

New Testament and the Yoruba Culture: An Appraisal of Women Circumcision

Ojo Margaret Yemisi

Department of Religious Studies, Ado-Ekiti University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Abstract: The main concern of this study is to look at women's circumcision within new testament and Yoruba culture, because the interest of women as a subject of study has been on the increase and so the religious focus on issues affecting women therefore is in line with global direction. The study worked through a sizable background material and from religious point of view argues that circumcision of women is not necessary, more so that the practice does not enjoy the blessing of Jesus. The study also, recommended that today's women should be proponents of women emancipation even in the face of hostile traditions. Women should also, reject female circumcision as it does not have its origin in the new testament and not even in the Bible.

Key words: New testament, Yoruba, culture, women, circumcision, Bible

INTRODUCTION

Origin and meaning of circumcision: Circumcision was a traditional practice of cutting off the foreskin of the male genital organ. It could be seen as an initiation right, as a mark of covenant among races. This right is also, seen as a tribal mark, like any other mutilations such as tattooing cutting of a finger joint, filling or chiseling out of teeth (Remodino, 1900).

In Egypt, its practice dates back to the 14th century BC and also in Genesis 17: 9-27 its origin is ascribed to the time of Abraham when God said to Abraham:

As for you, you will keep my covenant ...
every male among you shall be circumcised

Abraham was 99 years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin while, Ishmael his 13 years old when he too was circumcised.

The famous Herodotus (Buttrick, 1962) also traced it to the Egyptians from whom the Jews and others borrowed the tradition. Circumcision as a term was also used in Jeremiah as a metaphor.

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and take
away the foreskin of your heart. Because of
the evil doings

The above means spiritual purity and also consecration of heart. The term is further used to make a distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles. According to Ex. 4:25 circumcision did not begin with Moses, which as at the time of Moses about circumcision was still on.

Circumcision in biblical times should furthermore be seen as a covenant sign between God and Abraham to distinguish Abraham and his descendants from others. Of

necessity is the fact that at the time of Abraham, it was mass circumcision (Gen 17: 27) and later according to God instruction every male child that was 8 days old. Importance of the 8th day was not entrained in the Bible but according to the report of a teaching working Group of World Health Organization (WHO, 1996) most circumcision take place on the 8th day so as to prevent neo-natal infection and that bleeding could be controlled.

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

There was no information about women circumcision directly, but indirectly women were involved in the circumcision of their sons and even their husbands thus they directly become monitors in circumcision, they would have to monitor the healing of the wound so as to prevent them from infections. In other words, women were not kept in the dark about circumcision and so in the events surrounding circumcision they played supporting roles, example is in Exodus 4:5 where, Zipporah herself performed the circumcision of her son and yet no reference to female circumcision. Circumcision in old testament was very symbolic, the physical aspect of the tradition is a symbol of an inward physical operation. Symbolically, it's performed by man on one hand and by God on the other hand, thus Joshua told the people

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart
... and the Lord God will circumcise your heart
and the heart of your offspring

The above reference reveals the spiritual importance of circumcision in old testament while, circumcision in new testament has both physical and spiritual dimension.

CIRCUMCISION IN NEW TESTAMENT

Circumcision is known in Greek language as peritomen, which also means an act of cutting off the foreskin of the male genital organ. In the new testament period; circumcision was a bitter source of contention because, when Christianity spread among the Gentiles the question then arose whether, it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be admitted to Christian fold because the Jewish Christians thought, it was necessary and even important.

The Jerusalem council, which was reported in Acts 15, was summoned to deal with the question and the decision reached was that circumcision was not compulsory (Buttrick, 1962). Though, Jesus was himself circumcised at a very tender age and Paul was himself circumcised and at his circumcision he was giving the name Saul, but at a point in time Paul refused Titus to be circumcised (Gal 2:3) and yet he brought Titus the uncircumcised Gentile to be heard by the elders and also to share from his experience (Atowoju, 2003). Paul's expectations were fulfilled; for the elders received Titus the uncircumcised into the church and so in Gal 5:2 Paul said:

If you become circumcised Christ will profit
you nothing

The Greek word *umas ouden* does not mean condemnation but that circumcision is nothing in the absence of righteousness. The attitude of Paul was concerned with a change of heart to be a new creation and also, of his view that the Jews should not value the physical tradition so much. Jesus did not dwell so much on circumcision and as at the time of Jesus circumcision was not applicable to women.

WOMEN AND CIRCUMCISION

In every society, people have diverse beliefs and practices, which are tied to their customs. It is difficult to separate societal practices from the customs of the people. Like other items of culture, these beliefs and practices are learned and passed on from generation to generation during the process of socialization.

