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**Female Circumcision –
the Ethical Debate to Keep or Abolish the Practice**

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Course: Moral Teaching and Practice of African Traditional Religion

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Date: December 2005

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1. Introduction

Female circumcision is part of the African initiation rite to become an adult woman. It is practiced in many cultures. According to the WHO, there are about 130 million African women circumcised – 75% of them in Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Nigeria. About two million girls are circumcised every year (cf. Gachiri, 2000, p. 37). Because the practice violates the integrity of women and poses a health risk, it has increasingly been conceptualized as a human rights violation at international conferences, for example in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Platform for Action, no. 39; 113). Great efforts have been made to educate people about the potentially harmful effects of female circumcision. Still, it is an unbroken tradition in many ethnic groups, especially in rural areas.

1.1. Objective and Methodology

This research presents female circumcision in its cultural context to understand the ethical motivations of its ongoing practice and to discuss if there are acceptable alternatives.

The principal source of this paper is the field research as it is documented in the appendix. I've interviewed Kenyans from different ethnic groups and religious backgrounds. They all live in Nairobi and have been confronted in one way or another with the critical discussion.

The literature review presents the global debate which is very complex. The opinions of my informants represent only a small section of it.

In the conclusion, I compare the results of my research with the literature, in particular how to find an acceptable alternative initiation rite that could replace female circumcision.

1.2. Terminology

The appropriate medical term is “Female Genital Mutilation” (FGM) to underline that it is damaging the female body irreversibly. Mutilation is defined as “any definitive and irremediable removal of a healthy organ.” (Shell-Duncan/Hernlund, 2001, p. 6). In this paper, I use the expression “Female Circumcision” (abb.: FC) to prevent emotional accusations against those who believe in its cultural importance. It is also less humiliating to circumcised women who regret their operation. Nobody wishes to be referred to as mutilated.

FC means the “complete or partial removal or alteration of the external genitalia for nonmedical reasons.” (ibid. p. 3). There are three main types (cf. ibid. p. 4; Gachiri, 2000, p. 33-35; concerning the bone which can be chopped off during excision: see p. 67):

- 1) *Clitoridectomy* is the removal of the clitoral prepuce (hood) with or without the removal of all or part of the clitoris.
- 2) *Excision* is the complete or partial removal of the clitoris with the complete or partial removal of the labia minora. It may include the removal of parts of the labia majora, too. Sometimes the bone which holds the clitoris is broken and chopped off.
- 3) *Infibulation* (“pharaonic circumcision”) is the most severe operation. Like excision, it cuts away the outer parts of the female sexual organs as well as most of the labia majora. Then the vagina is sewn together to leave only a tiny opening for urination and menstruation. Commonly, a small stick is inserted to maintain the opening.

Other variations of FC are piercing, burning or using acid substances. But the most common practice is excision (about 80 % of all cases).

2. Field Research

2.1. Experiences and Opinions of Circumcised Women

I begin the presentation of my research with the testimonies of four circumcised Kenyan women whose communities affirm the cultural importance of this initiation rite: the Samburu, the Massai, the Kikuyu and the Kisii.

2.1.1. Samburu – Becoming a Mature Person

I interviewed a mother of five children who belongs to the Samburu (app. 1: research no. 3, 29/9/2005). She is 32 years old and was circumcised at the age of about 10 years like almost all women in her community (about 90%, see app. 2). Also, her three daughters who are now 9, 8 and 6 years old will be initiated in the same way. This is important for becoming an adult with a mature character. Uncircumcised women remain childish and don't find a husband to marry. The preparation for marriage is the latest occasion when Samburu women receive FC. Although premarital sex is not allowed, it happens that an uncircumcised woman gets pregnant before marriage. In this case, she will be circumcised right after giving birth.

This is not only important for the woman. The child would be considered impure and be rejected by the community.

Up to this point in our conversation, it seemed that the woman identifies fully with the tradition of her clan. Then I asked her if she remembers her own circumcision. Initially, she denied it. But when I asked about the pain, she started talking: The circumciser cut away a lot (“everything”) and it hurt terribly for three weeks. The wound opens again and bleeds during child birth so that the doctor always has to stitch it. The woman doesn’t feel sexual desires and is totally numb and passive in this matter. Because she doesn’t know the difference, it is no problem for her. Fortunately, she has no pain during sexual intercourse. But she regrets that she is circumcised and wants to protect her daughters. This is difficult because the relatives at home will force her. When she will visit her family, they will take her daughters and cut them. In Nairobi, they are safe. Her husband is indifferent about the rite.

I was surprised about her emotional change during our conversation, rejecting the same things she defended in the beginning. She hopes that today’s young men will accept to marry uncircumcised women. Then the practice will vanish.

2.1.2. Massai – Ancestors as Guardians of Tradition

An interview with a Massai mother of about 50 years affirms the tension between traditional custom and modern thinking (app. 1: no. 1, 19/9/2005). The woman told me about her initiation rite which, at the same time, prepared her to marriage. FC was part of a ceremony where the girls receive a new name and their heads are shaved. They were sprinkled with milk to be blessed. Then she went with her future husband for several months in seclusion. He had to prove that he is able to survive without the support of the community. Almost all Massai women are circumcised (about 93%, see app. 2).

My informant is convinced that the rite has a great value to become a woman and a mother. Men don’t want to marry uncircumcised women. She complains that her daughter refuses to be circumcised because of modern education. Probably, FC will die out in her culture. But some Massai don’t wait anymore until marriage for the cut. To prevent that the girls escape, they are usually initiated between 10 and 14 years. My informant never had health problems after her circumcision.

