

The Review of Pros and Cons between Traditional Male Circumcision and Medical Male Circumcision in the Contemporary South Africa

Thanduxolo Nomngcoyiya¹ and Simon M. Kang'ethe²

University of Fort Hare, Social Work Department, P/B X1314, Alice Town, South Africa

Telephone: +27406022342, Mobile: ¹<063 681 7496>, ²<0787751095>

E-mail: ¹<tnomngcoyiya@ufh.ac.za>, <tnomngcoyiya@gmail.com>,

²<skangethe@ufh.ac.za>, <smkangethe1962@gmail.com>

KEYWORDS Africanizing. African Renaissance. Cultural Practices. International Forces. Traditional Male Circumcision

ABSTRACT The relevance and benefits of Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) as opposed to Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) has been a topical issue globally. The purpose of this paper through a desktop review, seeks to elicit debates, discussions, discourses and analysis of the pros and cons between Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) and Medical Male Circumcision (MMC). The following underpinning factors have been identified to be a panacea: TMC as an identity maker; TMC harnesses social status. TMC phenomenon is also considered to be perfidious because of: Clinical hazards and illegal initiation schools; para-professionalism associated with traditional practitioners; and conflict between the culture of TMC and modernity. The present paper recommends that: Public need to be afforded the principle of self-determination; a need for all relevant TMC stakeholders to embrace the current gaps in the TMC; and allow other TMC stakeholders to decide whether to supplant MMC or find ways to improve TMC.

INTRODUCTION

Incontrovertibly, the importance of maintaining Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) cannot be overemphasized due to its cultural principles and values of bringing unity and social cohesion (Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017). Culture is perceived by Mathangwane (2009) as a traditional, social and psychological dictionary that African communities have memorized and through which each person unconsciously interprets themselves and others. More so, it also has a religious value as it promotes peace and tranquility as well as its ability to provide many African societies with distinctive national, social and personal identity (Ntombana 2011). It also enables African people to acquire social capital, interconnectedness, sense of belonging, communalism, social interaction, and filling of generation gaps, and to nurture men that become responsible for family, society and great leadership (Kheswa et al. 2014). However, the dynamic international forces of modernization, globalization, eurocentrism, civilization and westernization appear to be tilting cultural variables day-in-day-out (Kang'ethe 2014; Mpateni 2017).

To this end, the aforementioned dynamic forces have derailed, disabled and paralyzed many of these cultural practices and made African people to believe that they were outdated, barbaric, demeaning, and violating people's rights (Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017). These have left many African people in a state of confusion and not fully comprehending the niche and the value of cultural practices such as Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) (Abrahams 2017). Therefore, a critical analysis with the intent of repackaging the meaning and placing the role of Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) in the cultural terrain, exposing and highlighting perfidious dimensions is critical, timeous and urgent. This is to make invaluable cultural practices such as Traditional Male Circumcision, not only be appreciated by the elderly, but also be embraced by youths as cultural practices that have been engrained and benchmarks the Africans' ways of life (Nomngcoyiya 2015). It also serves as a point of reference and the moral compass that has been guiding our societies since time immemorial (Kang'ethe 2013). More so, this is done as an endeavor to encourage and motivate African people to realize and understand

the value imbedded in it, and for the people to understand the goal posts and the need to fulfil those goal posts. Optimistically also, some pragmatists and contemporary literature indicate that cultural interventions can be a strong formidable tool in mitigating social vices including HIV/AIDS, especially in African countries (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya 2016). These misplaced modernization and civilization ideologies need to be set aside because, other first world countries such as India, Japan and China are fully developed yet their cultural undertaking have been moving on in tandem with their development not lagging behind (Kang'ethe 2014). Furthermore, conceptualizing Traditional Male Circumcision is imperative because, all these undesirable and retrogressive dimensions that are infiltrating this cultural rite have to be identified and dealt with accordingly. The fact that African people are increasingly losing their cultural values places its importance to explain the underpinnings of these cultural organs and how significant it is to retain and resuscitate them (Kheswa et al. 2014). More so, the need for Africans to seek home brewed solutions is increasing daily (Battle and Cousin 2011). In line with the African Union's notion of African reawakening and African Renaissance these researchers suggest Africans to take a route of Africanizing African problems in an endeavor to get African solutions. Therefore, various mishaps associated with Traditional Male Circumcision are no exception. Importantly, the custodians of culture need to work tirelessly to find the lasting solution to the current challenges faced by TMC, instead of being coerced by antagonists of this cultural practice to consider MMC as an alternative (Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017).

