

Tachoni Male Circumcision Rituals: Navigating Cultural Revitalization, Heritage and Identity through Lexico-Semantic Analysis

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Abstract

The research explores the cultural significance of male circumcision ceremonies within the Tachoni community. Its objectives include analyzing the linguistic elements used in these rituals and their cultural implications, and examining how these rituals contribute to preserving, renewing, and adapting cultural practices and heritage among the Tachoni. Grounded in lexico-semantic theory, the study investigates the intricate relationship between language, meaning, and cultural identity in Tachoni male circumcision rituals. Conducted in Webuye East Sub-County, Bungoma County, Western Kenya, the research employed qualitative ethnographic methods during August and December 2022, and April 2023. Purposive sampling involved two Tachoni elders, custodians of circumcision knowledge, who were interviewed as key informants. Data collection methods included participant observation and library research. Through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), findings revealed that Tachoni circumcision rituals play a central role in shaping culture and language, reinforcing heritage and identity through a nuanced vocabulary of literal and symbolic meanings. These rituals symbolize rites of passage, affirming masculinity and promoting cohesion among circumcised males. However, the trend towards hospital circumcision, influenced by westernization and Christianity, threatens the continuity of Tachoni cultural practices and their associated lexicon. Consequently, documenting Tachoni circumcision rituals and their lexicon is crucial for preserving cultural heritage.

Keywords: Circumcision Rituals; Cultural Heritage; Identity; Language Revitalization; Tachoni

Introduction

Male circumcision is a significant cultural practice among many ethnic groups in Africa, including the *Tachoni* community. Traditional male circumcision (TMC) is a cultural ritual that involves the removal of the penile foreskin of a male person undertaken as part of a rite of passage from childhood into adulthood (Siweya, (2018) and it holds deep cultural and social significance among communities who practice it (Palmer et al 2020). The *AvaTachoni* (singular *OmuTachoni*) are people of the Bantu family who live in Bungoma, Kakamega and TransNzoia Counties in Western Kenya. They speak a language called *OluTachoni*. This paper will henceforth use the term *Tachoni* to refer to the people, region, language, and culture. The *Tachoni* are part of the larger *Luhya* ethnic group in Kenya, known for their rich cultural heritage and traditions. They comprise of thirty-six clans namely: *Avahimulungu, Avachivino, Avaengele, Avakafusi, Avakamkong, Avakemtevi, Aavakisiai, Avakubwai, Avakuusi, Avalukulu, Avaluu, Avamakhanga, Avamakhuli, Avamalicha, Avamarakalu, Avameywa, Avamua Avamurundi, Avameywa, Avangachi, Avanyangali, Avarefu, Avasamba, Avasamo, Avasang'alo, Avasaniaka, Avasioya, Avasonge Avatulu, Avavichua, Avaviya, Avawande, Avayumbu, Avaavicha, Avachewa and Avachikha*. It is among these thirty-six clans that the present study was based.

Circumcision among the *Tachoni* is an age-old practice which was first experienced by *Nanguila* who was appointed by *El (Tachoni god)* and commanded to be circumcised before the operation blades were handed over to him. Since then, the male circumcision rite is valued and accepted among the *Tachoni* hence handed down from generation to generation. The circumcision ritual marks two important steps in the life of the *Tachoni* young males, namely: transformation from childhood into adulthood, and the acquisition of special knowledge only meant for those who undergo the full process of circumcision. Although many *Tachoni* people have embraced foreign faiths such as Christianity and Islam, there are many adherents to traditional religious beliefs and practices, which normally come to the fore during the Tachoni Traditional Male Circumcision (TTMC) season.

Krenaith, (2005:201) asserts that ritual action is meaningless without function, aim or goal. Therefore, the centrality of this study is to delve into the cultural significance of the *Tachoni* male circumcision rituals, employing lexico-semantic analysis to uncover the intricate relationship between language, meaning, cultural identity and heritage. These rituals often involve various ceremonies, performances, and symbolic actions that convey cultural values, norms, and beliefs. According to Ojamaa (2022), circumcision is a deeply revered cultural rite among the Luhya ethnic groups such as the *Tachoni* and the *Tiriki*. Failure to undergo TTMC (*omusinde*) can result in severe social stigma, discrimination and is seen as unacceptable as well as a violation of *Tachoni* cultural norms.

The *Tachoni* males are circumcised between ages ten and eighteen years in an elaborate ritual known as *esisevo*. *Tachoni* Circumcision Ceremonies (TCC) are exclusively conducted during even-numbered years because these years coincide with abundant food harvests, essential for sustaining the community and offering sacrifices during the TCC. *Esisevo* does not only denote the cutting of the foreskin of the penis, but it also entails other rituals, music and dance, which play a significant role in the community's heritage and identity. This study therefore, adopts a Lexico-semantic linguistic approach to examine the relationship between language (lexicon) and meaning (semantics) within the context of *Tachoni* traditional male circumcision rituals.