I asked her about the consequences of refusing circumcision. She believes that the ancestors are cursing those women with barrenness or madness. Is she afraid that her daughter will be cursed? She affirmed and said that for this reason the girl has been circumcised. This was an apparent contradiction to the first statement, and I was not able to

find out during our conversation whether her daughter is circumcised or not. It demonstrates the deep rupture between tradition and modernity, as it has been obvious in the first interview.

2.1.3. Kikuyu – Initiation into Womanhood

A Catholic sister explained to me how she has been initiated in the 1980s (app. 1: no. 4, 6/10/2005). Her ethnic group, the Kikuyu, circumcises before the first menstrual period. Without the cut, the girls weren't able to become women and full members of the community. Enduring the pain of FC was believed to prepare the girls to endure better the pain of child labor. They were told good things about the initiation so that all girls looked forward to it. Delaying FC was perceived as a punishment. Every girl received a personal sponsor, a married woman who has the role of a counselor, advocator and confident friend. It is the sponsor's responsibility not only to prepare the girl for the initiation rite but also to accompany her during seclusion and to be a mentor for all her life.

Early in the morning, at the day of circumcision, she went with her age-mates to the river where they were ritually washed. Then the tip of the clitoris was cut so that her blood flowed on the ancestral land. The wound was treated with herbs. Afterwards, the girls went into seclusion for one month, a kind of "school of life", where they were taught the customs of the Kikuyu and how to behave as mature women. During this month, they were fed very well and received a lot of approval. At the end, there was a big feast and the young women received new clothes.

Today, things have changed a lot because the Kenyan law prohibits this practice. There is no longer the educational preparation and follow up. FC is done secretly in the hospital without a group and without a feast. It has become a decision of the nuclear family. About 1/3 of the Kikuyu women are circumcised (see app. 2).

Although the sister has a positive memory of her own initiation, she is against FC because it is a mutilation of the body and the health risk is high: the women can have pain during sexual intercourse or while urinating, receive infections like HIV/AIDS, have difficulties to give birth because of the scarred tissue and might bleed to death. She promotes a rite of initiation that keeps all the positive aspects to be integrated as members in the community but without the cut. Kikuyu regard the will of dying elders as law. It still happens that grandmothers curse their uncircumcised granddaughters. The fear of an ancestral curse is very strong. Therefore, it is in the hand of the elders to change traditions and bless new ways of living. The sister is confident that this attitude will spread in her community.

2.1.4. Kisii – Resilience against Forceful Abolition

A Kisii woman told me about her initiation experience in the 1950s (app. 1: no. 5, 9/10/2005). After the circumcision, the girls of her group went into seclusion for several weeks. They were taught by older women about marriage and responsibilities of women in the community. They sang educative songs and had a lot of fun. Part of the seclusion were also a public confession of sins, “suffering nights” (where the girls had to learn to endure physical pain) and skill-proofs like keeping a fire going until dawn. At the end, there was a great feast. The girls looked forward to FC. They themselves proposed to their parents when they felt mature to be circumcised. No one forced them to do it. But my informant doesn’t know a deeper cultural meaning for the cut except that it was a requirement for marriage. “It is done because of tradition.”

The Kisii practice clitoridectomy before the first menstruation. Up to this day, almost all women get circumcised (about 96%, see app. 2). The Seventh Day Adventist missionaries tried to abolish FC among the Kisii in the 1920s. But they only prevented the public ceremonies, not the cut. Today, girls are sent secretly to the hospital for circumcision because of the government pressure.

Since there is no transmission of cultural values organized to initiate the girls, my informant doesn’t see any sense to continue with the cut. Other reasons for her to abandon the tradition are possible health risks and sexual complications. She calls FC mutilation. Modern education is an important factor to change the practice. But without force! The intervention of the government has provoked that Kisii families have circumcised their daughters on purpose to defend their culture. It is better to explain that FC is not needed in order to identify with the tradition. Gradual change will end the practice.

2.2. Male Voices on Female Circumcision

2.2.1. Culture as a Stabilizer of Society

I interviewed a professor of Philosophy who is a follower of African Religion (app. 1: no. 2, 26/9/2005). He defends the practice of FC as long as the communities assign a cultural meaning to it. In that view, the woman is a sacred being because she gives new life; her blood has to mix with the earth, our mother, that she shall be fertile as the earth is fertile. For the professor, it is only a symbol without real effect, but wherever FC has a social function, people have the right to do it.

Customs have meaning in a specific social context. Then pain and irreversible body cuts are acceptable. Ear and body piercing are painful and irreversible, but the desired result motivates people even in Western countries to do it. If we believe in the value of something, we are willing to endure pain. Piercing in the West is only a fashion that can be abandoned without great cultural loss. But in African societies, initiation rites have a stabilizing function. A simple abolition of FC on medical grounds would destabilize the social order with far reaching negative consequences. Therefore, the individual has to follow the tradition of the clan.

My informant doesn't agree that FC is mutilation if the cutting is moderate. Male circumcision removes much more flesh. And if clean instruments are used, it is not health threatening. Excessive cutting should be replaced by clitoridectomy. And culture change that abandons FC is not necessarily bad if it is gradual and doesn't endanger the stability of the community.

2.2.2. Culture and Modern Influence

I met with a Kisii man who is not so much concerned about the meaning of FC but in general opposes the Western attitude that condemns African values (app. 1: no. 9, 15/11/2005). The Kenyan government implements with force international norms that are not comprehensible to the population. FC is a practice from time immemorial. Girls look forward to the rite and appreciate it afterwards. His wife and daughters are circumcised and never had any health problems or complications giving birth.

