Doing' Masculinity: The Intersection of Sexuality and Manliness in Bukusu Circumcision

Evans K. Wanyama
Kenyatta University, Kenya
wanyama86evans@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v5i2.315

Abstract

The expansion of gender scholarship has cemented the sociological constructionist paradigm of gender in the academia. Masculinity is thus hypothesized as biologically embedded and socially embodied. In Africa, this hypothesis reinforced the academic focus on circumcision as the dominant marker of manliness. I argue that the preoccupation with circumcision narrows the scope of masculinity research to the constructionist strand. This essay challenges the preponderance of the transitional purpose of circumcision. I draw on the sociological constructionist paradigm of gender and Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis in an integrated theoretical framework to advance the argument that the focal character of circumcision transcends the temporal transitioning of men from childhood. Because of the rich ritual symbolism involved, circumcision is structured to equip men with the instruments of performing male power and privilege in competing gender relations. The paper draws on oral evidence among the Bukusu of Bungoma County, Kenya, coupled with secondary data from books and journals to deduce the constellation of phallocentrism and its masculine expression in sexuality. The findings intervene in the dearth of literature in men's studies in eastern Africa by illuminating the social intersectionality of masculinity and its delineation of power relations.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender, Circumcision, Phallic Symbolism, Sexuality, Bukusu

Introduction

The aggregation of interest in men following the second wave of feminism stimulated debates over the social construction of masculinity. Traditional theorists explain human behavior on the basis of the differences in reproductive biology (Gardiner 1972; Freud 1986). For instance, aggressive behavior in men is associated with the high levels of testosterone while the passivity of women is linked to estrogen (Kimmel and Aronson 2004, xx; Egendorf 2000, p.26). However, with the emergence of anthropological studies, the assumptions of the 'natural' character of gender and the essentialism of the biological models were dismantled (Mead 1935). This meant that although physiological programming proffers disparity in human behavior, the disparity is attributable more to the ways in which different cultures interpret and attach meanings to physiology (Pascoe and Bridges 2016, p.6; Epstein 1986, p.8).

Around the middle of the twentieth century, the deconstruction of biological models gave rise to the sex-role paradigm that shifted focus on the different sets of societal expectations in the social development of male and female behavior (Kimmel and Aronson 2004). This sociological model views masculinity as a gendered category which is produced and reproduced through socialization in different cultural iterations (Kimmel 2005). Central in this emergent praxis was the need to locate power within the matrix of the institutionalization of gender relations that 'sex-roles' had ignored. The implication is that the prevailing power relations in a given social system dictate the process of socialization, and hence gender identities are legitimated and operationalized through social institutions such as marriage and sexuality.

The focus on institutions enabled scholars to "link individuals to institutionalized places, spaces and situations in order to understand who or what is considered masculine" (Pascoe and Bridges 2016, p.14). This implies that there are multiple and contextual ways of being male hence the plurality and cultural specificity of masculinity. This transformative thinking preceded the stimulation of interest on African masculinities. The profound outcome of this interest was the development of polemical discourses that exposed conceptual weaknesses in extant theories (Beoku-Betts 2005; Oyewumi 1997). Pointedly, unlike in western societies where the parameters of manliness strike a homogenously fixed pattern of established connections between men, private and public power, Africa portrays a multiplicity of masculine contours (Kaufman 1987). The implication is that African masculinities are "fluid, contentious and heavily articulated with disparate social practices in shifting power relations" (Lindsay and Miescher 2003, p.6).

The upshot to the revisionist discourses was the emergence of contextual masculinity research on the continent at the turn of the new millennium (Uchendu 2008; Morell 1998, 2007). The outcome was the preponderance of southern and western Africa focus and a glaring underrepresentation of eastern Africa. Such underrepresentation flags the troubling persistence of historical imbalances in knowledge production. Masculinity in eastern Africa is parochially focused on circumcision owing to the overwhelming spread of circumcising communities in the region (Wasike 2013; Murangiri 2014). This focus was accentuated by the revolutionary novelty of the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* by celebrated Australian sociologist R.W Connell. She elaborated the plurality of masculinities and called the dominant of these as *hegemonic*[1]. In so doing, circumcision acquired prominence as the benchmark of hegemonic ascendancy.

[1] The *hegemonic* type refers to the most socially exalted form of patriarchy but does not participate in dominance) and *marginalized* (which result from the interplay with other structures such as race and class) (Connell 1995, 76-86; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832)

This zooming in on circumcision arose out of the understanding of gender relations as "relationships arising in and around the reproductive arena" (Connell 2002, p.73). As a result, scholars approached this rite from its transitional purpose. Yet, blood-letting rituals of this far-reaching symbolism bear inextricable implications on the human psyche and personality (Heald 1999). Thus, this ritual drama has transformational influence on men. This transformational imperative fits neatly into the contemporary nuances of *doing gender* which have displaced the idea of a stable gender and instead foregrounded individual performances (Butler 1990).

