"We Cannot Be Led by a Child": Forced Male Circumcision during the Post-election Violence in Kenya

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Abstract
This paper is part of an ongoing research addressing the phenomenon of sexual violence in war and conflict situations in three African contexts including Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya and Rwanda. The paper argues that while sexual violence in these conflict situations, including the mass rape of women is a reflection of the prevailing gender ideologies, the contextual features or the way they intersect with various markers of identity including, ethnicity, culture, history and the economy, as well as what we describe as the "politics of my pocket" are little articulated. While women in Kenya were, during the four months of the post-election violence in 2007, similarly raped, men were forcibly circumcised, suffered castrations and other forms of mutilations to humiliate, terrorize not just the individual men, but the entire communities.

The paper thus focuses on the ritual of male circumcision (MC) among the Kikuyu people in Central Kenya and questions why a life-course transitional institution meant for community education and for inculcating ethical analysis of the self and others became that violent. The paper thus examines the changes that have taken place in the ritual and the actors around it. In view of the manner in which forced MC was perpetrated during the post-election violence in Kenya, we argue that it should also be considered as sexual violence.

Introduction

Sexual violence during the post-election conflict in Kenya was similar to that in Rwanda and DRC when considering the raping of women. However, the act of forcibly circumcising men, from ethnic groups that do not have male circumcision as a cultural practice, presents a phenomenon hitherto unknown or undocumented as sexual violence. The International Criminal Court in The Hague for example, categorises forced circumcision under "other inhuman acts." While forced MC is indeed an inhuman act, not viewing it also as sexual violence means, as argued by human rights advocacy groups, failing to take into account the element of force and the purpose for which the crime was committed (IRIN 2011). Ironically, male circumcision is one of the most important rites of passage, 'the making of men' through which manhood, adulthood and related responsibilities are conferred on to the next generation for many ethnic groups in Kenya. The point here is that this same notion was reversed and used to humiliate, traumatize, intimidate and hence emasculate the men in question. It was in other words an attack on the symbol of manhood for those communities that do not practice it. Men rather than women were hunted and forcibly circumcised or had the penis cut or mutilated in order to ensure lasting damage (Waki 2008, Human Rights Watch 2008). Yet, even before the post-election conflict, publicly executed forced circumcision of men, from male-circumcising communities who, for one reason or another, may not have been circumcised has occasionally taken place. Such forced circumcision is then justified on the ground that the 'coward' is helped to become a 'full man' and an acceptable and respectable member of the community (Kamau 2007). This notwithstanding, this paper explores how a cultural ritual of transition meant to confer adulthood, manhood and citizenship, and is therefore a basic element of societal organisation, became a tool of violence on members of communities whose societal organising principles are different. For any discussion of the ritual of male circumcision in Central Kenya, it is necessary to reflect on the current global policy promoting male circumcision as a public health strategy for prevention of HIV and the next section focuses on this.

The emerging public health discourse

Promotion of male circumcision as a public health strategy for prevention of HIV has gained momentum in past years. The enthusiasm to implement MC is based on three randomised control studies in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa which indicated that circumcision of adult men provides a protective benefit against HIV infection in 50-60% of the men (Wamai et al 2008). It is moreover believed that the removal of the foreskin makes the remaining outer layer tougher for HIV to penetrate (Rosen, 2007) but also makes it easier to keep the area clean, the latter, a rational reasoning given that the areas where circumcision is being promoted have poor sanitation and lack adequate water to maintain cleanliness.

Some have however, expressed doubts on the long-term effect of MC as strategy for HIV prevention, arguing that the studies on which the strategy is based, were not conclusive (Green et al, 2008), or because such a focus ignores the meanings associated with the ritual, in societies where it is a tradition or the changes taking place in the ritual (Ahlberg et al, 1997). It is moreover argued that there would be no guarantee that men will not have sex before the wound is healed, a time when HIV is easily transmitted or because