There are two main reasons for FC among the Kisii. First, it introduces the girls to the life of a woman and a mother. The second reason has lost its importance. When Kisii men used to be polygamists, FC reduced the sexual desire with the intention that wives didn't feel neglected. The adultery rate was low. But today, men don't have enough financial resources to care for more than one woman. Could the education during the initiation rite be organized without the cut? He believes that the center of initiation, which holds everything together, would miss. The physical mark is absolutely necessary to "feel" the bond between age-mates. This is valid also for a boy's initiation. Education without the climax of circumcision would not be taken seriously anymore. He has noted this among groups that don't practice FC.

Although my informant defends the initiation rite, he believes that FC will disappear because of the inevitable culture change. He wouldn't force young girls today to be circumcised if they don't want to. But in the long run, the Kisii will lose the good aspects of their tradition.

2.2.3. Culture and Islam

Among the religions in Kenya, Muslims have the highest FC-rate (about 50%, see app. 2). I spoke with a deputy principal of a Muslim secondary high school who is teacher of Islamic law (app. 1: no. 8, 14/11/2005). He happens to be a Luhya where FC is not practiced. According to Islam, there are five categories of laws. FC falls in the category of permissible actions. They are neither prohibited nor recommended. FC was practiced in Africa before the coming of Islam. As long as no Islamic laws are violated, the ethnic groups are free to continue with their customs.

But the Koran prohibits harmful damage to the human body. I asked him about infibulation, which is practiced mainly in Muslim communities. The deputy answered that this is certainly against the law. If Muslim groups have this custom, it is not because of their religion but in spite of it. Another important law concerning women is the prohibition to see her naked when she passes the age of 9 years. This includes the mother and other female relatives. Therefore, if Muslims circumcise their girls, they do it before that age. As a consequence, circumcision is not anymore an initiation rite into adulthood. Since there is no FC among the Luhya, he wasn't able to give reasons why Muslims hold on to this practice.

Asking him if Muslims want to dominate the sexuality of women (this is mentioned in the literature in connection with infibulation), he replied that sexual desires are a gift of God if we live them properly within marriage. To avoid premarital sex, the veil is the best protection to preserve the integrity of a woman. Taming her with FC is not necessary.

The interview seemed to me too easy going. There was no disagreement. Given the fact that Muslims have the highest number and the most severe methods of FC, there has to be a total indifference among believers. Or the real motivations are not communicable to outsiders.

2.3. The Campaign against Female Circumcision

Officially, FC has been outlawed in Kenya by the Children's Act in 2001. I visited the Gender Commission to learn about the government activities that enforce the abolition (app. 1: no. 6, 25/10/2005). The director was eager to tell me about their successful anti-circumcision campaign. FC has dropped in Kenya within five years from 38% to 32% (from 1998-2003). Key factors are the education of girls and a higher living standard of the families (see app. 2). A new survey is just being organized to see the latest development. The director

knows all the statistics by memory but has no understanding about the cultural motivations that keep the tradition alive. “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong because of medical reasons and women rights”. There is nothing to discuss. “If they want to see blood, they shall pinch the clitoris.”

During the interview, I was not sure if my European background was the reason of his zero-tolerance position. It is an open secret that politicians don't interfere with ethnic groups that circumcise women while they condemn the practice on international conferences. Financial aid from Western countries, especially the USA, is linked to credible efforts to abolish FC.

But the politicians have found a solution to meet international demands without provoking the population directly. In Kenya, anti-circumcision campaigns are implemented by several NGOs. I visited Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization, one of the most influential female NGOs in the country (app. 1: no. 7, 26/10/2005). The gender officer told me proudly how the government appreciates their work after a long period of opposition against women issues. The reasons against FC are the same as the director of the Gender Commission has mentioned: health risks and women rights. The NGO is more aware of the cultural reasons. But the target is clear: The meaning has to be known only to explain why it is wrong. Bloody pinching, as suggested above, is not an alternative. But the communities shall keep the education during seclusion. The NGO reaches out to leaders (elders) and role models of the community and informs them about the health dangers and wrong superstitions. Once these people are convinced, it is easy to change the initiation rite. A second activity are information campaigns in primary schools (see app. 4). They have to get the girls at this age before they are forced by their relatives to be circumcised. Boys are encouraged to accept uncircumcised wives. Sponsored with international funds, they have convinced successfully some Kenyan communities to abandon FC (cf. Shell-Duncan, 2001, p. 37).

The gender officer has a militant style to talk about the activities: “We've won the battle in Western Kenya.” I believe that women like my Massai informant would get scared and prefer to follow the ancestral tradition. To reproach her of being superstitious wouldn't be comprehensible to her. These two women live in different worlds.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Cultural Meaning of Female Circumcision

The motivations and cultural explanations to circumcise differ from region to region. Since my informants are all Kenyans, I limit myself to East Africa and give a summary of the cultural value within the context of the initiation rite of African Religion as it is explained by John Mbiti (cf. Mbiti, 1978, pp. 91-97), Laurenti Magesa (cf. Magesa, 1998, pp. 92-101) and Ephigenia Gachiri (cf. Gachiri, 2000, pp. 90-96). What is said about the circumcision of girls is basically valid also for the circumcision of boys:

- The blood, shed on the land, binds the person to the lineage of the clan. It is a covenant between the community and the individual establishing unity with religious implications. Before the rite, the child is still an outsider. The scars leave a permanent mark that identify the integrated members and serve as a sign of belonging and group identity. Traditionally, it is a religious ceremony that includes sacrifices to God and the ancestors. Afterwards, the initiates are allowed to perform religious acts.
- Some communities believe that humans are born bisexual. Removing the foreskin of the boy, which corresponds to the vagina, and the clitoris of the girl, which corresponds to the penis, makes them man and woman and gives them their (gender-)role in the community. Now they are able to relate to the opposite sex. The original perfection of the child has to be compensated for by social and cultural development.
- The physical mark during initiation is painful in order to prove endurance which prepares the initiates for the hardships of life and helps them to control their emotions. The courage of the youth, displayed in the ritual, ensures the life force of the clan. Therefore, cowards who show weakness during the ceremony are humiliated, often over a whole lifetime. The sublimation of pain teaches self-denial for the sake of the community. Pleasure and suffering in life belong together which is symbolized by cutting the sexual organs.
- The seclusion period is an important phase to prepare the girls for marriage and to become active members of the community. It covers all aspects of culture in a holistic manner: the norms, values and the wisdom of the community, domestic and social virtues, legal expectations, self-identity, sexual education, religion, history of the ethnic group, proverbs, songs, dances, aesthetics, medicine, farming, household and how to

behave responsibly as a woman and wife. Also secret knowledge is passed on from woman to woman, creating a sphere where men don't have access. The seclusion period, like the circumcision rite, involves physical and psychological extreme situations to practice courage and endurance. It shows in a radical way that the individual is nothing without the community.

- Initiation is compared to a new birth. Often, the candidates receive a new name to testify the radical change. It is a public recognition that the individual has become an adult. The removal of flesh is a symbol that the stage of childhood is passed, and there is no step back. The woman receives privileges and responsibilities in the family and larger community. She is allowed to express her opinion publicly and to take leadership positions. In some communities, the girls get married soon after initiation.
- The mingling of blood during the circumcision by using the same knife and the seclusion period create a strong bond among the initiates of the same group. These relations last a whole lifetime. The age mates will stick together in all problems. They give moral, psychological and financial support to each other. Honorable or shameful actions of one individual will fall on the whole group.

3.2. Objections against Female Circumcision

Commonly, FC is condemned by international organizations but defended by the local people. I present now the principal objections and, if there are contradicting opinions, summarize briefly the different ideas and experiences that are discussed in the literature.

3.2.1. Violation of Women and Children Rights

On several occasions the UN have condemned FC as a violation of human rights (cf. Shell-Duncan/Hernlund [abb.: S-D], 2001, p. 27-29). Because usually minors are circumcised, activists call upon the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) that advocates the right of children to develop physically in a healthy and normal manner (Princ. 2). Gachiri, herself being circumcised at the age of 6 years, writes that girls “are nonconsenting victims, uninformed and unconsulted. As the practice becomes more and more secretive [in Kenya] ..., the little girls have less and less chances of knowing exactly what happens during the operation.” (Gachiri, 2000, p. 102) She also reports cases of adult women who have undergone FC without knowing it. The mothers-in-law made arrangements with a

nurse, and the women were circumcised during a routine check of the vagina (cf. *ibid.* p. 19-20). Arguing from a human rights perspective, Fan Hosken states that the “integrity of the human body is supreme. Any violation of the physical nature of the human person, for any reason whatsoever, without the informed consent of the person involved, is a violation of human rights.” (quoted by Abusharaf, in: S-D, 2001, p. 161-62)

But reactions of circumcised women to the international condemnation of FC are not all supportive. According to Fuambai Ahmadu, only a minority of circumcised women oppose the practice (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 2). In many communities, girls usually look forward to being initiated through circumcision and, what is more important, circumcised women desire this ritual also for their daughters. They don’t agree that their rights have been violated or that their quality of life is reduced. Otherwise the tradition would have died long ago. In some cases, FC even serves as an ideological marker for women of the ruling class that reinforces ethnic superiority over non-circumcising groups (cf. Gruenbaum, in: S-D, 2001, p. 50).

The definition of human rights becomes problematic when it interferes with customary law. The cultural relativist position holds that judgments about certain practices are never independent of the cultural context and cannot be criticized by outsiders. The universalist position is convinced that there are some individual human rights whose violation should be punishable independent from the cultural context. This would include FC. Gerry Mackie, who opposes the practice, is against legislative action. He comes to the conclusion that governments cannot outlaw cultural practices and criminalize a whole population without methods of mass terror (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 34; also Johnson, in: S-D, 2001, pp. 226-232). Mackie proposes non-directive anti-circumcision campaigns (see 3.3.4.).

Noteworthy in this debate is also the aesthetical aspect. In Africa, there are several painful initiation practices like body piercing, impressing scars or removing teeth. They test the endurance of the person but also are perceived as making the person attractive. In a Nigerian study in 1997, 76% of the rural women have reported that their circumcision has made them more beautiful (see app. 3).

3.2.2. Medical Risks

Because of the difficulty to judge customary law from a universalistic standpoint, many have come to the conclusion that the most reasonable approach to stop FC is to explain the health hazards (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 14).

Short-term complications include severe pain and uncontrolled bleeding which may lead to anemia or even to death. FC, done without an anesthetic, may cause a psychological

trauma. The use of non-sterile instruments can spread infections (HIV/AIDS, Tetanus, Hepatitis...). Traditionally, the initiates are cut with the same knife.

Long-term complications are obstructed urinal and menstrual flow, especially associated with infibulation. Urinary tract infections can ascend to the bladder and kidneys, potentially resulting in renal failure. There might remain a chronic pain while urinating. Pelvic infections can lead to infertility. Wrong techniques can injure the clitoral nerve and cause a tumor of the neural tissue. Obstructed child labor can result due to scarred tissue that often doesn't heal well and bleeds again while giving birth because the birth canal is less flexible.