The overwhelming sexual symbolism embedded in Bukusu circumcision behoves the focus of this performativity on the institution of sexuality. This is because while circumcision may emboss masculinity on a man, the task is in him remaining masculine. Yet, unlike in pastoral societies where the performance of manhood is readily enabled through militancy, small scale agrarian societies (such as the Bukusu) have limited configurations of practice for manly elevation (Clignet 1970, p.21). Moreover, within "competitive and constantly contested intralocal relations of power" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, p.6), sexuality arguably presents the ubiquitous prospect of this institutionalized performance.

Background to the Conceptualization and Practice of Masculinity Among the Bukusu

At the turn of the new millennium, the most far-reaching contribution of the post-colonial turn to gender scholarship was the questioning of the relevance of Eurocentric theorizing on gender among non-western societies. In Africa, a major talking point of this counter-discourse was the critique of the dominant metanarratives of gender including feminism and RW Connell's schema of *hegemonic masculinity*[2] (Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1997; Lindsay and Miescher 2003). According to Oyewumi (1997, pp.3-5), western conception of gender draws largely on the biological influence with a sight-centric privileging of the physical body.

This biological determinism of the western theorizing is implicated in the construction of social categories whereby "the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex" (Connell, 1995). These western concepts and theorizing when applied in the empirical analyses of gendered experiences in Africa "produced distortions, obfuscations in language and total lack of comprehension since social categories are incommensurable" (Oyewumi 2004, p.2). This is because African gender is "fluid, contentious and heavily articulated with disparate social practices in shifting power relations" (Lindsay and Miescher 2003, p.6).

This body-centric western framework of conceiving gender contrasts sharply with the Bukusu traditional framework. The Bukusu are a subgroup of the Abaluya group of the Western Bantu of Kenya. Their history, migration and eventual settlement in present-day western Kenya are replete with a patriarchal overbearing in their social organization and the privileging of men in their gender relations. This androcentric predilection obtained from a traditional framework of conceiving social reality that drew on the physical and metaphysical essences of social existence. Pointedly, the conceptualization of social categories such as gender derives from the biological and spiritual essences of social existence. Thus, masculinity and male behaviour is contingent on material and immaterial (*kimusambwa*[3]) influences. Both these influences are

[2] Connell (1995).
[3] *Kumusambwa (Kimisambwa*) refer to ancestral spirits that reincarnate in the living through naming.

co-constituted in the sociological determinism of male personality in the same way that social life is ordered and understood. In delineating and ordering the material essence, language was vital.

Through the use of language, social categories were conceived and ordered materially based on a dichotomous frame of reference. This ordering took the form of a dichotomous pairing of related binaries for example good/bad, love/hate, life/death and so forth. In conceiving human beings, the biological factor preferred the dichotomous category of male/female. The important thing about this dichotomous pairing was that the first item of the pair was attributed with higher social value. Pointedly, the term used in reference to a man is *omusecha.* The higher value of this term is expressed in the root word '-*secha*' which is derived from the word *'busecha'* that is associated with the life-generating potency of semen (Wasike 2013, p.65). On the one hand, the social overvaluation of maleness, whose delineation was the phallus, obtained from its erectile 'activity' (Baraza 2009, 6). On the other hand, femininity was interpreted in terms of the absence of the phallus and its erectile activity hence it was a passive category of gender.

The Bukusu gendered socialization of individuals and its sociological determinism of personality drew on this dual-essence conceptual framework. Notably, the 'passivity' of women did not necessarily imply feminine inferiority, quite the opposite. The privilege attached to women's parturition power- the most important part of the value of a woman (Radcliffe-brown 1950, p.49; Maillu 1988, p.13-15) coupled with their regular ritual cleansing[4], metaphysically elevated women into 'mystical beings' imbued with the mystical powers of the gods (Nasimiyu 1986, p.190; Nangendo 1996, p.81; Wagner 1970, p.268). The logical corollary is that the transition to womanhood was naturally dependent upon observable physiological changes such as menstruation and the growth of breasts. These changes signalled feminine maturity and readiness for marriage as the principal purpose of womanhood. The girl was required to demonstrate this readiness by "[filling] up to three granaries with food crops harvested from her own plot allocation" (Makila 1982, p.143).

The gender category of femininity was thus an inherent outcome of nature and nurture, and this explains the absence of dramatic rites of passage for girls in Bukusu society. On the contrary, male social categories were metaphysically 'fragile' because they lacked the mystical investiture that women were endowed with as part of their regular ritual cleansing. Men's material phallic privilege was debilitated by the absence of the metaphysical essence. In this regard, the mystical empowerment of men had to be externally induced. This inducement took the form of an elaborate ritual investiture that was designed to test, traumatise and steel manhood.

