

SOME ASPECTS OF THE PRACTICE OF KANURI TRADITIONAL CIRCUMCISION IN MAIDUGURI, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA.

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Introduction

The destruction of lives and property caused by the Boko Haram insurgency from its onset in 2009 is often mentioned amongst scholars. On the other hand, the destruction of intangible cultural heritage and practices have received far less attention. It is only recently that studies such as Shallangwa (2021) began to document the effects of the insurgency on indigenous cultural practices by persons in their communities and those residing in the Internally Displaced Persons Camps (IDPs) in Maiduguri. Male traditional circumcision rituals in the Kanuri society serve as an indigenous cultural practice with several philosophies and wisdom behind its sustenance. It is usually done at certain occasions and ceremonies within the life cycle such as naming ceremonies, circumcision and marriage (Geider & Vogels, 1996). It is practised primarily as an initiation ritual into adulthood, that involves the cutting or removal of the foreskin of the male organ by *wanzamaa* (traditional circumcisers), *wanzama* being the singular. The practice is conducted under non-clinical settings and overseen by *wanzamaa*, hence it is distinct from medical/clinical circumcision. Although it can be medically recommended in a few cases, it is regarded as cultural and religious in Kanuri culture (El-Yakub, 2009). While the ritual has undergone certain changes over the years, traditional male circumcision among the Kanuri is associated with factors such as masculinity, social cohesion with boys of the same age group, who become circumcised at the same time, self-identity and spirituality (Cohen, 1967).

Similarly, El-Yakub (ibid) noted that the Kanuri society is a dynamic one, and has experienced elements of social transformation with respect to cultural traditions caused by education, population growth, technological changes, modern health care, and the effects of mass media. Furthermore, the sustainability of this cultural practice in the last decade has witnessed a significant change as a result of the insurgency that displaced people from their original settings as well as the activities of NGOs. Since the focus of government at all levels is tilted towards peace and stability, very little or no effort seem to be made to revive dying indigenous cultural practices. Therefore, this study assessed the changes recorded in the belief and attitudes towards the Kanuri traditional circumcision in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency over the last decade.

Study Area

Shehuri is the principal hub for the practice and sustenance of the Kanuri culture in Borno State because it is home to the Shehu's palace. The palace has Kanuri style elements in it, in terms of its central location and neighbourhood arrangement patterns around it. The palace is also traditionally bounded by the courtier's residences, including the; Waziri, Shettimari, Abbari, Limanti, Kalari, Talbari, Yerimari, Kaigamari Moramti and Galtimari among others, with the Shehu's palace standing at the centre (Abubakar, 2017). The research is situated specifically in Shehuri because it is the principal hub where cultural activities including rituals of the Kanuri circumcision formally takes place.

Research Design

The study employed qualitative research methodology utilising data collected from primary and secondary sources. Firstly, the researcher familiarized with the respondents through several visits in order to gain their acceptance, trust, and cooperation. These brought ease, added value and gave a stable direction to the research. The researcher participated by observing the Kanuri traditional circumcision in Shehuri where rituals and music performance by the circumcisers were showcased publicly in the presence of the Shehu of Borno and other local traditional rulers in attendance. This enabled the researcher gain first-hand knowledge and experience about the cultural practices surrounding the circumcision.

Furthermore, Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focused Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with relevant stakeholders including (but not limited to) head of traditional circumcisers (Zannah Dambusuma), traditional circumcisers (Wanzamaa), academics from the University of Maiduguri with Kanuri background in Linguistics and English department and parents of circumcised boys. Two (2) research assistants were trained and utilized by the researcher while conducting interviews and FGDs. Additionally, desk review of relevant literature was conducted to complement the findings of the research.

Rites of Passage

The origin of rites in the religious scenario of Africa is unclear. However, Eliade (1959) shared same view and noted that “these rites are re-enactments of the paradigmatic model set by the divine beings” (p. 185), while Kristiansen (1960) later confirmed that “Rites of passage are the actualization of divine order which have been recognized and apprehended” (p.306).