this could reinforce the prevailing blame on women as the carriers of HIV (Green et al 2008). In addition, since this intervention strategy creates the notion that MC is a form of prevention against HIV (Wamai et al 2008) it may, as argued by Bahinyoza (2008) encourage unprotected sex among the circumcised men. Studies in South Africa show for example, that 30% of circumcised men believed they could have sex with multiple partners without getting infected (Deacon 2008). Similarly, it was reported from Swaziland (UNHCR 2008) that men may be interpreting circumcision to mean they are vaccinated and do not therefore need to use condoms. Recent surveys in Kenya show that the rate of HIV infection has been on a steady increase over the last five years in Central Province where male circumcision is universal (Daily Nation August 30 2010). Whatever the case, promotion of MC has lifted it to the centre of public health discourse. However, as indicated, this global policy has neither taken account of the meaning of MC in areas where it is a cultural practice, the changes that have taken place and implication of such change for transmission of HIV. The micro-level changes taking place in MC among the Gikuyu people and the implication for HIV transmission is discussed in the following section.

The changing social meaning of male circumcision

In areas such as Central Kenya, where male circumcision is a tradition, it could also be undergoing change that undermine, the preventive status, for which it has been promoted. Studies in central Kenya (Ahlberg 1997, Kamau et al 2006, Kamau 2007) show how male circumcision has changed from an institution, used in the past to impart cultural values, knowledge and communal moral standing or *Ubuntu* and was a public moment for education and a demonstration of bravery on the part of the young boys, to one where genital cutting is devoid of the educative functions. This emptiness has however, not reduced the importance of the cutting, although school boys just about to undergo MC, in the same area were mostly concerned about the social meaning of MC (Ahlberg et al. 1997).

Yet, from another perspective it is not as devoid of cultural meanings as we claim and this is where the challenge seems to be. A good deal of its traditional form and meanings for example, transforming a boy from a *kihii* to an adult man is still embraced. Kihii was and continues to be the most derogatory and demeaning term that could be used on a male as it insinuates being of little value or having no manners. This is captured in a Gikuyu proverb that says *muici na kihii akenaga okiarua* (one who steals with an uncircumcised boy is happy only when he/(it) gets circumcised) because then he is not likely to divulge secrets. The term *Kugimara,* meaning making a kihii, an adult man is still used even for boys circumcised before the age of fifteen years or just before they enter secondary schools. Teachers in Central Kenya reported that male circumcision is discouraged in primary schools because, once circumcised, the boys become men and are difficult to discipline especially by female teachers (Ahlberg et al.1997).

The parents on their part still provide a separate room or house- *Thingira or Kiumbu*- where female relatives are not allowed in. The counselor- *Mutiiri*- who used to be a man of immense knowledge on cultural values and was known and chosen by the parents, is today mainly left to the boys to chose. The boys mostly chose equally young men

recently circumcised. The fact that circumcision is still universal has left a heavy institutional burden on the young men who in turn have interpreted it to fit their current contexts and realities.

A number of rituals the boys practice or have adapted to suit their realities are particularly important from a masculinity formation and transmission of HIV. For a *mutiiri* to be seen to still be performing his traditional functions or appear useful in a situation where boys are now circumcised at the hospital where the wound is bandaged, undressing the wound before the days the doctor has ordered is not uncommon. Parents may then be requested to provide money to buy medicine, simply known as suta, to be applied on the wound. Moreover, because the hospital circumcision is also considered as less painful, pain creating practices such feeding the recuperating boy with lots of water or tea to make him urinate many times or getting the penis to erect are performed, all meant to test the bravery of the newly initiated. What these practices mean to the healing process is not well researched, but cases of infection in the penis were reported by health care providers (Ahlberg et al 1997).

Another ritual is what the boys call "buying a road licence" where the newly circumcised is expected to offer money or buy cigarettes for the peers circumcised earlier. This is a type of secondary initiation that allows the newly circumcised to freely move around and talk or socialise with girls. The final ritual is what is known as *Kuhurwo mbiro* (cleaning the soot). This is adapted from a practice in the past where young men and women initiated together had teasing relationships. The men teased the women on what would happen should they not accept to have sex or if their soot was not dusted before marriage. There were then many socially instituted checks to prevent premarital penetrative sex including participating in *Ngwiko* where young men and women could sleep together, explore their bodies and experience sexual pleasure without penetration. Participation in *Ngwiko* was in this way also a form of moral testing by being presented with actual experiences (Ahlberg 1994, Mugambi 1989).