Boys to Men: Sexual Symbolism in the Ritual Ascension to Bukusu Manhood

Bukusu circumcision is popularly traced to a revered patriarch named Mango. Legend has it that during the community's settlement at Mwiala in Eastern Uganda, there emerged a terrifying serpent called *Khururwe ya bebe*. None of the neighboring Nilotic communities dared to hunt down the beast despite their circumcising reputation. At the time, circumcision was voluntary among the Bukusu. The beast's terror continued until one day it killed Mango's son, and he vowed to bring it to justice. The Kalenjin scoffed at his foolhardy decision and this fueled Mango's rage. He armed himself and waited in the snake's lair till

[4] Among the Bukusu, feminine discharges that accompany menstruation and childbirth were associated with disgust and considered to be ritually impure. This explains the catalogue of rules of avoidance, taboos and cleansing rituals that were associated with menstruating women and childbirth (Wagner 1970, p. 268).

evening when it returned and coiled itself in a perfect position. With one clinical strike, Mango decapitated the snake and ran back home to a hero's welcome. The Kalenjin elected to circumcise him and gift him a bride in honour of his unparalleled valor. From then henceforth, circumcision became the benchmark of Bukusu manhood and was institutionalized as a mandatory rite of passage.

Bukusu circumcision is structured in four major phases namely, preparation, operation, isolation and incorporation. Preparation begins when a boy decides that he is ready and informs his father. Granted the baneful implications of cowardice, the father will often call the son's bluff and undertake a series of traumatising tests[5] on him. Nothing is left to chance. The decision may be individual, but the ritual is a collective enterprise with the honour of the boy's decent group at stake. Upon establishing the boy's resolve, the father gives the nod. The boy fetched chime bells (*chinyima*) and wristlets (*birere*) on his own either by borrowing or bartering with his chicken.

The candidate then embarks on routine trips to his distant relatives and friends to invite them to his ceremony while accompanied by a euphorically charged party that sings and dances to his beating of chime bells. The songs are thematically loaded with sexual imagery and typical projection of manhood as superior[6]. An example of these songs goes as follows:

1	*Kongona sili mumbala kongona,*	..... Clean up what is in the scar, clean up
	Ekongona.	..... Do clean up.
2	*Ewee nakhuwelekho oli sekhesia .*	..... You if given fill it
	Sekhesia	..... Fill it
3	*Ewe nakhuwelekho oli seenda*	..... You, if given, push
	Seenda.	.... Push
	Ha-hoo-we iya	(Transcribed from tape recording, Dec 2024)

In this song, the soloist is pleading with the circumciser to 'clean' (conduct the operation) so meticulously that the novice's mother (femininity) flees from him. The emphasis on "cleaning" is informed by the white stuff found inside the prepuce (*lifunga*). This stuff can be likened to the Freudian 'disgust' which "interferes with the libidinal over-valuation of the sexual object, causing restriction of the sexual aim" (Freud 1986, p.296). Therefore, after procedural 'cleaning', the man is expected to perform sex thoroughly (pushing) to the full satisfaction of the woman. Bachelors searching for barren unmarried women are figurative of the circumcised masculinity that renders this barrenness impregnable.

These sexual innuendos are further coupled with the spectacle of men wielding sticks during the singing and dancing. According to Freud's concept of dream-symbolism, "sharp weapons, long and stiff objects such as tree trunks and sticks, stand for the male genital" (Freud 1986, p.123). Men take pride in the public posturing of phallic symbols to reinforce their masculinity. This can be surmised as a psychic representation of the Freudian "castration anxiety". The obsession with phallic objects denotes an overvaluation of the penis and anxiety over its possible loss. In other words, the men "strut phallic displays as compensation and in order to reassure themselves that their manhood is intact" (Gilmore 1990, p.93). This phallocentric theme is further emphasized in the symbolism of a string (penis) that sprays wax (ejaculation) as follows:

[5] The tests often involved the boy using his bare feet to extinguish burning cinders (*bunoro*) without flinching and engaging the father in a mock fight (Makila 1982, 123).
[6] A collection and analysis of these songs is provided by Simiyu (2011)

1	Soloist: Elusia luanya	..The string sprays
	Response: Haah	. .Haah
2	Soloist: Elusia luanya	..The string sprays
	Response: Elusia luanya embula	..The string sprays wax
3	Soloist: Lwareba	..It asks
	Response: Ahaah	..Ahaah
4	Soloist: Mala lwaanya	..And it sprays
	Lusia luanya embula	..The string sprays wax

Adapted from Simiyu (2011, p.75)

The last kin to be invited is the maternal uncle. This happens on the eve of the cut, and it highlights the hierarchy of kinship relations. The uncle is the elevated figurehead through whom affinal relations are cemented[7]. On this material day of his invitation, a bull is slaughtered to mark the ritual of *khuchukhila.* This ritual involved wrapping *likhoni* (ritual collar carved from the breast meat of the bull) and smearing the candidate's chest with cud (*buse*) from the bull's rumen. The father then solemnly exhorts that "I have now slaughtered my precious animal, and you should not let me down; cowardice does not exist in our clan" (Interview with Barasa, 2022). *Likhoni* symbolically represented "the solidarity of the agnate kinship regenerated through the father" (Makila 1982, p.127). It was incumbent upon the candidate to "meet expectations as a member of a corporate group defined by genealogy of affinity, hence protecting the group's collective reputation" (Gilmore 1990, p.131). The ensuing singing and dancing then assume a deliberate tormenting theme. On that dramatic night, there is aggressive singing, erotic dancing, drinking and general boisterousness in the front yard (*khuminya*). Meanwhile, the novice is repeatedly slapped, slandered and mocked throughout this fatiguing night till dawn.