According to Finegan, E. (2012), lexical refers to the vocabulary of a language, including words and fixed expressions whereas Milkevich, Y (2022) on the other hand defines semantics as the study of meaning in language. It includes the meaning of individual words (lexical), how words combine to form phrases and sentences, and how language conveys meaning. Lexico-semantics according to this study, therefore, involves the study of the linguistic elements (such as words, symbols, and expressions) used in the Tachoni traditional male circumcision rituals and how they contribute to the overall cultural meaning and significance which shed light on the rich heritage and linguistic diversity of the *Tachoni* people. Ethnolinguistics, as described by Dell Hymes (2009), explores how language mirrors cultural norms, practices, and worldviews. Vecco (2010) emphasizes the inseparable connection between language and culture. Green & Krauss (2000) highlight culture's significant impact on word meanings. Vecco (2010) underscores that culturally significant items are integral to every language's semantic lexicon. Ethnolinguistics could thus illuminate how Tachoni language usage in rituals shapes cultural heritage and identity.

Nonetheless, in an increasingly globalized world, traditional cultural practices such as male circumcision rituals face challenges of preservation and revitalization. Lexico-semantic analysis provides a valuable tool for understanding and documenting these rituals, thereby contributing to efforts aimed at preserving and promoting cultural heritage and identity. Language revitalization is not just about preserving words and grammar; it is also about revitalizing entire cultural systems and ways of life. It may help communities reclaim their heritage, strengthen inter-generational bonds, and foster a sense of pride and belonging among community members.

Fitzgerald, C (2021) opines that language revitalization is crucial for preserving cultural identity and heritage. According to Fitzgerald, language is not just a means of communication; it is also a repository of a community's history, traditions, and worldview. Hence, when a language is lost, a significant part of a community's identity and cultural heritage is also lost. Despite the importance of the TMC ritual to the Tachoni community's cultural identity and heritage, there is inadequate data on the same. It is against this background that this study aims to uncover the underlying meanings associated with TMC rituals with a view to understanding the role of these rituals in revitalizing the Tachoni language, shaping the cultural heritage and identity within the contemporary *Tachoni* community.

Objectives

- To analyse the linguistic elements used in the Tachoni male circumcision rituals and their cultural meanings.
- To examine how the rituals contribute to the preservation, identity, renewal, and adaptation of cultural practices and heritage within the Tachoni community.

Lexico-Semantic Theory

Lexico-semantic analysis remains a vibrant field in linguistics, impacting ethnolinguistics, lexicography, computational, and cognitive linguistics. Rooted in lexico-semantic theory, this study benefits from contributions by numerous linguists who have built frameworks, conducted empirical studies, and applied lexico-semantic theory across various linguistic domains. Leech (1981) explores the construction of

meaning through lexical items, while Lyons (1981) lays foundational concepts for understanding lexical-semantic relationships and Dell Hymes (1927-2009) enriches ethnolinguistic studies. In this study, this theory explores word meanings, their relationships, connotations, and their role in expressing cultural concepts and identity within the Tachoni community.

Methodology

This study targeted the Tachoni Traditional Male Circumcision Ritual (TTMCR) where boys aged between 10-18 years are circumcised. The choice of TTMCR is based on the fact that it is the most vigorous initiation ceremony among the Luhya group of speakers in Western Kenya. The study was domiciled in Webuye East within Bungoma County which is the epicentre of the *Tachoni* community's language and culture to help contextualize the findings within the relevant cultural framework. This helps to enhance the validity and applicability of the research outcomes to the target population. Further, there are numerous cultural sites where candidates, led by ritual elders, go to perform circumcision rituals such as baptism for purification of initiates (*okhulichana*) within Webuye East.

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology through an ethnographic approach. Ethnography aims at producing systematic and descriptive facts about people's beliefs, values, rituals and other general patterns of behavior (Cohen, S, 1993). Hymes (2009) further emphasizes the importance of ethnography and fieldwork in studying language, culture, and communication.

His approach to ethnolinguistics involved examining how language reflects cultural values, norms, and practices, and how it contributes to social identity and solidarity within communities. This paper is largely based on oral interviews and recall information provided by two Tachoni elders. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that in qualitative research, data saturation is a key criterion for determining sample size. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection does not yield new insights or information, indicating that the sample size is adequate to address the research questions. For linguistic data specifically, two individuals may be sufficient if the goal is to achieve data saturation — meaning that through detailed analysis of their language use, patterns, and perspectives, the researcher can adequately explore the phenomena under investigation. Data was collected in August 2022, December 2022 and April 2023 respectively. The observation was made by the researcher herself during the male circumcision rituals performed in August and December 2022. During each interview and observation, notes were taken by the researcher and an audio-video camera used to collect further information. The recording helped the researcher to cross check while analyzing the data for validation of data accuracy to enhance reliability.

