ceremony of circumcision is described. The circumcision ceremony creates unity and solidarity in the age-group of the circumcised and serves to maintain past values. It is a way of preparing them for later life and to fight for the interests of the group. About the circumcised of an age-group, Jomo Kenyatta said:

They act as one body in tribal matter and have a very strong bond of brotherhood among themselves. Thus in every generation, the Gikuyu tribal organisation is stabilised by the activities of various age-grades of old and young people who act harmoniously in the political, social and economic life of the Kikuyu.²⁷

Personal qualities such as skill, wisdom and ability determine leadership in the age-grade system. Joshua, Kabonyi and Chege are from the same age-grade and Chege has acquired leadership because of his wisdom and knowledge. Waiyaki and Kinuthia are also from the same age-grade but Waiyaki has acquired his leadership among his clan because he has founded the first modern school. As the Kikuyu, The Ibo society was also a highly decentralised society where social rank, status and leadership are well determined by personal talent and merit. In *Things Fall Apart*²⁸, Okonkwo who is from a poor family background becomes a highly respected man in his clan due to his determination and hard work. The social organisation starts from the family.

The Kikuyu social organisation is based on the family unit and the age-sets. The family is the fundamental basis of the Kikuyu social structure. It was an independent and self sufficient institution in the Kikuyu society. Before the arrival of the white people in the Gikuyu society, the family was either monogamous or polygamous and made up of a man, his wife or wives and his children. The number of wives they have is perceived as a sign of great achievement – the bigger the number, the greater the recognition of responsibility in the Kikuyu society. For instance, if a man chooses to marry more

than one wife, theoretically he must provide *ruracio* (bride-wealth) and a separate house for each within the homestead. The family lived in a homestead with several huts. The family, as an institution, is headed by the man whose hut is called *thingira*. It was in his *thingira* that serious family issues were discussed and the family norms and traditions taught to children. Chege has called Waiyaki into his *thingira* and reminds him his second birth and announces him the journey on Kerinyaga.

In the homestead, each wife has her own hut where she lives and sleeps with her children without distinction of sex and age; only those children must be yet to be circumcised. After a boy had gone through circumcision, a hut had to be built for him. Waiyaki has moved to his own hut which is built for him after he has passed his rite of passage. As children grow up, undergo the initiation and form their own families, a sub clan (*mbari*) is formed. The women's hut served as a kitchen and as dining room at the same time. One night, when Kinuthia visited Waiyaki in his hut, they went to Waiyaki's mother's hut to take their meal. There is a big tree under which the head of the family holds discussions with other men of his *riika*. It was the duty of the head of the family to settle problems and disputes that may occur within the family. A dispute within families is settled by the *kiama*. For religious matter in the family, *ngoma cia aciari* "the spirits of parents or forbears" is invoked particularly in situations concerning the welfare of the family. During Waiyaki's second birth, *the spirits of parents or forbears* is called by the elders or the *Kiama* to join the ritual for the ceremony wellness.

The religious hierarchy structures the Gikuyu society in which the elders play a major role in both social and political life. The *Kiama* presides over all the matters concerning the tribe as a whole. The religious beliefs influence all the other aspects of the Gikuyu culture. The *Kiama* is the council of elders who played the role of intermediary between Murungu, the ancestral spirits and the rest of the population. In the ridges, the elders collect and prepare the sacrifice that would be offered to Murungu. "The elders of Kameno, and all over the sleeping lions, collected and gave sacrifice to Murungu at the sacred place"²⁹. The elders gather any time an emergency occurs and find adequate solutions to the issue discussed. After Muthoni's death, following the complications of her circumcision, the elders met to discuss her case and came to the conclusion that Murungu was angry. They also offered sacrifice to Murungu after a fruitful harvest as a thanksgiving. As other African cultures, the Kikuyu practiced sacrifice. Sacrifice is made and offered according to the particularity of the situation. For example, when Muthoni's health deteriorated after her circumcision, her situation requires the sacrifice of "a black ram without blemish under the Mugumo tree".³⁰ But since Joshua is converted to Christianity, he could not do such a sacrifice. Therefore, the girl died.

Despite the fact that the kikuyu are highly patriarchal, women had a council. This council deals with domestic and farms issues, the discipline of women and girls and social and ritual life in the society. As far as political affairs are concerned, they are strictly forbidden for Women to interfere in. Women are formally excluded from political and judicial matters. An elder, man or woman, is only eligible to enter the *Kiama* when they have properly gone through the different life stages and raised their children according to pertaining tradition and customs. This is a kind of passport to the council of elders in the Gikuyu society. For example, one of their children must have successfully undergone the initiation and get married to allow the father's entrance into the *Kiama*. Chege acquires his passport because all his children are initiated and the girls are well married.