Today the boys have changed this practice to mean they must have the soot cleaned through penetrative sex, soon after circumcision. Since this aspect of the ritual has to do with cleansing or more specifically cleaning the soot, condom use is therefore discouraged (Kamau 2007). The boys moreover argue that the condom is in any case also discouraged by the church which has increasingly become active in the circumcision itself and counseling of the boys before and after circumcision. The boys use a great deal of proverbs and songs for educating, but also for putting pressure on the newly circumcised to conform to the rituals and violence is not uncommon against those who may refuse to conform (Kamau et al 2006). The question here is whether recruitment into what has come to be known as the *Mungiki* phenomenon does not have roots in these developments, particularly the institution being left to the young people. However, the *Mungiki* as a movement of young men need to be understood broadly in its political, economic and religious contexts particularly the peripheral position many young men have in the society (Wamue 2001). Wamue describes the Mungiki as extremely versed with the Gikuyu customs and language. Kamau and colleagues (2006) too note the young men in their study had extensive and efficient use of language in form of songs and

proverbs during male circumcision both to educate and to put pressure on the newly initiated to conform to the new rituals. Thus, in spite of the changes described above, the philosophy of reclaiming the Gikuyu traditions including female genital cutting, Gikuyu way of worship (Landinfo 2010) and snuff taking appear to be a type of "double reality" or what may be termed as cognitively living in an imagined past. As a movement that requires new members, MC seems as reported by Maina (2007), to be a suitable moment and space around which to recruit the newly initiated young men into the Mungiki. While this is one area of our ongoing research, the question still remains why male circumcision was used as a tool of violence in a political context. This leads to another question namely how the Mungiki phenomenon itself has developed and particularly in the context of political and economic development in Kenya.

The making of the Mungiki phenomenon and the post-election violence

Mungiki is important in the context of this paper because of the way it was reportedly implicated in the post-election violence in Kenya as the militia group responsible for forcibly circumcising Luo men, although it is not clear to what extent this was a *Mungiki* action per se or to what extent it was orchestrated by different interest groups for political and economic reasons. The post-election violence took ethnic outlook, just as the political parties which had strong ethnic links and were used by various leaders to orchestrate the violence (Wanyeki 2008). While the immediate chaos are well capture in various reports, the content of the massages orchestrated by the different party constellation within the Party of National Unity (PNU) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) in the opposition reflect the historical divisions, the politicisation of ethnicities and economic class formations. The ODM, mainly Kalenjin leaders in the Rift Valley are reported to have been vocal on uprooting the snake or what they called Gikuyu settlers and foreigners from the indigenous Kalenjin land. The history of how the Gikuyu people settled in the Rift Valley date back to the colonial period when the Kenyan Highlands, mostly the home of the Gikuyu, Kalenjin and Maasai was siphoned off for European settlement, a pattern that continued even after independence. According to Kenya Land Alliance (Lumumba, 2004):

> *….the formalized annexation of the Kenyan hinterland by the British Colonial government to the myth of the sanctity of title at independence, when it was argued that once a person acquires title to land, it cannot be questioned even in court of law! Customary land tenure holders inexorably lost their land to individual or private registered land holders. The result is that Kenya at independence inherited one of the most skewed patterns of land distribution in the world, compared only to Brazil, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia.*

The grievances arising from this historical injustice resulting in disinheritance of communities from their land were not resolved at attainment of independence. Rather they have persisted through the Kenyatta and Moi regimes. The resettlement scheme of peasants outside the settler zones by Kenyatta was based on a combination of free market or a principle of able and willing buyer even for land meant for settlement of the landless poor, but also on basis of political favours (Atieno-Adhiambo 2002) or the "politics of my pocket" which includes making alliances and a base of faithful supporters. This

resulted in a situation discussed further below where resources, mostly land was concentrated in a small group, leaving the majority of Kenyans especially young people landless and in utter poverty.

