Colonial Transformation of Female Circumcision and its Impact on Women’s Roles and Gender Relations among the Agikuyu of Kiambu from 1895 to 1963

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The general purpose of this study is to generate qualitative information on the colonial transformation of female circumcision and its impact on women’s roles and gender relations among the Agikuyu of Kiambu from 1895 to 1963. Female circumcision is a practice with deep cultural meaning and purpose. Among the Agikuyu, the practice implied analogy to male circumcision and therefore both male and female circumcision was referred to as *irua* or circumcision. The Agikuyu people of Kiambu from whom most of the data for this study was obtained, believed that in the traditional set up, female circumcision defined gender roles and women’s power to negotiate space with men. Indeed, men and women are biologically different but these differences constituted a central perception of society’s gender roles, values, and relations. The cultural meaning and procedures of female circumcision has experienced a lot of changes since the establishment of colonial rule in the area. The Europeans disregarded the female circumcision rite since they viewed it as a hindrance to their economic progress, and as a health hazard. This study therefore, endeavors to give an overview of the historical background on how the Agikuyu female circumcision traditionally defined women roles, values, and gender relations. The study demonstrates how during the traditional set-up, female circumcision channeled girls into socially acceptable roles, values and relations, which they internalized and seemed natural and inevitable. It also investigates how the Europeans ideologies such as capitalist economy, Christianity, Western education, and colonial administrative agents changed the Agikuyu female circumcision. These European ideologies embraced the nineteenth a patriarchal culture that perceived woman’s roles as to attend household tasks, to take care of home and to bear and raise children. Thus, the interaction between the African traditional male dominance perception and the European patriarchal perception that was manifested in its policies lead to continuous subordination of the Agikuyu women. Hence, women’s opportunities in public domain were limited compared to their male
counterparts. The transformation that took place in the Agikuyu female circumcision rite is analyzed within the concept of gender. This gendered analysis gives the study a comprehensive relational platform through which gender roles and relations are interrogated. Through this effort, the study presents available explanations for the persistence of female circumcision in Kikuyu land despite the extensive eradication campaign. The study employs the historical methods to analyze the data. This method involves an intellectual evaluation, conceptualization, and colligation of data in a descriptive, logical, and chronological manner. This gives a fundamental departure from a great deal of religious, sociological, anthropological and feminists studies. The study gives a concludes that the persistence of the practice is due to deeply rooted cultural identification, and the need for the Agikuyu women to negotiate social space with the men as they fear to be victimized and to be rejected by the society.