Descendant of the Kikuyu great seer, Mugo wa Kibiro, Chege is the central traditional leader of the ridges and he presides over every important ceremony. He has acquired this position “for he knew more than other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. He knew the meaning of every ritual and every sign.”³¹ He embodies the true Kikuyu as he defends and protects the tribe’s tradition and customs as long as he lives. All his daughters are circumcised and well-married. His only son, Waiyaki undergoes triumphantly his initiation despite his western education and this deserves congratulations and praises to Chege from the other elders.

The other elders not only fear but also respect Chege. They sometimes come to his homestead where they discuss important issues of the tribe with him. After the initiation, an elder came to him from Gathango to get more information on the initiation. Muthoni’s complicated circumcision case was also discussed. Chege concludes that nothing good would come from embracing Christianity if not rifts and divisions in the ridges because the Christians are opposed to traditional custom and therefore to circumcision. The traditionalist Kikuyu consider themselves as independent people, different from the Christians as they have their own way of worshipping God and governing.

The River Between presents the Gikuyu society as a highly democratic society. Although governing is exclusively reserved for the elders, the final decisions are taken through an agreement, but not by vote as in the democratic system. The primary role of the Kiama is judicial-the settlement of disputes between families within the community. When Waiyaki organises the students’ parents’ meeting to decide to build more schools, the decision has been taken by all the people. Justice is fundamental in a democratic system; in the Gikuyu society, the council of elders, the *Kiama*, carries out the legal functions of judgement and punishment with the community members’ agreement. When Kabonyi accuses Waiyaki of deceiving the tribe, the Kiama invites Waiyaki to come and give some clarifications on this accusation. Once Waiyaki is in front of the Kiama, Kabonyi first takes the floor to repeat the accusation; then Waiyaki defends himself with solid reasons. Finally the decision is taken by the elders who continue to trust Waiyaki as their leader.

CONCLUSIONS

Circumcision not only maintains the social structure but also reinforces the cohesion of the Kikuyu society during the pre-colonial period. It is a compulsory passage rite in the kikuyu society because the Kikuyu social and political life largely depends on the distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Circumcision and age-groups are considered as vital cultural aspects which give access to knowledge, maturity and to social and political responsibilities. However, it involves some weaknesses. Firstly, during the circumcision the same surgical instrument is used for everyone. Secondly, there are many side effects to young girl circumcision. It is the case of Muthoni, Joshua’s daughter, who died of the complications of her circumcision. Nowadays, because of the bad effects on women and girls, it is commonly agreed that this practice must disappear. Besides, circumcision turns out to be a barrier for marriage between Christians and traditionalists. The love between Waiyaki and Nyambura, the second daughter of Joshua could not ripe into marriage because of this incompatibility. It is better to educate by shaping the mind than educate by mutilating the body to shape the mind. The theme of circumcision in the kikuyu is the central pole around which turns people’s lives. Although, *The River Between* is a work of fiction, it can be used as a documentary on the practice of male and female circumcision along with their social and political implications in the Kikuyu society.

NOTES

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.44

² www.urbandictionary.com/define.php/circumcision. Accessed on 07, March 2016

³ Wikipedia.org/wiki/female-genital-mutilation (Accessed 09, June 2016)

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The Ditamari are located in the north west of Benin Republic. The region of Atacora

⁶ Demi was a riika (age-group) of early Gikuyu generation who had initiated and developed agricultural activities.

⁷ Ngugi waThiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.13

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.14

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 15

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.14

¹² Mugo wa Kibiro was the great Kikuyu seer who had prophesied the invasion of white men long time before their arrival. He was the ancestor of Waiyaki.

¹³ Ayi Kwei Armah. *Two Thousand Seasons*. London: Heinemann.1979

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.85

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Ngugi waThiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.44

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.45

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.48

¹⁹ Ngugi waThiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.53

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.45

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44

²² NgugiwaThiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.76

²³ *Ibid.*, p.79

²⁴ R.F. Morton, *The Structure of East African Age-Set Systems*

²⁵ To go together in life, befits humans as creatures.

²⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Petals of Blood*. London. Heinemann. 1977.

²⁷ Jomo Kenyatta. *Facing Mount Kenya*. London: Seeker and Warburg.1974.p.2.

²⁸ Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. London. Heinemann. 1981 (1962)

²⁹ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p 35

³⁰ Ibid. p 55

³¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann. 1965. p.8

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