

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CIRCUMCISION IN THE TRANSITION FROM CHILDHOOD TO  
ADULTHOOD AMONG THE BAGISU

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## Declaration

I, **Nasawa Jenipher**, acknowledge that this is my original work and it has never been submitted to any university for academic or other purposes.

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## Approval

This research dissertation on the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood among the Bagishu is a result of research carried out by NASAWA JENIPHER under my supervision and is submitted for examination with my approval.

Signed Kobusingye Loyce Date 07-06-23

**Dr. Loyce Kobusingye**  
Supervisor

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to investigate the cultural and ritualistic behaviors of Bagisu in transition from childhood to adulthood through circumcision. The main objective was to find out the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Basing on the findings circumcision is significant in that it reserve cultural rights, encourages hard work, reduces penile infections and a prerequisite of marriage among others. From this research study, it can be concluded that circumcision is good since it unites different families, initiates young boys into manhood and it's very healthy as it prevents penile cancer and other penile related infections.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background**

The Bamasaba (Bagishu) are a Bantu tribal group found in the Eastern part of Uganda. They occupy the districts of Bududa, Manafwa, Namisindwa, Bulambuli, Sironko, Mbale and Mbale city which are found in the Elgon zone of Eastern Uganda.

Every two years (during even years), after the main harvest, the Bagishu (Bamasaba) conduct male circumcision (Imbalu) to initiate 15 - 20-year-old boys into the rights and responsibilities of manhood. In this culture, no man should marry until he has been circumcised. It is a symbol of courage and represents a boy's respect for his family and community, bringing his relatives honor. In addition, circumcision is a cultural marker, which distinguishes the Bagishu from their non-circumcising neighbors. The Bagishu have their ancestral origins from Masaba who is believed to have emerged from the caves of Mount Elgon over 500 years ago. The Imbalu is an old practiced ceremony that involves removing the foreskin of the male genital organ. The Bagishu themselves have no idea of when the initiation ceremony became part of their culture because some of them believe that it was adopted from the Kalenjin at the western Kenya- Uganda border while other people believe that it was first done to punish an adulterous man.

Imbalu circumcision rituals participate in constructing the Bagishu identity and enabling the old generation to pass on societal roles to the young ones. Through these rituals the Bagishu emphasize the tenets/belief which define manhood in their society; marriage, production of children, unity with fellow clan men, courage and defense of self, household, clan and community. This prepares boys to the world of men and challenges.



Over the past decades, the circumcision ceremony has become a rite of passage for all Bagishu boys to manhood who believe that the desire to be circumcised is spiritually motivated. The ritual of removing the foreskin from the boy's penis emergence from the seclusion and the performance of "inemba" dance. Before circumcision, boys first undergo preparation; they do the "isonja" dance while strongly hitting hard their feet on the ground. This is usually done around March and June of the circumcision year and during this process, candidates to be circumcised are selected.

The circumcision ceremony is seasonal but when the season comes, the boys to be circumcised are first checked to see whether they are real Bagishu and are identified basing on their clans. During the circumcision process, the candidates are expected to stand firm as a sign of courage and boldness. They use a local herb called "Itanyi" to induce courage in those to be circumcised. They go to their relatives declaring their intentions of being circumcised and are later gathered at Mutoto a cultural site where the first Mugishu was circumcised. Here elders lead those to be circumcised to the traditional dance and songs.

The candidates are presented to the audience, dancers decorated with six to eight thigh bells and two bells jump high in the air to help the initiates on them once in a lifetime chance to make the journey into complete manhood.

They are then smeared with a mixture of millet or cassava flour, and put in the middle of a crowd dancing and singing Kadodi – a circumcision song played when circumcision is taking place. The boys are then provided with sticks which they hold tight and look up to the sky and those in charge of circumcision then come to do their work. There are special trained Bagishu men who do the circumcision and always expect courageous boys not to scream and show any signs of fear. If

that stick falls from the boy's hands, he is considered a coward and often gets little lady's' attention.

The Bagishu use a special knife in their circumcision process called "Inyembe" and the whole process takes about 10-30seconds.

The whole circumcision process is concluded with the "Inemba" ceremony where the newly circumcised boys are allowed to put traditional men garments for the first time. The garments expose their muscular bodies especially during the "inemba" dance whose dance patterns express sexual messages. Boys at this stage are allowed to marry because it's when they are considered men.