The existence of traditional practices such as early marriage, child bearing, tribal marks, food taboos and particularly female circumcision are common features among Africans and over the years many of these traditional practices especially, those with harmful effects were gradually rejected as societies become more technologically advanced and educated, others still survive.

Female circumcision is a process by which the female external genital is cut by the use of instruments (Atowoju, 2003). According to history, female circumcision has been practiced in various forms for over 2,000 years and various communities in all continents have practiced it at one time or the other (Anika *et al.*, 2000), but the practice has been more common in Africa than other continents.

Despite its long history and wide practice of female circumcision, its origin however remains obscure and even though evidence exist that circumcision was first performed on the male and later on the female. Toubia (1982) discussed that female circumcision proceeded Islam in Africa. To her when Islam entered Africa the new converted leaders seek to continue the practice and thereby linked it with Islam, this she said led to a belief among the Muslims that female circumcision was a necessity for them. She further explained that the search of the Holy Quran and Hadith did not show any support for female circumcision expect male circumcision and therefore, considered it not mandatory, but as a matter of choice. It can therefore, be deduced that female circumcision does not have its origin in either of the two religions i.e., Christianity and Islam neither is it the requirement for their beliefs.

More than 130 million girls and women worldwide have undergone female circumcision and nearly 2 million girls are at risk each year (Toubia, 1982). This is so because, it is done in an area of the body where, it is easy for the woman or young girl to bleed to death or to facilitate anemia, which is a grave problem in Yoruba society. There are 3 types of female circumcision:

Type A: This is excision of the clitoral prepuce; it is the oldest and least traumatic type.

Type B: This is the removal of prepuce amputation of glans clitoris.

Type C: This is infibulations, in which the female part is muzzled to curb sexual activities (Anika *et al.*, 2000).

YORUBA'S REASONS FOR FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

The practice of female circumcision is widespread in Nigeria and >50% of Nigerian girls have undergone the operation and many more are being subjected to it yearly (Shandal, 1967). Type A and B are being commonly practiced among the Yoruba.

Also, among the Yorubas female circumcision are done especially on the 8th day of birth with exception of few communities, of importance is that before the campaign against female circumcision, it used to be done both in the hospital and at home by traditional birth attendants, but because of the awareness of the campaign against female circumcision it has solely become the duty of traditional circumcisers known as Akola in Yoruba and no more in the hospitals.

Traditional circumcisers believes that circumcision should stop at (Adeneye, 1995) noon because, after noon bleeding could occur, instruments used is a special knife, which is locally fabricated and no special ceremony is attached to it. Native herbs are only given to adult female as it is believed that adult feels pain more than infants and young children these native herbs are applied to the vulva in all cases to aid healing. Sometimes there may be uncontrollable bleeding and in such situation incantations come in. The Yoruba do not believe in death occurring as a result of circumcision, it is believed that such a child is not destined to live. Reasons for this practice among the Yorubas are numerous as some of these reasons reflect the historical situation and beliefs of those who practice it and also in ensuring compliance of women to the dictates of their communities.

Identification: Identification with the cultural heritage because it is seen as an institution to womanhood. Among the Yorubas no special ceremony is attached to it but, above is the reason often given by a number of African ethnic groups for practicing it.

Enhancement of fertility: Among the Yoruba's, it is believed that if a woman is circumcised, then fertility is further enhanced. Child survival will also, be easier because, the baby may die if its head touches the mother's clitoris during delivery. The above reasons have been proved wrong as we now have cases of uncircumcised women, yet they have safe delivery.

Economic benefit: The practice is a source of livelihood for the Akolas (Circumcisers) and there is also a status symbol for the circumcisers within their communities as they are often held in high esteem.

Hygiene: The external genitalia are considered dirty by some and so for prevention of disease, it should therefore, be removed to achieve greater cleanliness of the vulva.

Reduction of the sensitive tissues of the outer genitalia, especially the clitoris so as to reduce sexual desires in the female, therefore maintaining chastity before marriage and fidelity during marriage.

With the justification given above by the Yoruba's, it is a well, known fact that all is not well with the tradition as there are complications

It is conspicuous from relevant old testament passages that circumcision that male circumcision was established during the time of Abraham as a covenant between God and His people. Jesus himself though circumcised did not say much on circumcision, there is also the realization that there were many customs and practices that are common in old testament times, which may have made sense to people at that time but have little or no relevance and acceptability today.

Furthermore, from New Testament perspective there is no religion requirement for female circumcision and only God knows from where the Yoruba's got the idea because to the Yoruba's especially, those who believe in female circumcision do not see it as mutilation but as circumcision in the same context as the male circumcision.