On the morning of the day of the operation, the initiate is taken to the mudding place (usually a swampy place along a permanent stream). Here, he strips and soaks his entire body in the cold river, taking time to clean his prepuce. A man renowned for his past bravery then smears mud on the initiate from head to toe, places a lump of clay on the boy's head and stuck a leafy grass stem in it. After the mudding, the accompanying party is led by a designated man to belt out the *sioyaye*[8] chant. It is customary to detour on the return home in order to avoid any would-be charms buried on the road by evil people.

As they approach home, the boy's paternal aunt appears with her face blackened with soot to ward off evil spirits (*binaninga*). On one ear, she hung a piece of meat and on the other, a seashell used by men for tasting beer. She also carries a cooking stick dipped in *kamayeku* beer which she touches over the lips of the initiate. Thereafter, the father of the boy comes and guides him to the designated spot for the operation (*etiang'i*). The operation lasts approximately five seconds. The boy must stand firmly upright without betraying any slight twitch, voluntary or involuntary. The cut begins with the foreskin followed by the inner skin. A successful operation is greeted with resounding ululation in typical re-enactment of Mango's triumph. The new man sis rewarded with gifts of livestock for bringing honour to his kindred and clan.

[7] The maternal uncle features prominently in Bukusu customary practices as the embodiment of masculine affinal relations. During payment of bridewealth for instance, one bull is reserved for him

[8] *Sioyaye* is a sacred chant sung by the accompanying party from the mudding place to his home. It contains largely the theme of Bukusu bravery. Unlike other circumcision songs, it is taboo to sing *sioyaye* anywhere else because it is believed to evoke ancestral spirits.

The last phase of the ritual involves ritual confinement and incorporation of the new man into the 'class of men'. This is done during the 'feast of coming out' where the father of the new man exhorts him that, "my son, you have left behind your mother's cloth, now you are given the father's cloth. The closed door (married woman) does not belong to you; only the open door is yours (unmarried woman)". The new man's position as a gendered actor was thus dependent upon his performance as a member of the 'class'. As evident from the solemn counsel, the highest social expectation from him was reproductivity and its inextricability from virility.

Beyond the Transitional Goal: Bukusu Circumcision and its Derivative Sexual Program

The fact that this ritual complex is so charged and pervaded with sexual imagery implies that beyond its transitional role, it has ontological value. Some scholars including Victor Turner (1969) have addressed themselves to the focal character of such rituals. Their conclusion is in the social and the political implications which the rituals possess for the individual and the community. They emphasize the "jural independence and obligatory rights that are attendant to the individual's transition to adulthood" (Heald, 1999, p.46). However, the pervasion of psychological imageries in the ritual must portend a purpose that transcends the mere transition of individuals into male adult status. The ubiquity of dramatic displays of sexual symbolism, the traumatising tests of fortitude and all ritual observances that are binding within the kinship ties and the spiritual world, must connote a dynamic changing of the individual's personality.

The imperative of changing the personality of men was part and parcel of the emergence of the Bukusu as a subnation in the closing decades of the eighteenth century throughout the nineteenth century. Throughout their history of migration and settlement, the Bukusu were disintegrated in semiautonomous clans and families. These disintegrated groups were highly mobile and heterogeneous in their cultural identity. For this reason, they were often susceptible to cattle raids and ethnic wars. The intensity of political skirmish tremendously militated against the survival of the Bukusu as a community (Makila 1978, pp.147-152). In response to the existential threat of cattle theft and war, the Bukusu adopted the art of building forts to defend themselves. This response became pronounced following the encroachment of the militant Nilotic ethnic groups in the neighbourhood such as the Kalenjin and Maasai (Were 1967, pp.65-84; Wafula 2000, p.37).

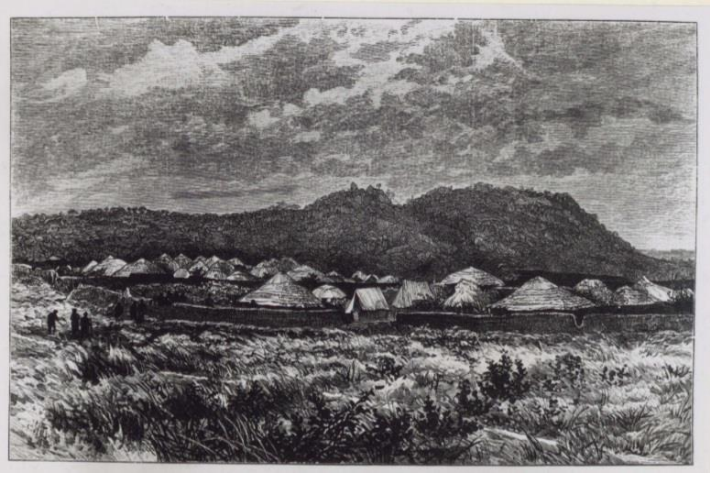

Figure 1: A traditional fortified village of the Bukusu (Picture from Thomson (1885, p. 473)

The primacy of the reproductive function coupled with the collective survival instinct echoes preponderantly in the ritual. The gifts of livestock and feasts of meat and beer signified the value of wealth in form of stock and descendants. Multiple children guaranteed a man's eternal commemoration through the naming of newborns and also elevated his social standing (Mbiti 1969, p.139). More importantly, a man's status and prestige was dependant on his capacity to manage large households. Such a man was celebrated as a leader and could easily assume political office. Bukusu men thus rivalled one another through either agrarian dexterity or sheer temerity in raiding to increase their stock. The popular method of expending this surplus wealth was by public feasts that involved meat and beer. A man that threw regular feasts (*omuyinda*) elevated his identity by creating dependencies in others.