Problem Statement

Increasingly, South Africa is scoring insignificantly in the international arena on issues of human rights, especially, in the protection of young boys during Traditional Male Circumcision rite in the Eastern Cape. This is because, year-in-year-out deaths associated with botched circumcision has led to various role players such as government to suggest that maybe it's time that communities practicing the rite to do away with it and rather take Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) route. However, a majority of South Africans especially Southern Nguni and certain

Northern Nguni ethnic groups such as amaNdebele and amaSwati feel the culture still occupies a pivotal niche in their lives through Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC). Hence, it is of utmost important to engage in research dialogue, discourse and debates to discuss, analyse and the review pros and cons between TMC and MMC in contemporary epoch.

METHODOLOGY

This paper has adopted a literature review methodology and has immensely benefitted from analysing and reviewing an array of empirical studies and literature sources on TMC domain such as contemporary literature (Newspapers, magazines, academic journals, etc.), books and researchers' experiential knowledge on the terrain of Traditional Male Circumcision and being advocates for resuscitation of cultural practices.

OBSRVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Panacea of Traditional Male Circumcision as a Cultural Undertaking

Traditional Male Circumcision as an Identity Maker

In any socio-cultural context, being young is tantamount to a state of identity crisis, reflecting one's self-image. This is a state when the a young person tries to find who he/she is, where one belongs, one's cultural dispensation and the significant others one is supposed to relate with. The path to seek self-identity is an imperative psychological dispensation which cannot be overemphasized (Huitt 2004). It is an important part of moral, social and mental development. Klimstra et al. (2010) also believe that it is universally prevalent among the adolescents, although the way in which it manifests itself varies from societal and cultural context to another. For adolescents, identity is an individual cognizance of himself/herself as an autonomous, unique individual with unique needs and a specific place in society; and it occurs during infancy but continues throughout the life cycle stages, although it mushrooms most in the adolescent phase. In psychosocial stage of development, Erikson stipulates that each stage of the human life cycle passes through with crises for development (Swartz et al. 2011).

Therefore, male adolescents from societies practicing the rite are no exception. This crisis comes

with struggles and experiments with conflicting identities as the boys move from the security of the childhood to develop an autonomous identity which usually involves what Erikson term "identity versus role confusion" and there's always a great need to resonate confusion with identity (Kheswa et al. 2014). It is against such a background that Traditional Male Circumcision in Southern Nguni and other Northern Nguni ethnic groups, is perceived as an Acropolis of African rite of passage and a catalyst to the accretion of self-identity of an African youth (Baliso et al. 2015). Such a finding resonates with various studies on Traditional Male Circumcision that discovered that it plays a vital role in identity development of young men through a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood (Nomngcoyiya 2015). Similarly, boys from societies practicing the rite believe it's a cultural requirement and a sense of social and personal identity to undergo an initiation to be a man as being a boy or an which is "*inkwenkwe*" a derogatory term for young boy perceived to be socially and sexually undesirable identity (Mpateni 2017). Perhaps, the fact that young boys in communities practicing this rite are willing to put their lives on the line despite all the circumcision accidents and deaths associated with this practice justifies invaluability of the rite. Besides being a symbol of normalizing the state of dissonance in identity, Ndangam (2008) alludes that manhood and masculine identity are closely linked especially in societies where traditional circumcision is strongly practiced. Thus, circumcision initiation serves as a tool of portraying and authenticating manhood as well as enabling one to acquire social identity at the same time (Nomngcoyiya 2015). However, this has brought a sad state of affairs as the personal and social identity by communities practicing the rite is only seen through the spectacles of initiation practice acquired via "*entabeni*" which is initiation in the bush (Deacon and Thomson 2012). This therefore, suggests that young boys who find other means to resolves their state of identity dissonance would be humiliated and ostracized or rather disowned by such societies.