The two respondents were deliberately chosen based on their ethnic background, sex, residence and age. The two belong to the Tachoni ethnic group, are residents of Webuye East since birth, are male since as per Tachoni cultural norms, men are custodians of information regarding Tachoni Traditional Male Circumcision Rituals (TTMCR). Their age (75 and 85 years) was considered significant, assuming their familiarity with Tachoni cultural practices and history, making them capable of providing valuable insights into Tachoni circumcision rituals to the researcher.

Purposively sampling individuals who have undergone the Tachoni circumcision ritual in this case, allows the researcher to gain insights into the cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences of that particular group.

This understanding is essential for culturally sensitive research and for accurately representing the perspectives of the community. The interview took place in *Olutachoni* which is also the researcher's native language to facilitate active participation of the respondents who are native Tachoni speakers. This linguistic congruence facilitates a deeper level of understanding and allows respondents to express themselves more freely and accurately. Subsequently, the recorded data was transcribed and later translated into English for analysis purposes. The data was then presented in narrative form and analyzed thematically.

Participants filled in an informed consent to participate in the study. They were informed that the researcher would minimize any risk of inadvertent loss of privacy or their personal data including respect to *Tachoni* taboos attached to TTMCR. Codes have been used- [KII (1)] and [KII (2)] for data presentation and storing.

Results

The results of this study are presented in terms of thematic phases that emerged from data analysis. The TTMCR unfolds across twelve intertwined ritualistic stages, each bearing a unique traditional designation, lexicon and meanings imbued with symbolic significance, as elaborated below.

Okhulaanga (Breaking the News)

This is a preparatory stage for TTMCR entailing activities conducted prior to the actual circumcision ceremony. This stage begins in January till July of an even year, the year of *esisevo* (circumcision).

The initial step taken by the prospective initiate (*omusinde*) involves informing his father of his readiness to undergo the ritual as a sign of respect, adherence to cultural norms, and acknowledgment of his father's authority within the family and community. This message aims to engage the father in the commencement process, seeking his consent and counsel before moving forward with this momentous occasion. As per KII (1), informing the father enables familial backing and guarantees that the initiation adheres to traditional and cultural norms.

Upon receiving approval from his father, KII (2) said that the candidate (*omusinde*) then presents a chicken to a nearby blacksmith (*omwiranyi*) in exchange for two calling bells (*echinyimba*) used to invite, seek blessings and material support as well as declare their intentions of transitioning into adulthood to relatives, neighbours and friends to the ceremony implying that circumcision (*okhusevwa*) is a social ritual. Another purpose of the "breaking news" ritual is to notify participants that the *esisevo* (circumcision) season has commenced, providing them sufficient time to procure attire, provisions, and sacrificial animals necessary for the ceremonies, KII(2).

Okhumiinya (Circumcision Song and Dance)

According to the Key informants, *Okhumiinya* takes place during the month preceding the circumcision month (August). The ritual begins early evening and continues into late hours of the night. The candidates put on thigh bells, headgears (*ekutuusi*) and other dancing regalia as they go around village playgrounds or along major roads with other people (especially youths) responding to the songs and dance. This is a way of communicating one's candidature and a demonstration of the candidate's potential to become resilient as he transits to manhood.

The respondents further emphasized that due to the pain associated with *omuvaano* (the circumciser's knife), music and dance are employed to entice the candidate into undergoing circumcision without dwelling on the intense pain. Based on the narratives given by the informants, participating in music and dance during circumcision ceremonies aids in the transition of boys into adulthood, imparting qualities of bravery necessary for their societal role as men.

Okhukhooya (To Brew)

At the beginning of August, a few days preceding the onset of the circumcision season, the *Tachoni* Traditional Circumcision Council of elders, known as *avasakhuulu* conduct an inaugural ritual-*okhukhooya* in preparation for the actual circumcision ceremonies (*esiseevo*) [(KII (2))]. This ritual involves the brewing of traditional brew known as “*ebusaa*.” The ritual is conducted at the residence of one of the council of elders (*avasakhuulu*). Representatives from all the 32 *Tachoni* clans participate in the inaugural ritual. The traditional brew prepared during this ritual is usually utilized by the candidates' circumcisers (*avaseefi*) during the candidates' training into adult rites. Inaugural proceedings encompass speeches, musical performances, dances, feasting on traditional food and drinks.