The *omuyinda* masculinity is a crucial pointer to the way in which masculinity intersected with the Bukusu domain of sexuality. The primacy of descendants elevated the polygynous form of marriage as the proportionate avenue towards such status. Multiple wives underwrote a man's capacity to manage and provide for many dependants. In gender discourse, the privileging of men is strongly attributed to the 'provider' role. This role forms the core of Bukusu circumcision with its hallmarks of the symbolism and imageries of wealth. The ritual is, therefore, "a necessity of propagating life but penetrating unskilfully to the delicate domain of sexuality" (Nasimiyu 1986, p.217). Therefore, understanding the nature of Bukusu sexuality is the first step in the exploration of its intersection with masculinity.

Sexuality and the 'Doing' of Bukusu Masculinity

It has been demonstrated that the primacy of reproductivity was commensurate with male 'worthiness". The Bukusu perceived (hetero)sex as the model framework for masculine identity. Marriage guaranteed economic productivity and men's prestige in the plurality of descendants (Mbiti 1969, p.139; Wanyama 2017, p.63). According to Silverman (1995, p.45), masculinity in Africa is associated with symbolic themes such as enhancement of masculine virility, fecundity, arboreal fertility and preparation for marriage. Bukusu circumcision was not simply a custom for the transition of boys into manhood status. Rather, it entailed the bequeathal of the performing instruments of masculinity whose dominant articulation was sexuality.

The high premium placed on fecundity elevated sexual virility to the point that manliness was measured in terms of sexual performativity. For a Bukusu man to be less sexually desirous was tantamount to a social 'dysfunction' (interview with Wabuke, 2024). A common proverb goes; "*Eunwa efwa nende lunyasi mukhanwa*" (a bull dies with grass in its mouth). Baldwin (1967, p.365) observes that men dearly place high value on sexual power and view sexual impotence as disgraceful. The proverb of the bull dying with grass in its mouth was said when a man was severely indisposed. Customarily, such a man is "taken from hut to hut to have sex with his wives in order to shake off his weakness" (Wasike 2013, p.146). The road to Bukusu manhood was thus designed to inscribe the male body with instruments of performing male power.

Bukusu circumcision intertwined reproduction and masculinity in a procreative value system that endorsed a phallocentric program of sexuality. In this program, the male sexual function was prescribed and transmitted to men through the diversity of the language, drama, imagery and ritual symbolism that were enveloped in circumcision. This heterosexual program defined intercourse in terms of the erect penis, the

vaginal penetration, the vigorous pounding and the intense orgasm. Bukusu men were thus expected to conform to this program as the standard of masculine practice.

In performing the sexual program, the Bukusu man was conditioned to conform to the established program in order to prove his phallic worthiness. This worthiness, although individually asserted, was indebted to the gendered class of men to whom the Bukusu male actor was a bona fide member by virtue of his mark of circumcision. Individual male self-worthiness and identity were dictated by men, and it consisted in power and privilege over the gender class of femininity. In this gendered practice, in case a woman did not esteem a man's phallic worthiness, the man was customarily permitted to find another woman that did as expressed in the counsel of the feast of 'coming out'. This ensured that his phallic power was intact (Interview with Wabuke, 2024).

In this regard, the man's phallocentric performance was dictated by the expectations of the customary sexual program that he was obligated to conform to in order to fulfill the expectations of his class of men which was superior. The role of women as the subordinated class in this masculine performance was to enable this fulfilment. This did not imply the objectification of women as popularly perpetuated in western feminist radicalism. Rather, women's pleasure was important, especially as the signifier of the phallic worthiness. Thus, it was the goal of the Bukusu gendered man to gain the edge over his woman during the phallic performance. This is because this performance was practically intended to establish gendered power difference. If the man failed, he had dented the privilege of his class of men.

The psychological manifestations of coitus appear predominantly in the ritual games which mark the feast of "coming out". The favourite sport is that of sticking grass into banana stems from increasing distances. Freud observes that "the latent structure of sports games lies on libidinal foundations" and the very act of sticking grass stems into holes "stems from an unconscious desire to have coitus with a female" (Vodeb 2012, p.1). Secondary elaboration, a concept taken from Freud's interpretation of dreams, generates a diversity of supporting elements that constitute the rules of the game (shooting from increasing distances, the winner being he who sticks the most grass stems), making the libidinal symbolic game 'playable'. Such games are "psychological replays of childhood boys' contests. They confer nothing but imperatives dictated by male rivalry: the 'strongest' being the one who has the best 'hard-on', the longest, the biggest, the stiffest penis or even the one who pees the farthest" (Irigaray 1985, p.12).