Traditional Male Circumcision as Tool of Harnessing Social Status

Incontrovertibly, the need to acquire social status through Traditional Male Circumcision

outweighs all adverse effects associated with this practice. Social status in its very nature embraces fundamental pillars that are common to most African cultures which include shared communal values, collectivism, coexistence and interdependence (Kang'ethe 2013; Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017). Although it's not a predetermined requirement for TMC, however, Nqeketho (2008) believes that social status associated with rite is driven by human endeavor for a sense of community; social identity, interconnectedness and belonging, while in the process find their personal significance in life. Interestingly, it's not only young men alone who desire social identity and status, even a majority of their female counterparts are believed to have immense respect and regard for men that have underwent the rite of passage through circumcision initiation than those who are uncircumcised (Peltzer et al. 2008). Similarly also, such fundamental aspects of circumcision initiation which are closely associated with social status have other benefits such as conducting traditional rituals and activities, being part of the decision-making within one's own family and the community at large, and attaining respect and social power from one's society (Kepe 2010). Such privileges, therefore, cannot be enjoyed by any man that is uncircumcised despite his age and socio-economic status in African society. This, therefore, means that initiation by circumcision for men practicing the rite is imperative for both societal and individual needs (Mbachi and Likoko 2013). Such values are richly embraced and cherished by the society through their embedment in isiXhosa, a proverb that says "*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" (a person is person because of other persons) (Tanya 2006). However, such privileges may seem to be insignificant especially in the contemporary epoch as a result of promotion of individualism. However, traditional societies which are rooted in the aforementioned principles still hold them with high esteem and are not easily attainable. Therefore, TMC holds immense values and it would be unfair to down play such values when comparing it with MMC (Nomngcoyiya 2015). This could be one of the reasons most young men and their parents in the midst of various atrocities ranging from penile amputations, circumcision accidents, and disabilities even deaths are

willing to risk it all in order to enjoy such invaluable benefits. Perhaps, the cost-benefit analysis (CBA) in terms of equating both practices in this regard would mean that TMC benefits perhaps may outweigh MMC if it has to be conducted in societies that are practicing the rite.

Perfidy Associated with Traditional Male Circumcision

Clinical Hazards and Illegal Initiation Schools

Unfortunately and realistically, the contemporary traditional circumcision in South Africa is increasingly being characterized by a spate of botched circumcisions performed by inexperienced fly-by-night traditional surgeons. This has also brought in an alien culture that is not synonymous with conventional purpose and integral role played by initiation schools in the traditional circumcision practice in South Africa. Evidence holds that initiation schools have recently been defined by a new norm that involves initiates being the subjects of beating with sticks, kicked on their chest and burnt with smouldering plastic on their buttocks and knees by their traditional nurses in various Eastern Cape illegal initiation schools (Mpateni 2017). Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe (2017) also discovered such unprecedented revelation that illegal initiation schools have been associated with exposing initiates to health hazards, unnecessary deaths, and other controversial activities such as being overshadowed by young and unfit, unskilled and inexperienced bogus traditional practitioners. Such a scenario has become a cause for concern as the majority of parents felt that their sons became drugs and alcohol addicts as an aftermath of the rite of passage in the contemporary initiation schools (Kheswa et al. 2014). To say the least, statistics from the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) revealed that 774 initiates died across eight South African Provinces between 2006 and 2016 (Abrahams 2017). In a nutshell, about 557 initiates deaths were reported between 2006 and 2014; with a further increase in death toll between 2014 and 2016 to 199 initiates in the Eastern Cape, 10 in the Free State, 6 in the Northern Cape, 6 in Gauteng, 8 in Limpopo, 8 in Mpumalanga, 7 and 7 in North