It has been elaborately established in practice and theory that Africans are deeply or often religious. Religion colours all aspects of African life from the cradle to the grave (Mbiti, 1970). This is made manifest in her concept of the universe as a unified reality which is further explained in her view of the community and her sense of preservation and enhancement of human life. In Africa, nothing is an accident; things cannot happen without a cause. Thus, changes in one’s life, biological or socio-economic status or movements from and to different phases of life are appreciated as the work of the benevolent God or gods, and must be ritually celebrated. In other words, as one moves along the passage of life; from birth to the grave, there are major developmental stages of life that one stops to ritually celebrate which are referred to as rites of passage. Series of rites and rituals are imbedded in each stage which appreciates the super sensible being(s) and further prepares one for the life in the next stage (Ezenweke, 2012).

The various stages of human development starting from birth, puberty, marriage and death are all very important and need to be celebrated. They involved crossing from one stage of life to another. Ray (1999) noted that in this phase, people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into new beings with new social roles. New-born infants are made into human person, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husbands and wives, deceased people are made into ancestors, princes are made into kings and so on. This remaking of a human being involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new.

In another study on the initiation rites (Irua) of Agikuyu of Kenya, it was found that male and female initiation rites such as circumcision play a central social role in the society. Although boys and girls are taken to separate locations for the rituals, those circumcised at the same time are considered age-mates, and those circumcised during the same season are regarded as age-sets (Hinga, 1988). This corroborates with the social function of the Kanuri circumcision as noted by Cohen who states that the circumcision ceremony has to do with the strengthening of community connection. Cohen remarks, “The important thing is not the readiness of the boy for initiation. Rather it is the auspiciousness of the occasion in terms of the occasion in terms of the family’s relationship to the rest of the community”. Cohen (1960) further asserts that the Kanuri circumcision ritual like other

rituals marks publicly the opening of the gates on the road to manhood for the young man but much more importantly, it validates, strengthens, and dramatizes the relational network of ties that the family and the household maintains and attempts to promote in the society.

Ritual Processes of Male Circumcision

Rituals in Africa, just as in other parts of the world, utilize symbols to express and convey meanings, verbally and nonverbally. In traditional African societies, a firm stress is placed on the performance of rituals as customary, standardized, and symbolic social communication that is repeatable according to fixed patterns. All African societies have different age-linked rituals, and mark the passage from one to another, but not all have the same rituals, either in number or in kind. The following are typical: prenatal rituals (e.g., rituals to confirm pregnancy, for fetal growth, and for safe delivery); naming rituals; pre-pubertal and pubertal initiation rituals for the entrance into adulthood; betrothal and marriage; initiation into prestige-bestowing adult associations; rituals elevating individuals to high office or to priestly functions; and funeral (Turner, 1985).

African rituals thus can be analysed helpfully under the category "life cycle rituals," or what has been called "rites of passage" since the publication of the book of the same title in 1908 by Arnold van Gennep and expanded later by the British Anthropologist Victor Turner. Van Gennep identified three phases in such rituals: rites of separation, which provide a socially accepted way to move away from a prior status; rites of transition, which safeguard participants during the dangerous liminal, or "in-between," period; and rites of incorporation, which ensure that the participants have been reinstated properly into society and legitimated by the community in their new roles. Turner argued that the entire ritual process, from separation through transition to incorporation, can be understood as liminal because each phase occurs in a time between times and in a space that is set apart from other places.

Kanuri Traditional Circumcision

Cohen in his book the 'Kanuri of Borno' in 1967 discussed the Kanuri male circumcision as an important aspect of puberty that marks transition from childhood to adulthood. He states that the event is fundamentally a ceremonial occasion and is thus related only in a rough general way to the actual onset of puberty for each boy. Generally, boys are cut in groups, although in rural areas it is not uncommon to see a family performing the ceremony for just one boy in the household. On the other hand, circumcision among the high-ranking people such as village heads, district heads, members of the royal family, or rich traders in the city attracts many other families who try to have their own children cut at the same time to participate in the large festivities. Usually, the higher the rank of the leading families involved in the circumcision the greater the number of boys who are likely to be cut at the same time. Cohen further states that the most important thing is not the readiness of the boy. Rather it is the auspiciousness of the occasion in terms of the family's relationship to the rest of the community. In other words, what determines the circumcision ceremony is the calibre and status of the family organising the ceremony. The organising family's status in the community will influence the number of boys, the timing of the ceremony as well as determining the major functions of the event. Certainly, it's marks publicly the opening of the gates on the road to manhood for the young boy but much more importantly, it validates, strengthens and dramatizes the relational network of ties that the family and the household maintain and attempt to promote in the society.