It has been demonstrated that in performing the sexual program, men assert their power genitally by establishing disparity between themselves and women as a class, not as individuals. The gender class of men understood the catalogue of conjugal rules that were imparted in them physically and symbolically through circumcision. These rules maintained and protected the implicit privilege and the institutionalized superiority of the class of men. The performance of the sexual program was thus a process by which a male actor bonded with his fellow men in their class. Therefore, we need to interpret the meaning of sex from the context of its power. And by power, we do not imply the pleasuring coitus that is frequently entertained by the aforementioned Eurocentric narratives about African sexuality.

The power of sex in Bukusu cosmology is associated with the catalogue of taboos, ritual prohibitions and rules which problematize the act. This 'power' is manifest in two ways that are associated with positive value and harmfulness. Positively, sex among the Bukusu was used for conducting ritual cleansing in particular instances where taboo had been broken in order to avert calamity. Notably, incestuous incidences

were 'cured' using a ritual that involved mimicking the sexual act. In this ritual, a sheep was slaughtered, and the couple was made to lie down in its fresh blood in a sexual position. This dramatization of sex was believed to appease the evil deity (*Wele Khatundi*) so as to escape his punishment (Nangendo 1996, p.78).

In the negative essence, sex among the Bukusu had dangerous mystical potent. This deadly potency was embodied in the rules of avoidance that regulated and formalized kinship relations. As a key part of Bukusu socialization of individuals, the core of social relations and human behaviour is encapsulated in the concept of respect. Respect is the standard of relationships among the Bukusu. It was articulated in the rich rules of avoidance that were referenced in individual interaction with other members of the society. The strongest of these rules existed in the relationship between in-laws (*bumasala*). A son-in-law and mother-in-law must never come close as to even shake hands (Interview with Nanyama, 2022). The extent of this distancing varies in different contexts according to the proximity of the respective relationships.

The concept of *bumasala* epitomises the principles of differentiation in all social relations. It evokes 'fear' which is encapsulated in the traditional moral code with its range of taboos around sex. So powerful were these taboos that they extensively standardized place, time and position of sex (Interview with Wandabwa 2022). The Bukusu prohibited sexual acts in the open or in loosely confined privacies such as the bush. Nudity and public exposure were frowned upon, and this explains the elaborate diversity of the gendered fashion industry of the community (Makila 1982, pp.57-59). It was abominable (*luswa*) for a son-in-law to see the nakedness of his mother-in-law. Tradition dictated he be fined a sheep which was slaughtered, and the chyme (*buse*) was used to reverse the abomination (*kumusango*) (interview with Wandabwa, 2023).

The sexual taboos and the accompanying rules of avoidance were aimed at protecting consanguine and affinal relations. In addition to moral prohibitions, the power of sex among the Bukusu was articulate in the value attached to virginity. A virgin was customarily rewarded in the form of extra bridewealth (Makila 1982, pp.140-141). This custom was cherished and was generally indicative of the value of chastity and moral frugality. This range of prohibitions and customs interplayed to regulate the performance of the indigenous sexual program as a key element of the masculinization process.

The foregoing double-essence of the ritual value and the harmfulness of sex in Bukusu cosmology underwrote the mystical power of sex. This power was also implicit in taboos prohibiting copulation during critical activities like brewing or biological reactions like menses. Menstruation, just like sexual discharges carried a contaminating effect that is ominous (Interview with Nabayi, 2022). This explains why matriarchs were the only women allowed in masculine spaces such as pottery quarries. Such women were believed to be free of the polluting effects of sex (Nangendo 1996, p.73). The scope of these restrictions extended to regulate fidelity by cementing affinal relations through customs such as bridewealth. Bridewealth, which strictly took the form of livestock, was returned in the event of divorce hence the wife made every effort to avert the dissolution of her marriage (Interview with Wamalwa, 2022).

Conclusion

In this essay, I set out to demonstrate the intersection of masculinity and sexuality in Bukusu circumcision as the benchmark of Bukusu power relations. This was necessitated by the need to contribute to the contemporaneous conception of gender as a performance and not a stable social category. Casting the discussion in the light of the sociological constructionist paradigm of masculinity, I have comprehensively underscored the role of circumcision in the institutionalization of masculine sexual subjectivities among

Bukusu men. The paper has demonstrated that beyond the transitional purpose, Bukusu circumcision was invested with psychological and symbolic sexual imageries that constituted the core of Bukusu manly behaviour and personality. This behaviour reflected the underlying social expectations of manhood as dictated by the primacy of the agrarian economy and the imperative for collective security.

References

Aronson, A., & Kimmel, M. S. (Eds.). (2004). *Men and masculinities: A social, cultural, and historical encyclopedia* (Vol. 1). ABC-CLIO.

Baldwin, A. (1967). *Theories of child development*. John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Baraza, W. P. (2011). *Drumming up dialogue: The dialogic philosophies of Martin Buber, Fred Ikle, and William Ury compared and applied to the Babukusu of Kenya*. iUniverse, Inc.

