

CHRIST'S SALVIFIC MESSAGE AND THE NANDI RITUAL OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

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[Female initiation rite is one of the many traditional practices found in some African communities. The many rituals during this time of initiation include female circumcision/female genital mutilation, a socially justified mark of maturation, dramatizing the break with childhood and incorporation into adulthood. This practice has received much criticism because of sexist, health, and human implications for woman's integrity. Christian missionaries to Africa condemned it as a barbaric practice, unnecessary for its believers. In spite of condemnations and various efforts to stop the practice, female circumcision persists among a number of Africans including Christians. The author here examines the gospel message, especially what Christ's salvific message means to the Nandi culture, and especially how the practice of female circumcision can be re-interpreted in the light of this message.]

FEMALE INITIATION RITE is one of the many traditional practices found in some African communities and one of the rites of passage in which every individual in a given community is expected to participate. Rites of passage form a significant part of African society. Individuals who do not take them seriously deny their cultural roots. Such persons are believed to draw upon themselves the wrath of the community and even the ancestors.

Of the many rituals that take place during the female initiation rite in various African communities, one is female genital mutilation. The term female genital mutilation is used to refer to the removal of part or all of the female genitalia. It consists of: (a) excision (the removal of all or part of the labia minora); (b) clitoridectomy (the removal of all or part of the clitoris); and (c) infibulation (the cutting of the labia majora to create raw surfaces, which are then all stitched or held together in order to form a cover over the vagina when they heal. A small opening is left to allow urine and

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menstrual blood to escape. Female circumcision is discussed here as a form of female genital mutilation.

Whereas female genital mutilation includes even the practice of infibulation, female circumcision refers only to excision and clitoridectomy. It is estimated that world-wide about 80 to 100 million girls and young women have undergone genital mutilation.¹ Although this practice is not found in all African countries, it is found in 28 out of 53 of them. Even in these countries, it is found only in certain communities.² Each African community has its set of customs required of every individual person. Whereas some communities practice female circumcision, others choose scarification of parts of the body (making marks on the body by use of sharp objects such as razors) and removal of the four front teeth.

In Africa, over 85 percent of genital mutilation consists of clitoridectomy or excision. This practice is traditionally justified as a mark of maturation, dramatizing the break with childhood and incorporation into adulthood.³

In Kenya, three forms of female circumcision are found in various communities. Excision is found among communities such as Akamba, Maasai, Kisii, and the Kalenjin. Infibulation is found among the Somali of the northern part of Kenya. Clitoridectomy is found among the Nandi, a sub-ethnic group of the Kalenjin ethnic group in the western part of the highlands of Kenya.

There is no law specifically prohibiting the practice. Government and hospitals are instructed by the Ministry of Health to cease the practice of female genital mutilation. A motion brought before the parliament seeking legislative authority to ban the practice was defeated by an overwhelming majority in November 1996.⁴

In the wake of feminism, women's liberation movements, and the preservation of human rights and dignity, female circumcision has been and still is an issue of debate. Health and sexist problems related to the practice call for at least a change in the rite, if eradication cannot be attained. The need for practical solutions is a contemporary need for communities that practice this rite.

¹ Aisha Samad Matias, "Female Circumcision in Africa," *Africa Update* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1996) 3 (<http://www.ccsu.ctstateu.edu/afsudy/upd3-2.html>) [accessed February 28, 1999].

² Adeline Apena, "Female Circumcision in Africa and the Problem of Cross Cultural Perspectives," *ibid.* (<http://www.ccsu.ctstateu.edu/afstudy/upd3-2html.p7>) [accessed February 28, 1999].

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969) 123.

⁴ See Philip Alston and Henry J. Steiner, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics and Morals* (New York: Oxford University, 1996) 246; and *Female Genital Mutilation-A Human Rights Information Pack* (<http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm9.htm>) [accessed November 16, 1998].

Realizing the health implications of this practice, Christian missionaries to Africa, women's liberation movements, and human rights advocates have condemned the practice as barbaric, savage, torturous, maiming, and sexist aimed at depriving African women of their femininity especially with regard to sexual sensitivity and pleasure.⁵ The main argument of these groups is that the rite is sexist and a violation of human rights of both children and women. It deprives women of their right to good health.⁶ Hence these groups have advocated an immediate stop to the practice.

In spite of these condemnations and calls for the eradication of this practice, it persists in many communities to this day.⁷ Lightfoot-Klein emphasizes this point when she argues that "mutilation has persisted among some converts to Christianity."⁸ Christian missionaries have tried to discourage the practice but found it to be deep-rooted. In some cases, in order to retain converts, missionaries had to ignore or even condone the practice.

One wonders why this practice has persisted despite all these condemnations and calls for eradication. Does it perhaps mean that those advocating its eradication have not sufficiently discerned the value attached to the ritual, the value that makes it so deep-rooted? Is it the attitude of those who condemn the practice that leads to this ineffectiveness? My argument is that lack of clear discernment of the value of this practice to the particular communities and the approach adopted have led to inefficacy to bring about change in the practice. Cultural practices are complex issues involving deep-seated beliefs and behavior that should be considered with utmost cognizance before making any conclusions about them. With this in mind I seek to examine the Nandi female initiation rite with the goal of suggesting a theological basis for its change and possible eradication. I argue that female circumcision among the Nandi can be eradicated by understanding its value for both the individual and the wider community as

⁵ Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) 15; Awa Thiam, *Black Sisters Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* (London: Pluto, 1989).