The list of possible complications is still longer (cf. Gachiri, 2000, p. 49-50; S-D, 2001, p. 14-15). Although health hazards have to be taken seriously, it has been pointed out that information campaigns only have success if they match with the experience of the women (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 16). Often, the most extreme forms of circumcision and their complications are taken as the standard. A lot of circumcising communities are not convinced because these problems don't occur, and the credibility of anti-FC campaigns is undermined.

3.2.3. Male Domination over Women's Sexuality

Gachiri reports that taming women's sexual desires was the most named reason in her survey to circumcise girls (cf. Gachiri, 2000, p. 98). It ensures that the man has social control over a woman's sexuality which demonstrates his superiority. Lately, some Kenyan groups have reinforced FC to teach girls the value of submission to their husbands (cf. Thomas, in: S-D, 2001, p. 147). Infibulation, the most extreme practice, uses the women's tissue as a chastity belt. Those who justify FC hope that girls, by not developing sexual feelings, are more likely to remain virgins until marriage and faithful afterwards. For polygamist families, it has the advantage that women don't complain and remain chaste even if the husband ignores them.

In the West, the clitoris has become the symbol of women's emancipation and sexual fulfillment. Consequently, the fight against FC is a fight for the liberation of women against patriarchal oppression. Famous examples are the Hite Report (1976) and the Hosken Report (1982). Again, the perspective of circumcised women sheds a different light on their situation. African feminists in Sudan, for example, agree that women in their male dominant society are oppressed (cf. Abusharaf, in: S-D, 2001, p. 156-58). But FC is not a cause; it is a symptom of the system. Instead of fighting directly against infibulation, Sudanese women prefer to engage in more fundamental issues like poverty, illiteracy, lack of education and economic exploitation. Sexual pleasure is not perceived as a top priority, as Western

feminists emphasize, but changing the socio-economic context. The primary goals are girl's education and adult literacy.

Other circumcising communities don't even know the element of male dominance in their practice. Fuambai Ahmadu writes about her Kono people in Sierra Leone where women are initiated through circumcision in a secret society called 'Bundu' that empowers them (cf. Ahmadu, in: S-D, 2001, pp. 283-312). Men fear the power of these circumcised women. If there is any element of subordination, it is between the girls towards female elders. The Kono culture doesn't put much emphasize on virginity before marriage or women's sexual fidelity because the role of the biological father is considered marginal (cf. *ibid.* p. 285).

Ahadu disagrees further with the assumption that sexual pleasure and the ability to have an orgasm are located exclusively in the clitoris. She herself and the interviewed women experience either no difference or feel increased sexual satisfaction after their circumcision (cf. *ibid.* p. 305). This is confirmed by other women who had sexual relations before their initiation (cf. Johnson, in: S-D, 2001, p. 227-28). In the already cited Nigerian study (see app. 3), 53% of the rural women with sexual experience answered that their circumcision had increased the enjoyment of sexual activity; 40% said that they don't feel any difference. Sensitive tissue is deeply embedded in the vagina and not necessarily removed when external genitalia are cut, and some studies suggest that in women who have undergone clitoridectomy other erogenous zones become *more* sensitive (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 17).

It remains true that FC can damage the clitoral nerve and cause permanent complications (diminished sexual pleasure or even painful intercourse). But these seem to be exceptions. Female sexuality is primarily controlled by gender education, not by circumcision (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 22). Psychological and sociological reasons determine whether a women, circumcised or not, has a fulfilled sexual life.

3.2.4. Social Expectations and Peer Pressure

The assumption of male dominance can only explain for a limited number of groups the continuing persistence of FC. More commonly, social expectations keep the practice alive. Circumcised mothers wish for their daughters to be initiated in the same way so that they become marriageable and are allowed to take responsibilities in the community. Both, men and women, are born in this cultural context which they didn't choose. Not only women are brought up with the feeling that circumcision is appropriate, men also are caught in a cultural setting that they desire certain aspects of women. Several authors compare this phenomenon to face lifting and breast implants (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 32; Gruenbaum, in: S-D, 2001, p. 50;

Abusharaf, in: S-D, 2001, p. 156): Women practice and welcome plastic surgery because it is an advantage for the career and for getting a desired man. Interestingly, this is accepted as the free choice of the individual in Western countries. Instead, if a woman opts for circumcision, she is considered to be a victim of the social expectations.

But not only parents feel obliged to follow the custom for the benefit of their daughters. In Kenya, for example, peer pressure has a big impact. Gachiri reports of uncircumcised girls who have been mocked and outcast by their circumcised fellow students (cf. Gachiri, 2000, p. 18). They are treated as children and live with a social stigma. Among the Kikuyu they are simply called “kirigu”, which means “it” (cf. *ibid.* p. 101-102). It happens that adolescents voluntarily present themselves to circumcisers because they can’t resist the peer pressure in class, and some even pay with their pocket money if the parents refuse to arrange their FC.

Reading Gachiri’s testimonies, this social pressure can be compared to peer-groups that make their adolescent members drink or smoke. Nobody wants to be left out. Adult women sometimes agree to be circumcised because the in-laws or the future husband demand it.

3.2.5. Superstitious Motivations

There are many myths and superstitions alive that have perpetuated FC (cf. Gachiri, 2000, p. 103): Non-circumcised girls wouldn’t have common sense, don’t know how to behave, act in a childish manner and climb castor oil trees with uncircumcised boys which is a big insult in some communities. These girls would more likely become prostitutes because they have a greater libido. The clitoris would grow large like the penis if it isn’t cut or will produce a poisonous substance that kills the husband during the wedding night or harms the baby during birth. Some believe that FC enhances fertility and makes childbirth easier or that enduring the pain of FC prepares the woman to endure the pain of giving birth.