Beoku-Betts, J. (2005). Western perceptions of African women in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In A. Cornwall (Ed.), *Readings in gender in Africa* (pp. 17–24). The International African Institute.

Berman, B., & Lonsdale, J. (1992). *Unhappy valley: Conflict in Kenya & Africa. Book 2, Violence and ethnicity*. J. Currey.

Bhana, D. (2005). Violence and the gendered negotiation of masculinity among young black schoolboys in South Africa. In *African masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present* (pp. 205–220). Palgrave Macmillan US.

Burtler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge Publishers.

Caldwell, J. C., & Caldwell, P. (1987). The cultural context of high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review, 13*(3), 409–437.

Caldwell, J. C., Caldwell, P., & Quiggin, P. (1989). The social context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review, 15*(2), 185–234.

Chodorow, N. (1978). Mothering, object-relations, and the female oedipal configuration. *Feminist Studies, 4*(1), 137–158.

Clignet, R. (1970). *Many wives many powers: Authority and power in polygynous families*. Northwestern University Press.

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.

Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender*. Polity Press.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society, 19*(6), 829–859.

Cornwall, A., & Lindisfarne, N. (Eds.). (1994). *Dislocating masculinity: Comparative ethnographies*. Routledge.

De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.

De Wolf, J. J. (1983). Circumcision and initiation in Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda: Historical reconstructions and ethnographic evidence. *Anthropos, 78*(3/4), 369–410.

Egendorf, L. K. (2006). *Male/female roles: Opposing viewpoints*. Greenhaven Press.

Epstein, J. L. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal, 86*(3), 277–294.

Fallaize, E. (2007). Simone de Beauvoir and the demystification of woman. In *A history of feminist literary criticism* (pp. 85–100).

Falola, T. (2022). *Decolonizing African studies: Knowledge production, agency, and voice* (Vol. 93). Boydell & Brewer.

Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2006). 'Most of us guys are raring to go anytime, anyplace, anywhere': Male and female sexuality in *Cleo* and *Cosmo. Sex Roles, 55*(5–6), 295–310.

Freud, S. (1919). *Totem and taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics*. George Routledge and Sons Ltd.

Freud, S. (1920). *A general introduction to psychoanalysis* (G. Stanley Hall, Trans.). Boni and Liveright.

Freud, S. (1986). *The essentials of psycho-analysis*. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis.

Gardiner, M. (1972). *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*. Hogarth Press.

Geertz, C. (2002). Religion as a cultural system. Macmillan Publishing Company.

Gilmore, D. D. (1990). *Manhood in the making: Cultural concepts of masculinity*. Yale University Press.

Hardy, A. (1981). The spiritual nature of man: A study of contemporary religious experience. *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie, 43*(3), 567–568.

Heald, S. (1999). *Manhood and morality: Sex, violence and ritual in Gisu society*. Routledge.

Howard-Payne, L., & Bowman, B. (2017). "I am the man": Meanings of masculinity in perceptions of voluntary medical adult male circumcision for HIV prevention in South Africa. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 18*(1), 70–79.

Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one*. Cornell University Press.

Kabaji, E. (2008). Masculinity and ritual violence: A study of bullfighting among the Luhyia of Western Kenya. *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa, 7*, 34–53.

Kaufman, M. (Ed.). (1987). *Beyond patriarchy: Essays by men on pleasure, power, and change* (pp. 1–29). Oxford University Press.

Kimmel, M. S., et al. (2005). *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities*. Sage.

La Fontaine, J. S. (1967). Parricide in Bugisu: A study in inter-generational conflict. *Man, 2*(2), 249–259.

Lamp, F. (1988). Heavenly bodies: Menses, moon, and rituals of license among the Temne of Sierra Leone. In *Blood magic: The anthropology of menstruation* (pp. 210–231).

Levant, R. F. (1996). The new psychology of men. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 27*(3), 259–265.

Lindegger, G., & Quayle, M. (2009). Masculinity and HIV/AIDS. In *HIV/AIDS in South Africa 25 years on: Psychosocial perspectives* (pp. 41–54). Springer.

Lindsay, L. A., & Mierscher, S. F. (2003). *Men and masculinities in modern Africa*. Heinemann.

Lombard, N. (2013). 'What about the men?' Understanding men's experiences. In *Violence against women: Current theory and practice in domestic abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation* (pp. 177–192).

Luyt, R., et al. (2001). Hegemonic masculine conceptualisation in gang culture. *South African Journal of Psychology, 31*(3), 1–11.

Maillu, D. G. (1988). *Our kind of polygamy*. Heinemann Kenya Ltd.

Makila, F. E. (1978). *An outline history of Babukusu of Western Kenya*. Kenya Literature Bureau.

Makila, F. E. (1982). *The significance of Chetambe fort in Bukusu history*.

Makila, F. E. (2004). *Bukusu cultural traditions*. Kenya Literature Bureau.

Mbah, N. L. (2019). *Emergent masculinities: Gendered power and social change in the Biafran Atlantic age*. EBSCO Publishing.

Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.

Mead, M. (1935). *Sex and temperament in three primitive societies*. New American Library.

Mhlahlo, A. P. (2009). *What is manhood? The significance of traditional circumcision in the Xhosa initiation ritual* [Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch University].

Morrell, R. (1998). Of boys and men: Masculinity and gender in Southern African studies. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 24*(4), 605–630.

Morrell, R. (2007). Men, masculinities and gender politics in South Africa: A reply Macleod. *Psychology in Society, 35*(1), 15–25.

Murangiri. (2014). *The social construction of masculinity among the Chuka through circumcision, 1906–2000* [Master's thesis, Kenyatta University].

Nangendo, S. (1996). Potter taboos and symbolism in Bukusu society, Western Kenya. *African Study Monographs, 17*(2), 69–84.

Nasimiyu, A. J. (1986). *Vatican II: The problem of inculturation* [Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University].

Ndangam, L. N. (2008). 'Lifting the cloak on manhood': Coverage of Xhosa male circumcision in the South African press. *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa, 2008*, 209–228.

Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.

Parsons, T. (1954). *Essays in sociological theory*. Free Press.

Pascoe, C. J., & Bridges, T. (2016). *Exploring masculinities: Identity, inequality, continuity, and change*. Oxford University Press.

Phillips, A., & Morris, F. (1971). *Marriage laws in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

Pleck, J. H. (1981). *The myth of masculinity*. MIT Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (1950). *African systems of kinship and marriage*. Oxford University Press.

Ratele, K. (2013). Subordinate black South African men without fear. *Cahiers d'études africaines, 1*(1), 247–268.

Ratele, K. (2013). Masculinities without tradition. *Politikon, 40*(1), 133–156.

Reid, R. (2012). *A history of modern Africa: 1800 to the present*. John Wiley and Sons.

Segal, L. (1994). *Straight sex: Rethinking the politics of pleasure*. University of California Press.

Shefer, T., & Foster, D. (2009). Heterosex among young South Africans: Research reflections. In *The price/the prize: Shaping sexualities in the new South Africa* (pp. 267–289).

Silberschmidt, M. (1999). *Women forget that men are the masters: Gender antagonism and socio-economic change in Kisii District, Kenya*. Nordiska Afrikainstitute.

Silverman, E. K. (1995). Anthropology and circumcision. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 33*, 419–445.

Simiyu, R. N. (2011). *Socio-cultural significance of circumcision songs within a changing Bukusu community of Bumula Division, South Bungoma district, Western Province of Kenya* [Master's thesis, Kenyatta University].

Tamale, S. (2011). Researching and theorising sexualities in Africa. *African Sexualities: A Reader, 14*(3), 11–36.

Thomson, J. (1885). *Through Masai Land*. Рипол Классик.

Turner, V. W. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.

Uchendu, E. (2008). Introduction: Are African males men? Sketching African masculinities. In E. Uchendu (Ed.), *Masculinities in contemporary Africa* (pp. 1–16). CODESRIA Gender Series 7.

Vodeb, R. (2012). *Goooal!!! A historical treatment of the paradigm of the goal*. Torek.

Wagner, G. (1949). *The Bantu of North Kavirondo* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

Wagner, G., & Mair, L. P. (1970). *The Bantu of Western Kenya: With special reference to the Vugusu and Logoli*.

Wafula, P. W. (2000). *Politics and nationalism in colonial Kenya: The case of Babukusu of Bungoma District 1894–1963* [Unpublished thesis, Kenyatta University].

Wanyama, K. (2017). *Continuity and change in polygyny among the Bukusu of Sirisia Constituency, Bungoma County, Kenya c. 1895–2010* [Master's thesis, Kenyatta University].

Wasike, C. (2013). *Textualizing masculinity: Discourses of power and gender relations in Manguliechi's Bukusu afterburial oratory performance (khuswala kumuse)* [Unpublished thesis, University of Witwatersrand].

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society, 1*(2), 125–151.

Were, G. S. (1967). *A history of Abaluyia of Western Kenya c. 1500–1900*. East African Publishing House.

Were, G. S. (1972). The Maasai and Kalenjin factor in the settlement of Western Kenya. *Journal of East African Research and Development, 2*(1), 1–12.

Were, G. S. (1972). Politics, religion and nationalism in Western Kenya, 1942–1962: Dini ya Musambwa revisited. *Hadith 4*, 85–104.

List of Oral Informants

1. Nabiswa Yonah Wabuke; 71 years old, interviewed on 6th August, 2024 at Lugulu.
2. Misiko Joseph Wandabwa, 67 years old, interviewed on 15th August, 2024 at Kanduyi.
3. Namaswa Peris Nasambu, 63 years old, interviewed on 2nd July, 2024 at Maliki.
4. Nanjala Metrine Nabayi; 74 years old, interviewed on 14th July, 2024 at Malakisi
5. Wesonga Justo Wamalwa, 68 years old, interviewed on 10tth Dec 2024 at Lwandanyi.
6. Nasiuma Christine Nanjala, 78 years old, interviewed on 28th Dec 2024 at Chwele.