Another significant point worthy of note in the circumcision ceremony as stated by Cohen is that, it gives room for small groups of converts from other places who want to partake in the ceremony. This further gives them opportunities to gain more acceptance in the Kanuri community and in some cases marry Kanuri women. After the boys have come out of confinement during which the cut heals, they are given whips which they brandish while chasing and threatening to flog young girls. The girls must "buy off" such treatment by giving the young boys a few pennies, otherwise they will be lashed.

Another study conducted by Mustaffa (2019) on the Kanuri circumcision ceremony concurs with that of Cohen in some of its findings. However, while Cohen looks at it from a holistic point of view Mustaffa goes into details on the circumcision ceremony itself. Mustaffa starts by explaining the special hut called "*Ngushi*" which is purposely built for the circumcision ceremony. Furthermore, he explains that the night before the circumcision ceremony takes place, all those who are to be circumcised are gathered together in the "*Ngushi*", while women folk sing songs of praise, while at the same time encouraging the boys to face the ordeal boldly. As the women are singing the '*Wanzama*' (traditional barber and circumciser) blows his horn playing different tunes praising those to be circumcised and their families. The following morning before the ceremony is performed, the boys are all bathed thoroughly. The ceremony is usually attended by a big crowd from different parts of Borno State. Mustaffa further explains that as soon as the ceremony is performed, the *Wanzama* will blow his *magnum* (horn) in a way that those outside the *Ngushi* will know that the boys have undergone the ordeal and the ceremony is successfully completed. When the family's tune is blown from the *mangum*, the women and girls outside will begin to sing and rejoice. This is because the initiates who have spent two weeks inside the *Ngushi* are not allowed to go out and see girls or women. Therefore, the horn blowing at the end of the two weeks which signifies that the girls can now see them instils a feeling of strong masculinity and an upgrade of their status. As stated by Mustaffa, it is believed by the Kanuri that when the girls see the boys during confinement the wound (on the male organ) won't heal on time. Also, there is an extension (up to a month) of the two weeks before the final ceremony if some of the newly circumcised don't heal within the usual period of two weeks. This indicates a kind of social cohesion and bond among the initiates, giving them a feeling of togetherness.

The boys are usually fed with warm gruel, meat and onions. During the two weeks' period of confinement in the *Ngushi*, the *Wanzama* nurses the boys closely day and night. On the day of the outing ceremony the boys are usually given new gowns. Girls offer them gifts such as beads made of date and sweets which is worn around the neck. The boys sit on a large mat in front of the house while the *Wanzama* blows his horn notifying those around that the whole circumcision ceremony is over and the boys are now 'out'. The parents of the new, circumcise boys receive gifts from well-wishers on behalf of their son(s). The boys are given whips with which they will flog/strike those who stand in their way as they are walking. The elderly men and women present during the circumcision place their hands on the heads of the boys as a sign of blessing.

In all of the findings of the above studies, none has focused on the changes in the belief and attitudes of the people on the ritual process of the circumcision. As a result of the identified gap the study therefore focused on the changing trends in the attitudes and beliefs on the Kanuri traditional male circumcision ritual.

The Role of Music Performance in Kanuri Traditional Circumcision

The study found that organized social and religious ceremonies or rites that bring the members of the Kanuri community together provide an important means of encouraging involvement in collective behaviour, a means of strengthening the social bonds that bind them and the values that inspire their corporate life. The performance of music in such contexts, therefore assumes a multiple role in relation to the community as it provides at once an opportunity for sharing in creative experience, for participating in music as a form of community experience.

One of the respondents who is a traditional title holder explained that:

"the music performances in the Kanuri circumcision ceremonies depends on the status of the person that is sponsoring it. In some of the circumcision ceremony, the Ganga Kura music is played on the eve of the circumcision ceremony as well as on the circumcision ceremony day."