Some fear full Bagishu always flee the area however when they are traced and got, they are forcefully circumcised. If a man is not circumcised, he is believed to be a coward and unclean and in typical Bagishu setting he is not allowed to marry a girl from the Gishu tribe. The Bagishu women have a habit of reporting their uncircumcised men who are later forcefully circumcised. The "imbalu" ceremony is very important among the Gishu culture and it's now used as a means of unity since its one occasion that brings a large number of Bagishu together. The ceremony is also used as a means of identity and has played an important role in the preservation of the Gishu culture,

The "imbalu" now act as a tourist attraction because different travel to the region in order not to miss the mysterious ceremony and has been recently recognized as separate tour product by Uganda tourism board. Tourists visiting Mount Elgon national park therefore have a chance to experience the unforgettable unique Bagishu men.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Traditional circumcision is a great initiator to adulthood in Bugishu which is done when the candidates are naked using one knife on many candidates which puts them be at a high risk of getting HIV and many other infections hence portraying a bad image in the public and further this male circumcision leads to complications and advanced effects such as excessive pain, bleeding and many of those candidates become school dropouts at the young age.

## **1.3 Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the cultural and ritualistic behaviors of Bagisu in transition from childhood to adulthood.

## **1.4 Objectives**

To find out the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood

## **1.5 Research question for the study**

What is the significance of the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood?

## **1.6 Scope**

The research scope on circumcision among the Bagisu people, primarily focuses on the cultural and traditional significance of the practice. This includes the rituals and ceremonies associated with circumcision, as well as the beliefs and values that inform the practice. Other areas of research may include the physical and psychological effects of circumcision, as well as the impact of the practice on sexual health and overall well-being. Additionally, there may also be research on the history of circumcision among the Bagisu people, and how the practice has evolved over time.

The study was carried out in Bugisu sub-region, Mbale city, and Manafwa district because there are many young youths who are being circumcised and parents who involve themselves in the culture. The study was conducted from December 2022 to August 2023, ranging from proposal writing to submission of dissertation for examination.

## **1.7 Significance**

Research about circumcision among the Bagisu people is significant for several reasons.

- First, it helps to understand the cultural and traditional practices of the community. This knowledge is important in order to respect and appreciate the diversity of customs and beliefs among different cultures and ethnic groups.
- Second, it can provide insight into the physical and psychological effects of circumcision, which can inform discussions and decision-making about the practice. This can be particularly important in light of the ongoing debate about the medical benefits and risks of circumcision.
- Furthermore, research on the cultural and traditional practices of the Bagisu community can also contribute to a better understanding of the social, cultural and historical context of circumcision, which can be used to inform and improve public health policies and interventions.
- The study will help the parents, youth, politicians and clan leaders to integrate safe male circumcision in the traditional culture.
- The results will be used to sensitize the community about the complications and impact on life of teenagers after the traditional male circumcision.

- Research in this area can also help to understand any potential impact of traditional circumcision on the sexual and mental health of the Bagisu community.

In summary, research on circumcision among the Bagisu community can help to improve the safety and cultural appropriateness of the procedure, and contribute to a better understanding of the cultural and historical context of circumcision.

### **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

The traditional theoretical framework for circumcision among the Bagisu involves several cultural and religious beliefs. One belief is that circumcision is a rite of passage into adulthood and a symbol of masculinity. Additionally, the Bagisu believe that circumcision is necessary for spiritual purity and that it promotes good health. Furthermore, it is an important requirement for marriage. It is also a requirement for one to be initiated into the traditional religious cult called Imbalu. In summary, the traditional theoretical framework for circumcision among the Bagisu is rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, with the rite of passage, masculinity, spiritual purity and health, and marriage being the most important considerations.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

Circumcision is a significant rite of passage in the Bagishu tribe of Uganda, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is typically performed on boys between the ages of 15 and 18 and is seen as a symbol of their commitment to the tribe's traditional customs and values (Knippenberg, 2014).

The circumcision ceremony is a communal event that involves a series of rituals and practices designed to prepare the young men for their new roles as adults (Knippenberg, 2014). These may include fasting, seclusion, and instruction in the tribe's history and traditions (Knippenberg, 2014).

Despite the cultural significance of circumcision in the Bagishu tribe, the procedure is not without controversy. It is a painful and potentially risky procedure that can have both physical and psychological consequences (Knippenberg, 2014). There have been reports of serious complications, including infection and even death, as a result of circumcision (Knippenberg, 2014).

Despite these risks, many members of the Bagishu tribe view circumcision as a necessary step in the process of becoming a responsible and respected member of the community (Knippenberg, 2014). It is seen as a way of demonstrating one's commitment to the tribe's values and traditions, and of strengthening social bonds within the community (Knippenberg, 2014).