Many follow the tradition because they fear the curse of moral authorities. Often, grandmothers command to continue with the practice. Disobeying the will of the elders or ancestors inflicts a curse on the community.

3.3. Strategies to Abolish Female Circumcision

3.3.1. Attempts to Outlaw Female Circumcision

Colonial governments and mission churches have tried to abolish FC in the 20th century with little success. When the authorities in 1956 prohibited clitoridecetomy in Meru (Kenya)

and punished circumcisers who continued their work, adolescent girls defied the ban by cutting each other with razor blades purchased in local shops (cf. Thomas, in: S-D, 2001, p. 129-30). In other countries, the announcement to outlaw FC provoked public uprisings and mass circumcisions, including newborn infants, before the law would be enacted (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 33).

The African Inland Mission and other protestant societies decided in the 1920s in Kenya to excommunicate all members who continued with FC and demanded from their new converts during the profession of faith at baptism to renounce not only to Satan but also to FC. The forceful imposition had a boomerang effect. The majority of Christians who were faced to decide between tradition and foreign culture left the mission churches and mission schools and founded their own independent churches and schools (cf. Gehman, 1987, pp. 14-19). Many Kenyan African Independent Churches have their origin in this conflict.

3.3.2. Medicalization of Female Circumcision

A lot of scholars are convinced that FC will continue in many societies in the near future. Since it is not possible to abolish this custom by force, some have proposed transitional strategies to organize circumcisions under the supervision of trained medical personal that uses sterile instruments to reduce the health risks (cf. S-D, 2001, p. 32; 110-11). Infections would be eliminated totally.

The WHO has harshly rejected this because it would perpetuate FC and give a wrong sense of legitimacy. Instead, it should be abolished without intermediate stages. During the 1990s, Somali immigrant women in the Netherlands and the United States were willing to replace infibulation by a symbolic anaesthetized pricking of the clitoris in hospitals. Although no tissue would have been removed, the plan was blocked because of the negative public opinion (cf. *ibid.* p. 6). Others have pointed out the intellectual dishonesty comparing the non-mutilating nature of the proposal to legally performed male circumcisions that indeed remove healthy body tissue for non-medical reasons. As a consequence, these Somali families will infibulate their daughters during a trip to their home country. There is the impression that the WHO campaign is motivated ideologically. The fate of girls who are getting circumcised now is a worthwhile sacrifice to keep the non-compromising policy.

3.3.3. Keeping the Ritual without the Cut

Gachiri proposes a Christian alternative rite from girlhood to womanhood that would keep all the positive aspects of the initiation rite except the circumcision (cf. Gachiri, 2000, pp.

116-125). The immediate aim is the removal of the social stigma of uncircumcised girls and their parents. The girls shall grow up with the conviction that it is behavior which will determine their respect and status in the community. In the long run, the alternative rite will hopefully become culturally accepted. To be successful, parents, community leaders and the media have to support this process. The people should study the traditional rite of passage in small groups and discuss the genuine values that are transmitted. The holistic education during seclusion builds up the community and should be preserved as a vital element. Since FC nowadays often is practiced in Kenya without any instruction, the proposed alternative rite will even more fulfill the original idea of initiating adolescents into adulthood.

Ahmadu stresses, if the abolition of FC is an irreversible process, “what *is* needed to replace the physical act of cutting is an equally dynamic symbolic performance that will retain the same fluidity in associated meanings – eschewal of masculinity, womanhood, fertility, equality, hierarchy, motherhood, and sexual restraint.” (Ahmadu, in: S-D, 2001, p. 308)

3.3.4. Pledge Associations (Convention Theory)

Many anti-circumcision campaigns work for a gradual change. Gerry Mackie (in: S-D, 2001, pp. 253-281) presents a “convention” model that might stop FC abruptly in communities where it is implemented. According to him, marriageability is the primary reason why mothers desire their daughters to be circumcised. It is then natural that everybody in an intermarrying community follows the custom to avoid being left out. To break the circle, Mackie draws a parallel to the practice of footbinding in China. “Correspondences between footbinding and FGC [Female Genital Cutting] are numerous: Both customs are nearly universal where practiced, are persistent, and are practiced even by people who oppose them. Both control sexual access to females and promote female chastity and fidelity. Both are necessary for proper marriage, are believed to be sanctioned by tradition, and seem to have a past of contagious diffusion. Both are supported and transmitted by women.” (ibid. p. 261)

Footbinding disappeared suddenly in the beginning of the 20th century after a period of more than 1000 years. This was possible because of so called natural-foot societies whose members publicly pledged to abstain from the practice and to let their sons marry only women with natural feet. Education campaigns informed about the disadvantages of bound feet in Chinese cultural terms. The societies started in the cities where there was a larger marriage pool. Mackie believes it is not necessary to convince the majority of a circumcising

community. The critical number of families who participate in a pledge association only has to guarantee that parents are sure to find a spouse for their child. When others discover the advantages of abstaining from circumcision, it has a snowball effect. FC will disappear without legal intervention within a short period of time. This is confirmed by the Tostan-Project in Senegal. Important for the implementation of pledge associations is a non-directive policy. The circumcising communities have to discover themselves what they believe is best for their daughters.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Similarities and Differences between the Research and the Literature

My informants gave the following reasons for female circumcision:

- It is demanded by the tradition. (research no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9)
- It makes a woman marriageable. (no. 1, 3, 5, 9)
- It is part of a holistic initiation into the culture and the secrets of the clan. (no. 4, 5, 9)
- It makes the woman a full member of society and prepares for motherhood. (no. 1, 4, 9)
- It prepares to endure pain and hardships in life. (no. 4, 5)
- It forms a mature character. Uncircumcised women remain childish. (no. 3)
- It tames sexual desire. (no. 9)
- It makes the initiates “feel” the bond between them that will last until death. (no. 9)
- It creates a bond with mother earth to invoke fertility. (no. 2)
- It is demanded by the ancestors. (no. 1)
- It makes the child, born of the circumcised mother, pure for the community. (no. 3)

Tradition and marriageability are the most named reasons for FC by my informants and in the literature. The Massai mother is the only one who supports FC because of a superstitious motive (ancestors will punish with barrenness or madness). The Kisii man is the only informant who mentioned that FC lowers the sexual needs of a woman. But he argues in the context of polygamy and interprets it as a favor that women don't feel neglected. Interestingly, none of my informants talked about peer pressure or patriarchal structures that force women to agree to the rite. This might be a blind spot among Kenyans.

Female circumcision should be abolished because:

- It is a health hazard and mutilation. (research no. 4, 5, 6, 7)
- It is a human rights violation. (no. 6, 7)
- It may cause sexual complications. (no. 4, 5)
- It has lost its meaning without the seclusion period. (no. 4, 5)
- It leaves scars that bleed while giving birth. (no. 3)
- It hurt terribly for three weeks. (no. 3)

The human rights approach is only taken by those who represent the government and NGOs. None of the four circumcised women said that they had been violated in their rights. But there is a relation between education and opposition to FC (see app. 2). The Massai mother with only primary school education supports the practice fully. The Samburu mother, who finished secondary school, is supporting the value (maturity) but regrets the complications that occur while giving birth. The Kisii mother and the Catholic sister have both a university degree and opt clearly against the practice. They are well informed about the risks of FC but use the term ‘mutilation’ strictly in the medical sense because they want to avoid moral connotations.

The debate on sexuality, introduced by Western feminists, is discussed openly among women scholars. I personally didn’t feel it would be appropriate to ask my informants about such a private issue. The Samburu decided by herself to share her experience with me. The Kisii only talked in general about sexual complications. Nobody mentioned that FC would raise the libido of women. Following only my field research results, it would be a point against the practice. But the number of interviews is too small to draw a general conclusion.

4.2. Changing Traditions

Traditionally, FC has been perceived positively by the initiates. The girls appreciated the honor of being introduced into adulthood and womanhood. They got approval and lifelong companions. The sublimation of pain played a vital role to survive in a hostile environment.

Today, African countries are undergoing major cultural changes. In some places, FC is continued to hold on to an unreflecting tradition mixed with superstitious beliefs. The capability to endure physical pain is not anymore a necessary skill in modern African societies. And in Kenya, FC doesn’t determine anymore the status of a woman in society. But

circumcision without the cultural setting is anachronistic. Secret circumcisions without the instruction period are useless because they don't prepare the girls to live as an adult in their community. Besides, Africans are more conscious about their individuality and their personal needs. An imposed, unwanted circumcision is perceived differently in modern society than in a closed cultural context where women never have heard of an alternative.

In societies where circumcision is an integral part of the living culture, a proposal for a new initiation rite has to be perceived as meaningfully as the present one, and in accordance with the tradition. Focusing simply on the abolition of FC without an acceptable alternative may cause major irritations and disturb the balance of stable relations within these communities which have developed over centuries. It is crucial that the women can identify with a symbolic ritual in place of the cutting. The physical mark shows unmistakably that there is no return to the former state of living. What sign could seal the initiate irreversibly? Other non-circumcising communities that practice the rite of passage into adulthood might serve as an example. As stated by Gachiri and Mackie, the ethnic groups have to decide themselves which values of the initiation are meaningful and how to preserve them. Any forceful intervention from outside causes a stubborn reaction because it is interpreted as a critic of the culture itself.

I admit that, after reading the contribution of Fuumbai Ahmadu (see bibliography), I hesitate to reject FC where the cultural environment still is intact and free from patriarchal structures.

4.3. Health Information Campaigns and Curses

Often, the issue of FC is addressed by informing women about the health risks (see app. 4). If profane reasons like marriageability are the main motivation, it is already difficult to convince people. Mackie states that the advantage is not big enough compared to the disadvantage of being excluded from marriage. For those who believe in the power of ancestors, health risks are even less convincing. An ancestral curse is perceived as much more life threatening than FC because it usually causes death. In those communities, the only way out of the dilemma is a blessing of the (dying) grandparent that he/she doesn't demand the circumcision of the granddaughters. Many Western authors are ignorant about the worldview of circumcising communities. To be able to dialogue with them, it is necessary to understand the logic that motivates certain customs.

4.4. Female Circumcision among Muslims

I didn't discuss FC among Muslims since it is a tribal custom in Kenya, according to the information of my Muslim informant. But Michelle C. Johnson (in: S-D, 2001, pp. 215-234) describes how the ritual indeed has a religious function in Guinea-Bissau. In her culture, a woman can't be a Muslim without being circumcised. The study of Muslim communities in Africa would be an important project because there, the majority of female circumcisions in the world take place.

I was limited to a small number of interviews and to a specific geographic location. Hopefully, this paper was able to give an introduction into the ethical debate on female circumcision and able to shed light on the question why cultural practices tend to be resilient against change.