This ritual, according to the respondents, serves symbolic functions within the *Tachoni* cultural context such as fostering community cohesion, marking the beginning of the circumcision season and transition from childhood to adulthood for the candidates. Conducted by the *avasakhuulu*, (council of elders) underscores the importance of tradition and ancestral wisdom in guiding the community's rites of passage.

The inaugural speeches, music, and dances serve as a celebratory commemoration of the beginning of the circumcision season and provide an opportunity for the *Tachoni* community to honor its cultural heritage and reaffirm the values and traditions therein.

Elikhooni (A Visit to the Maternal Uncle).

In this ceremony, the initiate (*omusinde*) goes to their mother's side of the family (*evwiwaana*) on the eve of the circumcision day to receive blessings and presents (*elikhooni*), notably from their uncle, who received the dowry for their mother [(KII (1))]. The maternal relatives (uncle) might offer the bull either alive or already slaughtered (*iyevwiwana*). This action symbolizes respect for their daughter and her child, as well as a link with their ancestors who passed away.

It is a taboo for the candidate to enter their uncles' houses or interact with members of the maternal relatives before he receives the gift (*elikhooni*). The candidate is also served unsalted food to signify humility and simplicity, as the candidate undergoes a significant rite of passage into adulthood, [(KII (2))]. The receiving of the gift (*elikhooni*) is also a ritualistic ceremony according to the informants.

The candidate stands facing the East (*Ikwe*) to receive *elikhooni* in homage to the *Tachoni* god of the sun *eSirikwa*. The uncle then blesses the candidate by applying the stomach entrails (*ovuuse*) of the slaughtered bull to the chest and forehead. The lower part of the bull, close to the testicles, is placed on the candidate's neck, known as *oluriki*. This act signifies the uncle's recognition and approval of his nephew's readiness to embrace manhood.

When the bull is presented while still alive, the candidate undergoes an alternative ritual. They are instead adorned with couch grass (*olukhaafwa*). This practice aims to invoke the ancestral spirits of their clan upon the nephew.

Additionally, the initiate (*omusinde*) is doused with local beer to symbolize the prosperity of his mother's lineage. The uncle also blesses (*okhuviita*) the candidate by calling upon the clan's ancestors (*avakuuka*) to accompany the candidate back to his parents' home, safeguard him throughout the journey, during the night of vigil and grant him the resilience to endure the knife. One informant said that if the *avakuuka* (clan ancestors) are not invoked they could bring significant harm to the candidate. They must therefore also be “invited” through sacrificial offerings, music, and dance to ensure the candidate's resilience during the circumcision process.

Ovuheseeli (Inspection for Circumcision Readiness)

Upon returning home, the initiate encounters *avaheseli*- inspectors responsible for inspecting the penis in readiness for circumcision. The penis is examined by *avaheseli* for any abnormalities that could impede a successful operation. Before sunset (*elabukabuka*), the initiate emerges from seclusion to receive blessings from elders, who pray and invoke *El Lote* (Tachoni god) to safeguard the candidate from bad omens, excessive pain, and bleeding [KII (1); KII (2)]. This signifies the *Tachoni* belief in supernatural powers ordained by *El Lote*.

According to the respondents, this is immediately followed by another ritual of replacing the meat around the candidate's neck, previously provided by his uncle with *elisombo* (bull's stomach) from a bull slaughtered by his father. In the absence of the candidate's grandfather, a senior clan elder slits the bull's stomach to anoint the boy's forehead and chest with the stomach entrails (*ovuuse*) while the crowd sings, dances and the elders and *avakooki* (age-sets) indulge in eating and taking traditional brew (*ebusaa*).

OKhuminyiisia (The Night Vigil)

This ritual is a continuation of *Ovuheseeli*, inspection for circumcision readiness during the same night on the eve of the circumcision day. *Okhuminyiisia*-the night vigil is characterized by singing, dancing, and celebration. The dancers carry *echindavuusi/emisukuuni* (walking sticks) illuminated with fire to demonstrate resilience, perseverance and endurance among the candidates in the face of challenges.

Okhulisia Oluvaaka (To Feed Age-Sets)

The Tachoni decrees and rules are against disrespecting age-sets (*vakooki*). *Vakooki* (*age-mate*) is a person with whom one is circumcised with within the same age-set. Hence, when the *vakooki* is circumcising his son, he must treat members of his age-set with utmost respect by setting aside a special room/house for them and giving part of the meat and traditional beer for them during the night vigil. This ritual is referred to as “*okhulisia oluvaaka*.” According to one of the informants, sharing food and drink customarily symbolizes solidarity among the *vakooki*, reinforcing the bonds of brotherhood and mutual support. By eating a common meal and drinks, the *vakooki* reaffirm their collective identity, unity and commitment to one another, particularly during significant rites of passage such as circumcision enriching the communal experience of the circumcision ceremony.