“Young girls and women, apart from the role of cooking and preparing the children, also sing songs during the circumcision ceremony however, the songs that are in form of prayers are not only peculiar to the circumcision ceremony as they are also performed in marriage ceremonies as well as child naming ceremonies in order to ward off evil eyes so that the child can succeed in life.”

The lyrics go thus;

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1- Laulande karama | 1- divine intervention against the witch |
| 2- klanumgare karama | 2- eat yourself, witch |
| 3- kauchi din tai karama | 3- catch the stone, witch |

(Repeat)

“I blow the *Mangum* to make musical sounds on the day of the circumcision ceremony as a form of prayer for the boys as well as entertainment for the guests that are present in the occasion”
- Zanna Dambusuma.

The music is made of sounds produced by the Zanna Dambusuma while blowing 1. The *Mangum*. In other words, the music is without written lyrics.

“The music is a form of prayer for the boys on the day of the circumcision, there are no written lyrics”- Zanna Dambusuma.

Observations in the field on the day of the circumcision ceremony (reintegration phase), the music sound was responded to by few who responded by saying 'Amen' while the Zanna Dambusuma blows 1. The *Mangum* as seen in the figure below. Prior to the day of the circumcision, the Zanna Dambusuma blows the *mangum* making musical sounds to invite community members including children to attend the auspicious ceremony. The sound could be transcribed thus;

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1- Yawatadayeso arowo | 1- mothers of children come |
| 2- Ina tadayeso arowo | 2- maternal aunts of children come |
| 3- Rawatadayeso arowo | 3- maternal uncles of children come |
| 4- Bawatadayeso arowo | 4- paternal uncles of children come |
| 5- Ngrma biyanowo | 5- pay the race horse |
| 6- Ngrma winowo | 6- untie the race horse |
| 7- Nduli kura kuraso arowo | 7- grown up children, come |
| 8- Nduli sinanaso arowo | 8- younger children, come |
| 9- Nduliso arowo | 9- children, come |

(Repeat)



Fig 1. Zanna Dambusuma blowing the *Mangum* to make musical sound at the Circumcision ceremony in Shehuri
Source: field work (2022)

The Kanuri traditional circumcision music original content has not been documented in written form. However, the performance of the music by the Zannah Dambusuma has been ongoing in every circumcision ceremony for the past 12 years in Shehuri. This study attempted to collect some of the lyrics for documentation purposes. The music performance serves as a form of divine intervention in the lives of the boys as well as to entertain people that graced the ceremony.

Discussion

The study found certain factors have been responsible for the changes towards the sustainability of Kanuri traditional circumcision since the beginning of the insurgency. With the coming of NGOs, there have been an overwhelming campaign on peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution in Maiduguri. These activities have not been exclusive as there are often healthcare support for people especially those in displaced settings. In the words of the respondents;

“my last child was born and circumcised in the hospital because of the free support by an NGO and I think it is easier and better to do it at infancy because they said its better than the traditional method.”

Another respondent stated that,

“the insurgency has forced us away from our communities where we find it easier to practice the traditional circumcision. But it has also provided opportunity for us to get it done medically with the help of NGOs. This is because not all of us find it convenient to take our children for the group circumcision in Shehuri. Sometimes we don’t even get to know of the date for the group circumcision.”

Apart from the influence of NGOs, other factors that have influenced the attitudes of Kanuri people towards the sustainability of this practice includes more religious awareness and education that have crept in and have influenced the people's behaviour towards the practice of the traditional circumcision. This religious awareness has manifested over the years as Islamic religious scholars through their teachings have demonstrated that the circumcision is a religious obligation which does not necessarily involve traditional rituals. The observation in the field also showed that religious clerics of Kanuri ethnic group are usually invited to give a short sermon on the importance of the

circumcision from the religious angle, and how it is important in the maintenance of identity as Muslims. Also, in-depth knowledge and religious awareness has also shown that the rituals that accompany the Kanuri traditional circumcision may not be compulsory. These rituals have however continued to thrive with certain changes chiefly due to admiration of the practice as an event, the maintenance of social cohesion and life time bond for groups of boys who undergo the procedure together as stated by some respondents:

“Expansion in knowledge of the religion has influenced the circumcision practice in a greater way. Our people, will continue to observe some of the rituals as a way of displaying their cultural admiration and identity”.