Male circumcision too is reportedly to have gone through political and class metamorphosis. Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) has written a comprehensive history showing how the Gikuyu and the Luo were not only categorized and stereotyped differently. They were also exposed to different experiences of the colonial divide and rule enterprise when the Gikuyu and Luo ethnicities were cemented. Subsequently, the emerging political elite continued during the Kenyatta era entrenching a process where male circumcision was appropriated to mean somebody of wealth and power a type of "ethnic chauvinism". As the wealthy class indulged in high consumption, it has not been uncommon especially at the height of GEMA Association which brought together Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities, to hear wealthy men referring to those driving anything lower than a range rover derogatorily as kahii (small uncircumcised boy). Apart from making it a symbol of wealth, a study of the messages passed around through sms during the 2007 elections, one message quoted by Onyango (2008:10) is particularly informative of the extent to which male circumcision had also been appropriated and politicised:

> *Do you want to be ruled by a Luo to take us back to joblessness? Safeguard the kingdom. Let us ALL come out and give all the votes to Kibaki so that we are not ruled by an uncircumcised man who will make us wear shorts and plunder all the wealth. It's your vote that will prevent our country from going back to Egypt. May our God bless you (2008:10).*

Whatever happened during this period, it was not spontaneous, but rather a product of the historical developments of a Kenyan society strongly segregated especially in terms of wealth. It is a society where, according to Kenya Land Alliance, more than 65% of all arable land is owned by 20% of the population, leaving millions of people landless (Lumumba 2004). It is therefore no accident that the political elite, with everything to lose organised poor people along ethnic lines to fight. According to the Waki (2008) and the Human Rights Watch (2008), as the displaced people mostly the Gikuyu, moved from Eldoret, the epicenter of violence bringing stories of brutality and atrocities of burning, looting, rape and murder, tensions were heightened among the Gikuyu. The Gikuyu local leaders and elites are reported to have reacted by organizing to contribute money for self-defense. In this context, whether the young men involved in fighting back were genuine members of the Mungiki or not, the Gikuyu militias were nonetheless reportedly organized (Human Rights Watch 2008).

Since the beginning in the 1980s, the Mungiki which means "a united people" whose aim was to revive indigenous culture and religion, but also to liberate the Kenyan masses from political oppression and economic exploitation, the group has had running battles with the police and other security institutions. Githongo (2000) for example, reports the way the police force has been used to disrupt the Mungiki prayer meetings. In such circumstances, their range is then diverted to the attack of women deemed improperly dressed for wearing trousers, an act that in turn leads to immediate public outcry.

Paradoxically, other areas of Mungiki crusade for example, against drunkenness, broken families and prostitution resonate with many. Moreover, from an economic perspective, Mungiki has been seen as a welfare organization that offers unemployed young men means of survival, but also protection especially in slum areas where security is critical (Landinfo 2010). However, this involves extortion especially of *matatu*, a public system of transport using mini-buses, and shop-keepers in the rural areas, a practice that has sent chills all over the area, also because of their manner of killing by beheading those who cross their way. The government in turn has unleashed extreme violence, including extra-judicial killings of the members (Landinfo 2010), a policy considered as an abuse of human rights (Maathai 2009). By 2007, Mungiki had however been driven underground partly by being outlawed as a terrorist and criminal organisation, but also by being badly weakened through a violent government campaign where many supposedly Mungiki members including school going youth perhaps recently recruited after circumcision have been killed in an attempt to wipe out the Mungiki.

This, notwithstanding the politicians and businessmen have, at the same time, recruited and used *mungiki* to help them settle their own scores against rivals or win election. According to Githongo (2000):

> *….every time Mungiki have tried to hold one of their "baptism" or prayer meetings, the police have moved in to stop them almost before they begin. This is a clear indication of the extent to which they have been infiltrated by the security services. Yet they have not been "neutralized" in the typical security-service approach that would have seen the creation of pseudo-Mungikis and the promotion of unseemly leadership wrangles….Perhaps powerful people would rather this did not happen because Mungiki plays a useful political purpose.*

It is this complexity that the post-election violence in Kenya and the wider conflict situations in African contexts need to be understood. People may use the cultural resources they have and the forcible circumcision of the Luo men could be seen to reflect culturally based masculine construct. However, whether it was Mungiki perpetrating this on their own or organized by the Gikuyu elite, the act of forcibly circumcising Luo men during the violence cannot be understood without looking at the way MC has been appropriated for political and economic ends as described above.

In conclusion, there is need for reflecting on the institution of male circumcision and its changing forms, but more significantly for how it intersects with political and economic interests. Such reflection is opportune especially given the current political manifestations where the cutting of the penis or not cutting, health benefits aside, has become politicised in ways that make managing ethnic diversity, masculinities, gender and sexual violence exceedingly complex in Kenya.

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