Following the overnight observance, the initiates receive a two-hour break, during which they are served a millet meal to bolster their stamina and aid in managing bleeding. Subsequently, they are directed to the river (*emuchela*) for another ritual involving the application of mud (*Okhuloonga*).

Okhuloonga (To Smear/Apply the Mud)

The initiate (*omusinde*) is escorted to the sacred swamp (*emucheela*) to undergo mud smearing ritual (*okhuloonga*). The initiate is anointed by *umuloongi*-the custodian of the sacred swamp who must have not indulged in sexual activities during the night. The initiate undergoes another inspection to detect any deformities, infections and subsequently treated and cleansed using a combination of herbal remedies for swollen testicles and to combat possible bacterial infections. The initial undergoes anesthesia using herbs (*olufufu*), scientifically known as *garcinia livingstonei*. Subsequently, they are smeared with black or gray chalky soil sourced from the swamp. The clay is applied procedurally beginning from the chest, moving to the hands, thighs, spinal lining, buttocks, loins, and testicles. A small line of clay is finally drawn along the ridge of the nose up to the forehead, with another gently formed into a crest at the center of the head. Upon this crest, a special grass is planted to symbolize a house.

According to Tachoni beliefs, the swamp is traversed by spirits (*emisambwa kie okhusevana*) during the *esisevo* (circumcision) period. Smearing the candidate with mud is believed to grant the initiate (*omusinde*) additional strength to endure the ordeal, bestow blessings upon him and a form of purification. Rivers are traditionally regarded as sources of cleansing and renewal [(KII (2)]. Practically, according to the first informant, the mud acts as an anesthetic to cool the blood vessels to prevent excessive bleeding after the surgery. Additionally, the scheduling of the ritual at dawn symbolizes a fresh start, denoting the initiates' passage into adulthood.

The initiate then walks home completely naked, carrying a walking stick (*omusukuni*) obtained from a specific tree called *o'mulaha* to the "surgery theater" (*okhulwanyi*).

To circumvent encountering evil spirits and bad omens, two distinct paths are chosen for travel to and from the dressing swamp (*emuchela*). These routes are meticulously selected by elders during the night and are kept confidential among elders and the leader of the dressing team (*omulongi*) or *omuheseli*. During this time, music and dance become the main focus, as speaking is avoided to prevent distracting the boys' minds. Upon arriving home, a simulated war-like reception is enacted as the initiate is directed to the designated operational site, referred to as *etiang'ii*.

Etiang'ii (Prepared Site for The Actual Operation)

These are rituals associated with the preparation of the site where the initiate stands during the operation. *Etiang'ii* is prepared using a mixture of herbs comprising of ashes, dust, leaves, bucks and sticks to protect the initiate (*omusinde*) from evil, strengthen his will and prevent blood to directly spill into the ground which could allow evil people to harm the initiate. Where more than one initiate are being circumcised in the same courtyard (*olwanyi*), each one has his own *etiang'ii*, [KII 1 & KII 2].

Okhuseeva (The Surgery)

This is the actual operation ritual marking the climax of TTMC that entails the removal of the foreskin from the penis (*elifuunga*). The informants opined that when the initiate reaches the courtyard, he is guided to stand next to his *etiang'ii*. The *omusukuni* (the stick) which was carried from the river is put across his shoulders for support and a symbol of his final battle to adulthood. According to the informants, the initiate is expected to persevere and win “the battle” bravely just like the *omulaha* tree from which the *Omusukuni* is harvested from. Any form of cowardice from the initiate such as wailing is a taboo regarded as a curse to the clan. A few minutes to the cut, the aunt to the initiate makes jokes to ward off evil spirits (*evisieno*) as his mother sits with straightened legs inside the house (*okhulambisia*). The surgery is conducted while the initiate faces the East (*ikwe*) preferably in his father’s courtyard.

The circumciser’s assistant (*waliifu*) pulls the boy’s fore skin (*eliifunga*) to apply dust from a crushed brick (*liifu*) meant sterilize the penis and to increase the gripping power (KII2). Immediately, the circumciser (*omusefi*) comes forward and in approximately one to two minutes cuts the foreskin as elders approve in unison. During the surgery, women are kept away.