In conclusion, circumcision is a significant rite of passage in the Bagisu tribe of Uganda, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. While the procedure carries risks and has been the

subject of controversy, it is viewed by many members of the tribe as a necessary step in the process of becoming a responsible and respected member of the community.

## **2.1 Complications associated with male circumcision**

Complications associated with male circumcision can include bleeding, infection, and pain. In rare cases, circumcision may also result in damage to the penis or difficulty urinating. Additionally, some men may experience psychological or sexual difficulties following circumcision. These can include feelings of loss of sensitivity, difficulty achieving or maintaining an erection and difficulty achieving orgasm, among others.

There have also been reports of death due to traditional circumcisions performed by untrained practitioners. Additionally, traditional circumcisions in the Bagisu community are often performed at a young age and with the use of unsterilized instruments, which increases the risk of infection and other complications.

It is important to discuss the potential risks and benefits of circumcision with a healthcare provider before making a decision about the procedure.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter is about the steps that were to be taken to collect the research data and the methods, tools and techniques that were used in the study.

It describes the methods that were used in carrying out the research study. It contains the following sections: research design, research location, population sampling techniques, research tools and instruments and data collection and analysis techniques.

#### **3.1 Research design**

Qualitative research was used in this research. Research information was obtained from respondents using a purposive sampling method on the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood in Bugisu region.

#### **3.2 Research Area**

This research was carried out in Bugisu sub region located in the Eastern part of Uganda in districts of Mbale, Manafwa, Bududa, Namisindwa, Bulambuli, Sironko and Mbale city. This is the only region in Uganda which carries out traditional circumcision.

The research was conducted in the Bugishu sub-region located in the Eastern part of Uganda in Mbale City, and Manafwa district. An application letter was written to the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) informing them of the intention of carrying out the study from those districts. This letter contained the anticipated period when the research will be carried out.



### **3.3 Study population, size, and sampling techniques**

The study population was 50 persons in the selected districts, this included 20 young boys who have just been circumcised 14- 20 years and 20 old men who have followed the culture and rituals of Bugisu plus 10 women who have attended the circumcision ceremony.

Purposive sampling technique was utilized to collect Primary data from the respondents. Under this technique, respondents in Mbale city and Manafwa district were selected for the study.

### **3.4 Data collection methods and management**

Mobile device recorded semi-structured interviews were carried out with the people of Bugisu one at a time until a number of 10 workers were interviewed for a particular day.

During the mobile Device recorded interview, specific questions about circumcision, and traditional rituals were asked.

For data management, the recorded interviews were saved on the Device and kept for analysis.

### **3.5 Inclusion criteria**

The participants were selected based on the criteria of age and gender in Bugisu.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

After collecting the required number of responses from the participants, the audios were listened to while picking the necessary information about the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood in Bugisu. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis

## Chapter Four

### Presentation and Analysis of Findings

#### 4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research study followed by the analysis of the data collected from Bugisu sub-region on the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood among the Bagisu

Finally the findings are integrated to establish the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood among the Bagisu.

<b>Young people</b>	<b>Reason / Factors</b>	<b>Quotation</b>
Respondent A	Continuity of culture Cleanliness and hygiene	“Circumcision helps to transfer cultural values to the young and enable continuity of the culture, their importance and thus guard their regalia.” He also said, “Circumcision in Bugisu culture is to promote cleanliness and hygiene. It is believed that circumcision helps prevent infections and diseases that can be transmitted through the foreskin.”
Respondent B	Inculcation of cognitive skills Sexual purity	“The culture involves inculcation of cognitive skills that are helpful for personal survival, during the initiation times boys are encouraged to become responsible and hardworking men. They are taught how to work and live as responsible citizens in the community.” He also said, “Additionally, circumcision is seen as a way of promoting sexual purity and preventing promiscuity among young men before they become men.”
Respondent C	Economic activities Associate freely with others	“The Men are taught economic activities like how to get food for their families and growing of crops that will help them survive with their families by the family elders.” He also added “Men are taught to live with people and always associate freely and not to be selfish people.”