Within the society, to those who know the pains of female circumcision, its' practice either at home or hospital is violence against innocent infants because human life is real and deserves respect and consideration even from the stage of pregnancy. Thus, female circumcision is an action against the child's right as a human being.

CONSEQUENCES OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

The consequences of female circumcision have been documented to be detrimental to the health of the woman. The complications of the practice are of different degrees depending on who, how, where and when the circumcision was performed and the type. According to Basher (1982) and Oke (1996), any form of surgical interference in the highly sensitive organ constitute a serious threat to the child and that the painful operation is a source of major physical trauma.

At times it is difficult to obtain information on immediate complications because most are done at home and Yoruba people will not admit to having these complications since they do not believe in its' harmful effect. As it concerns a sensitive part of the body, women will thus, be reluctant to seek medical advice. In most rural areas, health facilities are not within reach and thus complications are only reported only if it is severe.

IMMEDIATE COMPLICATIONS OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Majority of female circumcision are done without pain relieve system. Those performing, it among the Yoruba's on the infants does so with the believe of not feeling much pain. Infections are also common due to unhygienic

conditions and use of unsterilized equipments; it can also, be contacted from the traditional concoctions used for healing the wound. Bleeding is also, very common and degree of bleeding depends on the proficiency of the operator.

Acute urine retention for hours or days due to the fear of, pain or damage of the urethra, this may lead to urinary acts infection. In few cases, there may be dislocation of the hip joint if heavy pressure is applied to the struggling of the child. The risk of HIV transmission also exists.

CONCLUSION

The focus on health consequences is very paramount because in Yoruba culture, women have become socially conditioned to accept the practice and the pains it cause though the traditional practitioners are often aware of the health problems, but they make up myth to make women believe that these problems are normal. It has been identified by WHO (1996) that female circumcision has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the poor health of women. It is a man made problem that causes grave damage to women. Thus, WHO (1996) has led in the attempt to reduce its occurrence by legislation and by raising general awareness on its discomfort.

It has been discovered that female circumcision was not recommended nor enforced by any religion. There is no record in the Bible or Quran enforcing the practice to their followers hence, the practice therefore, has been found to have started as part of the trends of rituals of the past (Basher, 1982).

The arguments of those who practice it has been hinged on information and stories, which are told without serious foundation, though tradition held, but it is important that efforts be made by all to eliminate the harmful practice hence, this study recommend that: There should be health talk on the consequences of female circumcision at all levels. There is also, the need for more research into the problem of female circumcision, in which everyone should be involved.

It is also, important to involve traditional birth attendants, traditional circumcisers, mission maternity

homes in order to provide them with appropriate knowledge, which will enable them to research for the elimination of female circumcision in their communities.

Educational institutions too have a major role to play, particularly in biology and other related subjects. The students should be made to know the harmful effect of female circumcision. The education of women particularly on health matters is a very useful tool in loosening the hold of such harmful traditional practices. The role of government in her efforts to stop the practice of female circumcision should be more dynamic.

There is also, need for massive support of the medical professionals as this will in no small way bring about an effective and fruitful result and women will also be at peace (Eisanstahn, 1973).

REFERENCES

- Adeneye, A.K., 1995. Female Circumcision in South West: A Case of Owu Abeokuta, B.Sc. Thesis Department of Sociology Ogun State University, Ago Iwoye.
- Anika, R. *et al.*, 2000. Female Genital Mutilation: A Guide to laws and policies Worldwide. London: Zed Books.
- Atowaju, A., 2003. Paul of Tarsus. B. Print Publication, Lagos.
- Basher, T.A., 1982. Psychological Aspects of Female Circumcision WHO/EMRO Alexandria: Technical Publication.
- Buttrick, G.A., 1962. The Interpreter Dictionary of the Bible Vol. 1. Abingdon Press, New York.
- Eisanstahn, S.N., 1973. Tradition, Change and Modernity. John and Sons, New York.
- Oke, W., 1996. My People: Their Traditional Custom and Culture. Matanmi and Sons Ltd., Ilorin.
- Remodino, P.C., 1900. History of circumcision from the Earliest Times to the present: Moral and Physical Reasons for its Performance. Davis, F.A., New York.
- Shandal, A.A., 1967. Circumcision and Infibulations of Females. Sudan Medical Journal.
- Toubia, N., 1982. Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action. Woman Link, New York.
- WHO (World Health Organization), 1996. Female Genital Mutilation Report of a Technical Working Group. Vol. 1. Geneva: WHO.