At this juncture, a whistle is blown to indicate a successful operation. The father and uncles to the initiate celebrate through song and dance as women ululate for victory of a successful surgery. A young girl (virgin) traditionally referred to as *omutembete* holds the waist of the candidate immediately after the cut to symbolize purity. A special stool is then brought for the initiate to sit on. The candidate, now addressed as *omufuulu*, has the option to decline sitting on the stool if they believe they have demonstrated bravery or have been mistreated. In such instances, their father is required to provide them with an animal. The grandmother or aunt is entrusted to carry away the *etiang'ii* for proper disposal. Candidates receive applause and presents accompanied with songs and dance, praising the forefathers who initiated the circumcision ceremony and the clan for bearing a strong and brave son. The candidate is then led to his shelter of seclusion called *elikoombe*, where he would spend his healing time. His name now changes from *omusinde* (the uncircumcised) to *omufulu* (the newly circumcised).

Okhuulumia (To Be Made to Bite)

During this ceremony, the surgeon (*omuseefi*) provides the *omufulu* (the newly circumcised) with his first meal of the day, a ritual known as *okhuulumia* (to be made to bite).

This meal consists of beef mixed with herbs and ugali made from millet, sorghum, or maize. The ritual represents care and support for the initiate as he embarks on his recovery process. It also serves as a demonstration by the *omuseefi* (surgeon) of his dedication to the initiate's well-being and fosters social cohesion within the community. In essence, the *okhuulumia* ritual signifies the transition from the surgical procedure to the initiate's journey into manhood.

The Obufulu (The Healing Process)

This is the period of transition after surgery, where the initiate undergoes the healing process (*ovufulu*) as he transits from being *omusinde* to awaiting confirmation as a “man” (*omusaacha*). The *omufulu* heals from a designated hut known as *elikoombe*. Throughout the healing process, the *omufulu* (initiate) and his

caregiver adheres to associated rituals and taboos. The *omufulu* refrains from entering other houses or homes; abstains from bathe and consumption of sugary or starchy foods; avoids intercourse, avoids physical greetings, fights and arguments. Instead of traditional hand greetings, the *omufulu* uses greeting sticks to interact, as it is believed that physical contact could transfer evil spirits and delay healing or cause complications. However, the *avafuulu* (plural for several initiates) are permitted to engage in fishing, hunting, and herding animals. They wear a special traditional clothe called *ol'wari* or modern clothing like blankets, bed sheets, shorts and shirts. The sap from *inguu* (*rhoicissus revoilii*), traditional herb, is used to clean, dress and treat the wound. The caretakers on the other hand (*avatebete*) are usually young girls who are still virgins. Virgin girls are commonly viewed as symbols of purity and innocence, and their participation is thought to facilitate healing and shield the recently circumcised boys from malicious people in the crucial period following the procedure. This involvement also serves as an educational opportunity for girls, as they acquire knowledge about care-giving and traditional healing methods from the older women in the community, thereby facilitating inter-generational transmission of cultural practices and ensuring their perpetuation.

OKhuliicha (Baptism and Purification)

This signifies the culminating ceremony of the Traditional Tachoni Male Circumcision Ritual (TTMCR), typically coinciding with the annual December harvest. During this phase, known as the baptism and sanctification, the *omufulu* undergoes purification by the *mafadet* leopard (*eingwe*). The ritual spans four days, segmented into three stages. Initially, the initiates are moved from their shelters (*amakombe*) to a designated household where they spend the night before proceeding for water baptism the next day. Usually, this designated residence belongs to one of the initiates' parents who has previously experienced the *Tachoni* circumcision ritual. The *Tachoni* council of elders responsible for circumcision activities (*avasakhuulu*) furnish the house with necessary items for the baptism, including sacred pots (*echinyunguu*), traditional brew (*amalwa ka ebusaa*), and various food items like chicken, dried beef, and flour, contributed by each initiate. During these proceedings, the initiates are commended for their bravery, and gratitude is expressed to the ancestors for establishing the circumcision tradition among the *Tachoni* community. Furthermore, under the supervision of overseers (*avaheseli*), individuals displaying unacceptable social conduct within the community are publicly admonished during the night (*okhuhuna*)-to spear, including thieves, liars, adulterers, and chronic beggars, among others.

Following this phase, the complete baptism process extends over two days and one night. At dawn on the initial day, the initiates depart for the *esitabicha* (baptismal site), guided by the high priests (*avaviiti*), who oversee the baptism.

Accompanying them is the mace bearer (*omusakhuulu wa okhusita evituukhu*), attired in ceremonial garb. Entry to the *esitabicha* is restricted to circumcised *Tachoni* men who have previously undergone the baptism. Upon arrival, under the guidance of their supervisors, the initiates discard their *ol'wari* garments and proceed individually through the sacred shrine to the baptismal site (*esitaviicha*). The initiates engage in a series of secretive rituals only reserved among the baptized *Tachoni* men (*avaliche*). The culmination of the ritual involves prayers and expressions of gratitude led by the high priest to *El*, invoking blessings such as a prosperous harvest, national unity, the well-being of women and children, and effective leadership.