West and Western Cape respectively (Nyoka 2017). However, the majority of deaths were from the Eastern Cape in OR Tambo District in particular. Similarly, the Community Development Foundation of South Africa (CODEFSA) during the winter season between June 2014 to 2015 period rescued approximately 155 initiates from illegal initiation schools in Phondoland region to their various designated centers to provide them the much needed psychosocial support such as food, water, nursing their wounds and informal counselling provided by caregivers (Mpateni 2017). Realistically also, unless the parents, families, community networks and government collaborate in solving the problem of illegal schools, the problem may linger longer. Perhaps, the blame game and finger pointing at one another coupled with lip-service reactionary episodes are all likely to keep the problem-solving process at snail's pace. The government and by extension the cultural custodians owe the society an answer to the stalemate. However, parents also need to have inputs as it is their children and themselves who are victims. These researchers believe it is high time South Africa regain its niche in the human rights arena. The country cannot continue to be watched by the whole world killing its young men in the name of the culture during circumcision initiation fray. This needs to stop. Apparently also, it is evident that the underpinnings associated with botched circumcision such as illegal initiation schools will continue to impede the value, dignity and developmental aspects of this practice (SABC 2017). Lastly, as Mpateni (2017) suggests, the contemporary stalemate associated with circumcision in South Africa calls for the involvement and reflection of a diverse stakeholders. The stalemate is a national disaster that requires national response. The government officials need to pave a way in facilitating in problem solving process. Perhaps it's also high time to review the overarching powers that have been bestowed to traditional custodians especially in the issues of TMC.

Para-professionalism Associated With Traditional Practitioners

Findings indicated that traditional circumcision practitioners in the study area lacked professionalism through the traditional nurses being youths and individuals with neither culturally appropriate knowledge, nor tested experience. However, and unfortunately, this is not an

unfamiliar phenomenon because researchers in diverse Traditional Male Circumcision studies have long identified the phenomena of incompetence, inappropriateness, negligence and para-professionalism as the major contributing factors in the current deaths and incidents in this practice (Mpateni 2017). Further, the current stalemate of Traditional Male Circumcision mirrors the research findings by Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe (2017) that Traditional Male Circumcision practitioners grossly lacked skills, knowledge and expertise of conducting proper and quality circumcision procedure/practice. It is therefore critical that the state as a custodian of people's human and health rights critically look into the prevailing problems and put in place interventions to remedy the current mishaps in TMC. Of pivotal importance is to woo the cultural custodians to take their role of guiding the circumcision process professionally and appropriately. There should be a stringent process of achieving the recruitment and selection of the traditional practitioners such as the traditional nurses.

Conflict between the Culture of Traditional Male Circumcision and Modernity

Apparently, the cultural pendulum seems to be swinging towards modernity as government advocacy for Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) appears to intensify day-in-day-out (Kheswa et al. 2014). But in these researchers' contention, it spells doom to the culture of Traditional Male Circumcision for the government to throw its weight behind MMC. This is because the government has strong machinery of advocacy and funding that can lead to a successful campaign against the culture. However, the government has the right to defend its people against a negative onslaught even if it is culturally grounded. As such, the country of South Africa has been on the international news spotlight for continued deaths of the initiates (Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017). But for the cultural architects such as these researchers, and of course the Traditional Male Circumcision cultural diehards, the phenomenon of the government going against the culture could herald the weakening of cultures, considering the fact that South Africa is one of the few African countries that is fast embracing Eurocentric values at the expense of Afrocentric values. Realistically, going the route

of Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) could be a serious blow to the Southern Nguni ethnic groups pursuing the culture of Traditional Male Circumcision. This, in a way could be a route to weaken other traditional cultures. This needs to be fought tooth and nail. These researchers agree with Kang'ethe's contention (2013) that people without a strong culture are like slaves without heritage and identity, it would then be pertinent that ways and means to strengthen the South African cultures such as Traditional Male Circumcision are upheld (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya 2016). It is a glory to the societies and the country at large. Perhaps the fact that there have been some conflicts between the traditional custodians of culture and provincial government on issues to guide circumcision could be a possibility that lays a foundation for challenges in the circumcision institution. As such, the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders have disowned the Circumcision Act of 2001 that was passed by the Eastern Cape Legislature claiming that there was inadequate consultation between them as traditional custodians and the government. They also believed that the government move was an attempt to undermine the cultural practice (Kepe 2010). More so, both traditional leaders and elderly people are strongly critiquing the intervention by other stakeholders such as, the government in involving medical practitioners in this initiation, but on the other hand, the leaders don't seem to bring concrete plan on the as to how to curb the current pandemonium (Mpateni 2017). Apparently, what could be brewing grains of conflict is the government's unwavering support towards entrenchment of the Western culture's hegemony in all spheres of people's lives including westernizing traditional male circumcision. For example, in its advocacy for MMC, the international community especially the United States of America has heavily funded Medical Male Circumcision. In the recent past, South Africa has received from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) a sum of R7 million towards Medical Male Circumcision (Peltzer et al. 2008). Apparently, this has been perceived by cultural custodians as a threat and attempt to supplant Traditional Male Circumcision (Baliso et al. 2016). Once more, it is alleged that certain provincial department in 2013 awarded a medical circumcision tender worth approximately

R182 million to Health Care Services to circumcise about 260 000 boys at the value of R700 each without following proper procurement procedures. This points to the phenomenon of commercializing the practice (Bailey 2013).

CONCLUSION

Irrefutably, making an analysis and a review of whether TMC is still in line with its intended objectives and goals is critical, timeous and urgent, especially in this epoch of unrelenting cases of clinical circumcision mishaps in some parts of the country. Such as analysis and review is likely to define the niche of the TMC and possibly change some of its undesirable aspects which seem to be detrimental in this cultural growth and development. Perhaps, the adoption of cost-benefit-analysis (CBA) is needed with the hope of determining whether to retain the culture of traditional male circumcision or seek alternatives altogether or to set relevant new goal posts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The need to appreciate both the negative and positives aspects of TMC in order to allow the public to apply its mind.
- There's also a need for all relevant TMC stakeholders to embrace the current gaps in the TMC. This would help the TMC stakeholders to decide whether to supplant MMC or find ways to improve TMC.
- The need for the government as the custodians of legislation to really consider the wishes of the people.
- The need for government machinery to strongly commit itself to address those clinical challenges in order for the cultural goal posts to be maintained. This is because MMC may be able to serve health purposes but not be able to serve cultural solution such as social capital embedded to TMC. Therefore, MMC could prove to be a big blow to cultural development, resuscitation, etc.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams V 2017. CRL Commission Reveals "Shocking" Initiation Deaths Toll. The Citizen, 3 March. From <<http://citizen.co.za/news/news-national/1450289/crl-commission-reveals-shocking-initiation-death-toll>> (Retrieved on 8 March 2017).
- Bailey C 2013. Circumcision Contract "Cut" While Probe is Under Way. *The Sunday Independent*, 6 October, P. 3.
- Baliso K, Manyonda A, Mpateni A, Ndyokolo A, Siqoko A 2015. *The Behavioral Changes of Male Adolescent Post Traditional Circumcision: The Case of Alice, Eastern Cape*. Honors Dissertation in Social Work, Unpublished. Alice, South Africa: University of Fort Hare.
- Battle B, Cousin E 2011. African Solution for African Problems (ASAP). *Environmental Issues*, 31 August, P. 201.
- Deacon H, Thomson K 2012. The Social Penis. Traditional Male Circumcision and Initiation in Southern Africa, 1800-2000: A Literature Review. *CSSR Working Paper No. 304*. South Africa: Centre for Social Science Research, Aids and Society Research Unit, pp.1-154.
- Huitt W 2004. Moral and character development. In: *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta: Valdosta State University.
- Kang'ethe SM 2013. The panacea and perfidy of cultural rites of circumcision in African countries: Examples from Kenya, Botswana and South Africa. *EASSRR Journal*, 29(1): 107-123.
- Kang'ethe SM 2014. Exploring efforts of integrating progressive aspects of cultures into development and purging retrogressive ones from development framework in a score of African Countries. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 48(2): 267-274.
- Kang'ethe SM, Nomngcoyiya T 2016. An autopsy of pertinent psychosocial deficits espoused in contemporary traditional male circumcision in South Africa: A literature review. *J Hum Ecol*, 55(3): 214-220.
- Kepe T 2010. Secrets that kill: Crisis, custodianship and responsibility in ritual male circumcision in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70: 729-735.
- Kheswa JG, Nomngcoyiya T, Adonis P, Ngeleka S 2014. The experiences and perceptions of "amakrwala" (graduated initiates) towards the traditional male circumcision practice in Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(20): 2789-2798.
- Klimstra TA, Hale III WW, Meeus WHJ 2010. Identity formation in adolescence: Change or stability? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(2): 150-162.
- Mathangwane JT 2009. Bakalanga traditional music: Some cultural insights. *Botswana Notes and Records*, 41: 83-94.
- Mbachi F, Likoko S 2013. Traditional male circumcision and its implications on the socio-economic and psychosocial life of the Bukusu Community in Kenya. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1): 218-224.
- Mpateni A 2017. *Health Challenges Associated with Male Adolescents during Traditional Male Circumcision in Alice, Nkonkobe Municipality, Eastern Cape*. Thesis of Masters in Social Work, Unpublished. Alice, South Africa: University of Fort Hare.
- Ndangam LN 2008. Lifting the cloak on manhood: Coverage of Xhosa male circumcision in the South African Press. In: E Uchendu (Ed.): *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA, pp. 209-228.
- Nomngcoyiya T 2015. *Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges Associated with Traditional Male Circumcision Practice (TMCP) through the Lenses of Newly Initiated Men: A Case of Lusikisiki, Phon-*