Respondent D	Preserve cultural rights Resolve conflicts	<p>“The men are taught how to preserve the cultural rights and be able to distinguish it from other practices that go against it, hence encouraging continuity.”</p> <p>He added “The Men are taught their social roles such as How to resolve conflicts among family members.”</p>
Respondent E	Transfer of roles  Hard work and marriage	<p>“Circumcision Involves transfer of roles and responsibilities from the elderly people to the young generation.”</p> <p>“Also after cutting, the umushebi (the one who circumcises) comes to advise you on hardwork, marriage and your roles as a man, many life things like respecting elders and fellow men,” he added.</p>
Respondent F	Grooming future leaders Bringing togetherness	<p>“Circumcision involves grooming up the future leaders as the men are taught about the importance of being circumcised, how to be a strong leader and always stay passionate.”</p> <p>He also said, “The circumcision ceremony is a highly symbolic event that involves the entire community bringing togetherness since it involves celebrations and feasting.”</p>
Respondent G	Prerequisite for marriage	<p>“Circumcision is a prerequisite for marriage. An uncircumcised man is not considered eligible for marriage, therefore, circumcision is seen as a necessary step towards adulthood and marriage.”</p>
Elder	<b>Reason / Factors</b>	<b>Quotation</b>
Elder A	Family cohesion Maturity and social status	<p>“The initiation brings close relatives who agitate for family cohesion thus teaches the candidate value for unity.”</p> <p>He also said, “Circumcision is seen as a symbol of maturity and social status. After circumcision, a boy is considered a man and is accorded more respect in the community. He is also allowed to participate in certain activities that were previously reserved for adults.”</p>
Elder B	Self-sustainability Reduces penile infections	<p>“Serves as a stepping stone for entering the world of self sustainability where men are encouraged to get married and form responsible families to fulfill their demands around them.”</p> <p>He also added and said, “Circumcision increases hygiene of the penis as it’s easier to wash it thus reducing penile infections.”</p>

Elder C	<p>Understand lineage and clan members</p> <p>Endurance and patience</p>	<p>“The advice you are given by your father, uncles, great fathers, understanding your lineage/clan where they take you to some graves and tell you this person produced your great grandpa, who produced your grandfather, who produced your father who produced you, helps one understand their clan and lineage very well.”</p> <p>“The pain you endure and patience you show during the entire process, before circumcision, during and after circumcision teaches a lot, In Fact you may even not feel the stress women bring after going through this process because you already reached the threshold.”<sup>1</sup></p>
Elder D	<p>Dowry collecting</p> <p>Sense of belonging</p>	<p>“A family that can organize Kadodi/imbalu ceremony shows that it can pay dowry, and that process is also for collecting dowry, and many other gifts, if one isn’t wealthy.”</p> <p>“Promotes a sense of belonging among the gishu culture. Those who are not circumcised feel unfit to gishu society and the only way to remove such fear is circumcision.”</p>

## Chapter Five

### Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

#### 5.0 Introduction

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the significance of circumcision in the transition from childhood to adulthood in Bugisu. This chapter mainly contains the interpretation of the findings generated from the analysis of the recordings of the interviews with at least six young people and four elders in Bugisu. Then the final parts of this chapter are conclusions from the study and recommendations drawn from the research study.

#### 5.1 Interpretation of the findings in relation to the research topic.

Circumcision as a tradition is vital since it is of great significance as stated by the respondents and researchers :Involves transfer of roles and responsibilities from the elderly people to the young generation, this helps the young generation to grow up knowing their responsibilities and roles as parents, mostly fathers.

Promotes sense of belonging among the *Gishu* culture, those who are not circumcised feel unfit to *Gishu* society, so they are forced to do as culture tell them, they mostly recognize themselves as *makoki* meaning circumcised in the same year, so it creates much love among themselves.

Circumcision being a prerequisite for marriage, where uncircumcised men are not considered eligible for marriage, encourages young boys to avoid early marriages until they are circumcised.

The advice given by your father, uncles, great fathers, helps them understand lineage/clan where one is introduced to the different clan members and they award him a clear sense of understanding one's lineage very well.

Circumcision is seen as a way of promoting sexual purity and preventing promiscuity among men which also prevent the spread of HIV.

Circumcision increases hygiene of the penis since it's easier to wash it thus reducing penile infections like penile cancer and candida.

## **5.2 Conclusion from the study**

From this research study, it can be concluded that circumcision is good since it unites different families, initiates young boys into manhood and it's very healthy as it prevents penile cancer and other penile related infections.

On the other hand, circumcision leads to a high number of school dropouts and early pregnancies since the initiation age is 14 years to 18 years which is a young age to be introduced into manhood.

## **5.3 Recommendation from the study.**

The Elders and clan leaders should extend the circumcision age at least 18 years to 25 years to avoid early school drop out and pregnancies,

The elders should stop encouraging the young boys to start marriage immediately after marriage but to take their time up to an adult age of 18 years and above.

The clan leaders should implement the government idea of safe male circumcision because it doesn't involve over bleeding, and excessive pain.

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