

## Circumcision: proud tradition faces the cut



Initiates at Bukembe on the Webuye-Bungoma road are escorted to take the 'cut' in accordance with the culture of the Bukusu sub-clan of the Luhya community.

By ERICK NGOBILO, March 25 2011

The pomp and colour associated with traditional circumcision ceremonies among the three main communities in Bungoma is set to diminish drastically in the coming years. The Bukusu, Tachoni and Sabaot all circumcise their boys in elaborate ceremonies that are some of Kenya's biggest and most expensive exhibitions of culture.

The only difference between the three groups is that the Bukusu face the west during circumcision while the Tachoni and Sabaot face east. The Sabaot, who also circumcise their girls, perform the ceremonies in December while the Bukusu and Tachoni do them in August.

The elaborate ceremonies also provide a huge platform for village musicians to compose gripping songs mostly on love but also on other topics. For decades, these songs remained in the villages until Peter Kadabbi Ngeru and Desmond Majanga came along.

The two, Kayamba Fiesta and Kayamba Roots band leaders, respectively remixed some of these songs and produced hits that are popular in Kenyan dance halls today. Mulongo, a love song about a twin of the same name, is one of the most popular.

According to Mzee Hussein Sifuma, 92, circumcision was introduced to the Bukusu by the Sabaot through a young Bukusu man known as *Mango Mukhurarwa*. Perhaps, not surprisingly, it is the love of a woman that drove Mango to this rite.

But with the hard economic times and the HIV/Aids scourge, this cultural exhibition is under threat among all the three communities, who now face the challenge of making the practice safer.

The Saboot are also under immense pressure to stop circumcising girls after the rite was outlawed. Experts say HIV may be spread through sharing unsterilized knives and other equipment used in the initiations. Indeed, health workers have been training the circumcisers on how to avert this danger. But it is the economic cost that gives many parents sleepless nights and poses the greatest danger to the tradition.

Mr Erick Wambasi, a financial advisor in Bungoma town says a traditional circumcision ceremony costs about Sh50, 000. He puts the price of a bull to be slaughtered at Sh15, 000. Two bulls are slaughtered during the ceremony, one at the home of the initiate and the other at his uncle's. "Those families that slaughter one bull during an initiation ceremony are looked down upon as poor people, so most families kill two to save face," he said.

The food budget for an average ceremony, according to Mr Wambasi, is Sh10, 000. This includes sugar, rice, milk, baking flour, maize flour and other items. If one chooses to include soft drinks on the menu, then the budget swells by another Sh5, 000. Traditional brew (busaa) and a few crates of beer for distinguished guests will set one back Sh5, 000. The family may also hire tents and chairs, which can cost up to Sh2, 000.

A family can spend Sh52, 000 on the ceremony, money that can pay school fees for a secondary school student in the rural areas for four years. And the cost of ceremonies for the nearly 3,000 youths initiated traditionally in Bungoma County last year is close to Sh150 million. In sharp contrast, this would have cost Sh600, 000 if the boys had been taken to public hospitals for the cut.

The operation costs Sh200 for each boy after the government reduced it from Sh600. However, hospital operations are frowned upon by the community and there is massive peer pressure both on the boys and their parents to go through the more prestigious traditional ceremony.

But families have been forced to cut down on the festivities because of the rising cost of living and some now merely serve snacks and drinks. Bulls which used to be slaughtered for initiates at their uncles' homes are now being given to them live.

In spite of these challenges, Mzee Sifuma and Luhya Council of Elders member Patrick Wangamati says the culture will not die down any time soon. The two elders say cultural beliefs will make it difficult to completely phase out traditional circumcision. For example, Mzee Wangamati said according to Bukusu tradition, a female doctor cannot circumcise a boy. "This is why many parents are reluctant to take their children to hospitals for the cut," he said.

Mzee Sifuma added that a doctor who was not circumcised could also not carry out the operation. Mzee Wangamati said because of financial constraints, more parents were now

holding joint ceremonies where a single bull was slaughtered, unlike in the past when animals were slaughtered in every homestead.

One recently circumcised boy, Alphas Murumba, said he chose to undergo the cut at home as he did not want to be ostracized by his agemates. He said his father had tried to persuade him to undergo the cut in hospital but he declined. "My agemates would have look down upon me as a coward had I gone to hospital," he said.

A traditional circumciser, Mr Fredrick Khaoya said the "surgeons" had reduced their charges. "We are paid anything ranging from money, chickens to cereals," he said, adding that they were forced to reduce charges after hospitals slashed theirs.

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