Following the water baptism, the initiates relocate to undisclosed residences to encounter the leopard (*eingwe*). According to the KII2, the leopard is revered in the *Tachoni* community as a symbol of strength, courage, and power. By encountering the leopard, the initiates are meant to imbibe these qualities, preparing them for the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. In addition, the leopard (*eingwe*) is believed to be a spiritual intermediary between the human world and the realm of ancestors. Meeting the leopard symbolically connects the initiates with their ancestors, invoking their protection and guidance as they transition into adulthood. The KII2 further revealed that encountering the leopard is often a daunting and intimidating experience, testing the initiates' resilience and ability to overcome fear. Hence, the encounter becomes a rite of passage that demonstrates their readiness to confront and conquer obstacles in life.

Finally, the initiates undergo the purification process by taking their first bath since circumcision in the river very early in the morning (*emabwibwi*) followed by shaving the hair and discarding their old garments in exchange of new ones. According to our informants, this ritual symbolizes a spiritual purification which washes away impurities and sins accumulated since the time of circumcision.

The immersion in the river is believed to cleanse the initiates' bodies and souls, preparing them for a new phase of life. Similarly, shaving of hair and discarding old garments represent a shedding of the old self and embracing a new identity. It signifies a rebirth of the initiates into adulthood, leaving behind childhood and entering into the responsibilities and privileges of maturity. By undergoing these rituals, the initiates affirm their cultural identity and strengthen their connection to their community and ancestors.

During the fourth day, the young adults are guided by their mentors (*abeseeli*) and elders (*avasakhuulu*) to engage in discussions surrounding societal values and goals in life. This is done as they take communal meals and are ceremoniously initiated into adulthood at dawn (*echulichuli*) and return to their homes. According to the informants, the discussions facilitated by mentors and elders provide an opportunity for the transfer of traditional knowledge, values, and wisdom from one generation to the next. Through storytelling, anecdotes, and teachings, the initiates learn about the history, customs, and societal expectations of their community. The mentors and elders also discuss important life skills, such as leadership, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making, helping the initiates make informed choices and set meaningful goals for their future.

At home, the newly circumcised 'men' now referred to as *avatembete* are welcomed with celebrations and gifts. A schedule for the *omutebete* (sgl) to visit relatives including their maternal relations for further blessings over the course of one month (*okhuvachuukha*) is conducted as the last ritual. According to our informant, the welcoming celebrations and gifts signify the community's recognition and celebration of the *avatebete's* passage into manhood. It is a momentous occasion that marks the successful completion of the circumcision ritual and the beginning of their journey as fully initiated members of society.

Blessings from elders and relatives according to the *Tachoni* customs, are believed to bestow strength, guidance, and good fortune upon the newly initiated men as they embark on their adult lives.

Contemporary Views on the Traditional Tachoni Male Circumcision Ritual

Despite the pervasive nature of TTMC rituals, various factors such as influence from Christianity, technological advancements, Western education, and urbanization have brought about significant changes in how these rituals are conducted (KII2). According to the informant, an example of this shift is the adoption of hospital circumcision (*okhusevwa okhulupao*) by some *Tachoni* individuals. Informants have acknowledged that there are arguments against traditional circumcision, citing it as primitive, unhygienic, and some fear that their sons may be bewitched. Additionally, the church views these rituals as sinful, leading to the disruption of children's education and an increase in teenage pregnancies. However, those who are circumcised in hospitals (*okhulupao*) are often not esteemed within the *Tachoni* community. Circumcision performed in hospitals according to our respondent represents a departure from the traditional cultural practice of undergoing the ritual in accordance with *Tachoni* customs. This deviation from tradition is viewed negatively by some community members who place a high value on upholding cultural heritage and practices.

Tachoni circumcision music and dances have moved beyond their original settings and are now performed in diverse contexts such as music and drama festivals in educational institutions, political rallies, and even in nightclubs for entertainment purposes (KII2). Nevertheless, it is considered taboo to sing specific *Tachoni* circumcision songs out of context or season, especially those associated with the baptism (*okhulichia*) ritual.

These views imply a possible shift in societal attitudes towards traditional practices. If modern perspectives are more accepting or critical of the circumcision ritual, it could lead to changes in how the ceremony is perceived and practiced over time, potentially influencing the preservation or modification of cultural traditions. This could further affect the ritual's role in shaping identity, community cohesion, and concepts of masculinity among *Tachoni* males.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of the cultural revitalization and associated lexicon; heritage, and identity of the *Tachoni* people. The 13 phases of the circumcision ritual, ranging from breaking of news (*okhulanga*) to baptism and purification (*okhulichia*), reveal a rich tapestry of cultural practices that are deeply embedded in the *Tachoni* language and tradition.