- doland Area - Eastern Cape*. Master's Thesis, Unpublished. Alice, South Africa: University of Fort Hare.
- Nomngcoyiya T, Kang'ethe SM 2017. Exploring flaws embedded in the contemporary traditional circumcision practice in South Africa: A literature review. *Ethno Med*, 11(1): 123-129.
- Nqeketo A 2008. *Xhosa Male Circumcision at the Crossroads: Responses by Government, Traditional Authorities and Communities to Circumcision-related Injuries and Deaths in Eastern Cape Province*. Master's Thesis, Unpublished. Cape Town: Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of the Western Cape.
- Ntombana L 2011. Should Xhosa male initiation be abolished? *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(6): 631-640.
- Nyoka N 2017. CRL Commission to Probe Initiation Deaths. News24. From <<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/crl-commission-to-probe-initiation-deaths-20170215>> (Retrieved on 15 February 2017).
- Peltzer K, Nqeketo A, Petros G, Kanta X 2008. Traditional circumcision during manhood initiation rituals in the Eastern Cape, South Africa: A pre-post intervention evaluation. *BMC Public Health*, 8(1): 64.
- South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) 2017. CRL Launches Hearings on Initiates Deaths. Thursday, 16 February. From <<http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/7cca49004016ff0c94e9ff75889f6f7e/CRL-launches-hearings-on-initiates-deaths-20171602>> (Retrieved on 16 February 2017).
- Swatz L, de la Rey C, Duncan N, Townsend L 2011. *Psychology: An Introduction*. 3rd Edition. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa (Pty) Ltd.
- Tanya B 2006. Umntu Ngumntu Ngabantu (A person is a person because of other persons): The ethos of the pre-colonial Xhosa-speaking people as presented in fact and young adult fiction. *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 60(1/2): 4.

Paper received for publication on April 2016
Paper accepted for publication on December 2016