Appendix 1: Field Research Summary

1. 19/9/2005, Ongata Rongai: Interviews with three Massai about the role of African Religion in the moral lives of the people. In this context, I spoke with a Massai mother about FC as integral part of her religion.
2. 26/9/2005, Consolata College – Nairobi: Interview with a professor of philosophy. He defends FC as long as it has a cultural meaning.
3. 29/9/2005, Tangaza College – Nairobi: Interview with a Samburu mother. She is torn between the traditional believe that FC makes a woman mature and her personal suffering. She would like to protect her daughters from circumcision.
4. 6/10/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a Catholic sister who is circumcised. She explained the process of initiation in her Kikuyu community and why she opts for a gradual change to abandon the practice.
5. 10/10/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a Kisii mother. She is circumcised and keeps a good memory of her initiation. But today, FC should be abolished because it has lost its meaning without the seclusion period.
6. 25/10/2005, National Social Security Fund (NSSF) – Nairobi: Interview with the director of the Gender Commission. He is mainly concerned that the number of circumcised women drops but has little knowledge about the cultural meaning of FC.
7. 26/10/2005, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization – Nairobi: Interview with a gender officer. The NGO tries to convince community leaders that FC is a health threat. But the education during the initiation rite should be kept.
8. 14/11/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a deputy principal of a Muslim secondary high school. For Muslims, FC is a permissible action. But other Islamic laws must not be violated.
9. 15/11/2005, Bomas – Nairobi: Interview with a Kisii man. He defends African cultures against Western imperialism. FC is part of the Kisii culture since time immemorial and appreciated by the women.

Appendix 2: Percentage of Circumcised Women in Kenya (2003)

(Source: Gender Commission, NSSF, Nairobi)

The national average dropped from 38% to 32% within the period from 1998-2003.

Today, only one girl out of five is being circumcised.

Age:	15-19	20.3%	Wealth quintile: Low	42.2%
	20-24	24.8%	Middle	36%
	40-49	47.6%	High	31.8%
			Highest	19.1%
Residence:	Urban	21.3%	Ethnicity (some examples):	
	Rural	35.8%	Kamba	26.5%
Religion:	Christian	30.9%	Kikuyu	34%
	African	39.6%	Kisii	95.9%
	Muslim	49.6%	Luhya	0.7%
			Luo	0.7%
Education:	No education	58.2%	Massai	93.4%
	Primary incomplete	32.8%	Meru	42.4%
	Primary complete	31%	Samburu	90%
	Secondary+	21.1%	Somali	97%

Appendix 3: The Yoruba Female “Circumcision” Study in Nigeria (1997-98)

(Source: Shell-Duncan/Hernlund (Eds.), 2001, p. 83)

	Rural	Urban
1. Whether the women believe their circumcision has reduced their enjoyment of sexual activity		
Increased enjoyment	53 %	16 %
No effect either way	40 %	63 %
Reduced enjoyment	4 %	16 %
2. The aesthetic effect of their circumcision on their genitalia		
More beautiful	76 %	24 %
Neutral or little effect	21 %	73 %
Uglier	2 %	2 %

Appendix 4: School Information about Female Circumcision

(Source: Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization, P.O.Box 44412, Nairobi)

“The dangers of Female Circumcision: Female Circumcision is harmful to women’s health”

Jane: Mother, Lucy, Anne and Mary are not playing with me since school opened in January. They told me, it is because they were circumcised and have now become grown-ups while I am still a child. When will I be circumcised, mother?

Mother: Circumcised? What did your friends tell you about it?

Jane: Lucy told me that if I don't get circumcised, my clitoris will grow longer and longer and I will smell. Agnes told me that I will not get a husband easily and when I get married, I will have problems when giving birth.

Mother: What else did they say?

Jane: They all agreed that it was part of our tradition which must be continued.

Mother: My daughter, we need to talk about circumcision now. I have heard all you have said, Jane, about female circumcision being a good tradition. But good traditions come and go. Some time back we were wearing animal skins but we no longer do this. Times change. Long ago, people believed that it was not necessary to take girls to school. Today, everybody has realized that educating girls is beneficial to both the

family and the nation. In the same manner people believed that female circumcision was important for a girl's development into a woman. But today, we have realized that circumcision is harmful to the health of a girl, now and in the future.

Jane: Does that mean I can still be a grown-up without getting circumcised?

Mother: Yes, my daughter. Becoming mature is a natural process. There are many communities where girls are not circumcised and they still grow up, get married, and have children. They are also accepted in the community.

Jane: Mother, what about the smell caused by the clitoris?

Mother: Jane, both circumcised and uncircumcised girls and women can smell if they do not keep themselves clean because we all have natural mucus that comes out of the vagina. Therefore, circumcision does not stop one from smelling if she does not keep herself clean.

Jane: Mother, are you saying that I will not be circumcised?

Mother: Listen Jane, your father and I have discussed and agreed that our daughters will not be circumcised. We know that female circumcision is a practice with many problems and is dangerous to a woman's health.

Jane: Dangerous? How?

Mother: In the first place, it is very painful. It also causes bleeding which may result in death. One may also have difficulties while urinating. Wounds that refuse to heal may also develop kefoids. Kefoids are scars with growths on them. In addition, the scar which develops after circumcision may tear during childbirth. Diseases, such as AIDS and tetanus, may be transmitted during circumcision.

Jane: I didn't know all this. Thank you, mother, for telling me. Now that I know the problems caused by female circumcision, I don't want to be circumcised. I will also tell my friends in school about all the problems of female circumcision. Mother, maybe you could also come to school and tell the other pupils about the health problems of female circumcision.

Mother: That's a very good idea, Jane. I will be very happy to inform other pupils in your school, all I have told you concerning female circumcision.

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