As a customary ritual, *Tachoni* Male Circumcision serves the purpose of assimilating *Tachoni* boys into adulthood, granting them the status of "a man." This process goes beyond the physical act of removing the foreskin, encompassing education, readiness, and initiation into the cultural heritage and language preservation of the *Tachoni* people. This notion aligns with Langa's (2014) findings that male circumcision in South Africa primarily acquaint boys with community customs and ready them for adulthood. Wangusa (1987) on the other hand stresses that *imbalu* (circumcision among the *Bagisu* of Uganda) is a rite for enacting manhood among the *Bagisu*. Vincent, (2008) agrees that circumcision practice extends to orientating boys into their multiple identities as sons, brothers, lovers, and prospective fathers.

Another significant finding of this study is the role of language in preserving cultural heritage.

The *Tachoni* lexicon, as reflected in the various phases of the circumcision ritual, is a vital component of the community's cultural identity. The use of specific words and phrases, such as *omusinde*, *esisevo*, *okhulaanga*, *okhuseeva*, *okhumiinya*, *okhukhoya*, *okhulicha*, *olukhafwa*, *obuuse*,

omuseevi, *elikhooni*, *ovuheseli*, *oluvaaka*, *vakooki*, *okhulonga*, *etiang'I*, *evinanyenje*, *elikombe*, *okhuuluma*, *obufuulu*, *okhulicha*, *okhulanga*, *okhuminya*, and *okhuyenga*, not only convey meaning but also evoke a sense of cultural continuity and tradition (Mufwene, S. S. (2001). This is consistent with Fishman (1991) study which highlights the importance of language in preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural revitalization. According to Di Carlo & Good, (2020), African language lexicography serves a vital function in creating terminologies across different domains as highlighted in the lexicon associated with *Tachoni* male circumcision. As noted by Batibo (2009), language documentation is imperative for safeguarding the linguistic richness and heritage of African languages, many of which face endangerment and potential extinction.

The study's findings also underscore the significance of the circumcision ritual in shaping *Tachoni* identity. The various phases of the ritual, from the breaking of news to convey readiness for circumcision (*okhulanga*) to the actual surgery (*okhuseeva*), up to the last stage of baptism and purification (*okhulicha*) are imbued with cultural meaning and significance. The surgery ritual for example, serves as a rite of passage, marking the transition of young boys into manhood and conferring upon them a sense of identity and belonging within the *Tachoni* community (Herdt, G. H. (2006). This is in line with previous researches, which have shown that circumcision rituals play a crucial role in shaping masculine identity and promoting social cohesion in many African societies (Gilmore, D. D. (1990; Sifuna, 2000). According to Sifuna (2000), circumcision in the context of African traditional education is a process of passing to the young generation practices and customs of their people for identity and cultural posterity. Both Otiende (1982) and Sifuna (2000) agree that circumcision within the African context is basically to prepare the youth for adulthood.

The study's results further highlight the importance of cultural heritage in promoting community cohesion and social solidarity. The various phases of the ritual, including the feeding members of the age set (*oluvaka*), visiting of the maternal uncle for gifts (*elikhooni*), the night vigil (*okhuminya*) including the accompanying song and dance involve active participation of community, family and clan members hence reinforces social bonds and relationships. This is in tandem with previous studies, which show that cultural heritage practices can promote community cohesion and social solidarity by providing a shared sense of identity and purpose (Kuper, A. (1999; Cohen, A. P. (1994). Bloch, M (1989) argues that music and dance as communicative agents also promote cohesion among communities.

Despite the positive outlook provided by the dynamic nature of language use and evolution in multilingual Africa, the threat to African languages and cultures is escalating. Studies by Lüpke (2019), Mufwene (2004, 2016), Krauss (1992), and Crystal (2000) indicate that many of the world's languages are at risk of disappearing. Nevertheless, the findings of this study also bear significance for revitalizing the *Tachoni* language and culture in tandem with UNESCO (2003) effort for safeguarding cultural heritage and fostering cultural diversity.

The interplay between tradition and modernity, with the community grappling with the implications of shifting practices influenced by external factors in regard to circumcision practices is also revealed. These tensions between preserving cultural heritage and embracing contemporary norms underscore the dynamic nature of cultural evolution within the *Tachoni* society.

Conclusion

The Tachoni male circumcision ceremonies serve not just as a traditional milestone but also mirror the cultural values, social cohesion, identity and historical legacy of the community. Analyzing these rituals from a lexico-semantic perspective offers insights into the linguistic and cultural aspects that mould the identity and heritage of the *Tachoni* people. These findings carry implications for language preservation and initiatives aimed at revitalizing culture, emphasizing the urgency of safeguarding and promoting the cultural heritage of the *Tachoni* community despite the resurgence of modernism.

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