The study also found that despite the influences from the modern medical circumcision, the people have a strong admiration for the culture of traditional circumcision as it is held with high esteem and seen as an integral part of the Kanuri identity which enforces social cohesion and a lifetime bond among children.

Some of the *wanzamaa* also noted that people are gradually shifting to individual traditional circumcisions for their children. The family *wanzamaa* is sometimes invited to come and perform the operation privately in contrast to the group circumcision. One of the respondents stated;

“...even when we go out to circumcise in the hospitals, we still invite the family’s *wanzama* so as to pay them their due as if they were the ones that circumcised the boy(s)”.

The family *wanzama* (similar to family doctor) performs not only circumcision procedures but a range of other functions like shaving the hair of infants, uvulectomy, blood cupping, and so on. Furthermore, in terms of the socio-cultural significance, the respondents stated unanimously that the group circumcision builds a lifetime relationship amongst the boys and therefore enhances communal life where everyone is a brother’s keeper. This social function of the Kanuri circumcision corroborates with Cohen (1960) who noted that the Kanuri circumcision ceremony has to do with the strengthening of community connection.

The finding above demonstrates that there are certain wisdom and philosophies relating to peaceful coexistence in the sustainability of the Kanuri traditional circumcision. The belief is that a long-lasting bond and brotherhood will be generated from a younger age when young people are jointly circumcised.

The finding is also in consonance with Nakou et al. (2012) who studied the Fulani of Benin Republic ‘flogging’ test initiation rite through which adolescents are granted full rights and social duties. More than a rite of social integration in which aggression occurs and develops a logical exchange of lashes, the Godja (flogging test) turns to be a practice that helps to maintain and affirm a social identity around cultural references. Muguna (2014) also found that those that are circumcised at the same time had respect for one another and a common name among them.

Furthermore, respondents stated that in the Kanuri society, maternal uncles play a significant role in the life of the circumcised boy. He is responsible for bringing the child to the circumcision venue and the *ngushi*. He holds the boy when getting cut and buys a lot of gifts for him. He shows maximum concern over the boy. The reason for this as explained by one of the respondents is that, the boys cannot inherit directly from their maternal uncles in their demise and as such the only time they could benefit from them is when they are alive. The gifts that are received by the boys is believed to mark a new phase of success in their future exploits.

“In the early 60s when I was circumcised, I was gifted with a goat which my mom kept for me until I came off age. I sold the goat and invested with the money which yielded more profits and marked a turning point in my business exploit”.

Secondly, observation from the field shows the Shehu of Borno and other elders dipping hands in a bowl of 'kaulu' (sesame leaf) and touching the head of all the boys as a form of blessing.



Fig 2: Shehu of Borno conferring his blessings on an initiate
Source: field work (2022)

This was explained to mean unending success in the life of the boys. This is one aspect of the rites that even those who didn't circumcise in the traditional way bring their children to perform. The belief on the traditional circumcision as stated by respondents in both FGD and KII is that it makes a child more sexually active than those circumcised in the hospitals. This belief seems to be a myth according to some other respondents who are mostly from the academic environment.



Fig 4.3: Initiates heading to the Shehu's palace on the day of circumcision ceremony
Source: field work (2022)

An elderly respondent noted that it is not a religious injunction to perform the rituals as it is being done in the Kanuri tradition, but the way it is being practiced in the Kanuri culture is good, because it doesn't contradict the Islamic religion and it enforces social cohesion among people.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From the foregoing, it can be seen that insurgency has impacted the change in attitudes and sustainability of the Kanuri traditional circumcision. On the other hand, we can equally infer that the wisdom and philosophical assumption surrounding the Kanuri traditional circumcision is that it promotes peace among children and families in the long run through the social cohesion and unity which the group circumcision is believed to reinforce. On the other hand, it can also be seen that the belief and attitudes of the Kanuri people pertaining the sustainability of the traditional circumcision has taken a new dimension due to the insurgency as well as other factors such as health care services and awareness activities of NGOs in the area. As a result, the study therefore recommends that the government and other relevant healthcare organisations in Maiduguri work in synergy with traditional circumcisers to further understand and guide traditional surgical procedures.

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