⁶ Efua Dorkenoo and Scilla Elworthy, *Female Genital Mutilation: Proposals for Change* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1992); Efua Dorkenoo and Hedley Rodney, *Child Protection and Female Genital Mutilation: Advice for Health, Education and Social Work Professionals* (London: FORWARD, 1992); Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context* 244–45.

⁷ Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) 188; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 130.

⁸ Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, "Erroneous Belief Systems Underlying Female Genital Mutilation in Sub-Saharan Africa and Male Neonatal Circumcision in the United States: A Brief Report Updated" 6 (<http://www.nocirc.org/symposia/third/hanny3.html>).

well as by attempting to give practical solutions that take into account the needs of these people.

From a theological view, I argue that since the practice has a religious implication for both the individual and the community, it is important that this be taken into account in addressing it. I adopt a theological strategy of contextualization whereby I propose appreciation of the practice in its context by interpreting it in the light of Christianity. By adopting Schreiter's idea of the role of the "insider" and "outsider," as a method of clear discernment of a people's way of life, I attempt to "listen" to the value the Nandi place on this practice.⁹ According to this approach, to discern a people's way of life, a member of that group must be given an opportunity to present that culture as an insider. This is the only means of discerning the philosophy behind certain practices that may be misconstrued from the surface value. However, the role of the "outsider" is also significant when it comes to application of study skills. In the case of contextualization, a trained theologian needs to work hand in hand with those from the target cultural community. In this article, I have employed ethnographic and liberation models of contextualizing theology that require both interviews with members of the Nandi community and a review of literature on female circumcision. Ethnographic methods look into the issues of identity and continuity. They aim at initiating a dialogue with the Christian tradition and local circumstances. Liberation methods, on the other hand, focus on social change and discontinuity. They are concerned with salvation, analyzing the lived experience of a people to uncover the forces of oppression, struggle, violence, and power. The Nandi women whom I interviewed serve as the "insiders" while literature on the practice and the salvific work of Christ serve as the "outsider." This information is analyzed in the face of social change taking place in contemporary communities.

I have adopted here two methods of study, namely library research and ethnographic observation. I have reviewed literature relevant to Nandi female circumcision and the redemptive nature of Christology with specific reference to its impact on Christology in Africa. I interviewed both traditional Nandi and Christian Nandi in order to engage them in my research.

In a genuine localization of theology, many aspects need to be considered such as gospel, Church, and culture.¹⁰ Here I examine the gospel, specifically Christ's salvific message and its pertinence for the Nandi culture of female circumcision. Christology relates to female suffering because Christ represents the essence of the Christian faith, and his redemptive message extends to all those under any form of oppression. Both the per-

⁹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 19 and 59–61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 22.

son of Christ as a historical figure and the works of Christ are important in the redemption of the oppressed.

My article seeks to achieve two objectives: (a) to explain the traditional values attached to the practice of female circumcision among the Nandi of Kenya; and (b) to attempt to relate to this cultural practice a contextual understanding of Christ's salvific message of atonement, liberation, and mediation. The significance of my article lies in the fact that, apart from affirming women's rights and dignity, I seek to recognize the cultural value attached to the practice. Attempts to eradicate female circumcision in Kenya have been fruitless.¹¹ Hence the need for better understanding of the reasons behind the persistence of the practice, and the need for suggesting practical solutions. To address the problem adequately, a religious perspective needs to be taken into consideration. Since Christianity is the major religion in Kenya, it is appropriate to search among Christian resources for ways to effect changes in this practice.

I address the practice of female circumcision only among the Nandi, but it is likely that the findings of my study can be generalized for other communities, when one considers basic similarities in the practices. In what follows, I discuss first, the Nandi female initiation rite, secondly, consequences and efforts toward eradication of female genital mutilation, and finally Christology and Nandi female circumcision.

NANDI FEMALE INITIATION RITE

My aim first is to discuss the Nandi female initiation rite with the objectives of outlining its value and more specifically the practice of female circumcision. Since the scope of my attempt cannot allow for a detailed discussion of all aspects of the practice, I focus on those aspects of the practice that help one to discern the religious significance inherent in the practice.

Nandi Female Initiation: A Description

The Nandi initiation rite is a practice considered mandatory in preparation for adulthood and housewifery.¹² The rite takes a prescribed period of time, usually three months. It involves a number of rituals and stages that must be followed unto their conclusion. It consists of training for endurance and corporate living in seclusion, imparting the community's knowledge, and undergoing physical labor to mark the initiation stage. Female

¹¹ Alston and Steiner, *International Human Rights* 246.

¹² Most of the information on this rite is derived from Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 122–27 and from interviews with members of the Nandi community.

circumcision is only one aspect of the female initiation rite. No woman is allowed to marry without going through it.

At ten years old, girls begin this process by sleeping outside their parents' house. They sleep in a house (*sikiroino*) built for this purpose with boys of their age or slightly older. This obligatory practice is meant to teach the girls how to control their sexual desires. No sexual intercourse is permitted, as the girls are examined for virginity just before circumcision. To refuse to sleep in the *sikiroino* would earn a girl a beating from boys without any interventions from her parents. Loss of virginity could earn her death by a spear.

At initiation time, girls at about the age of 14 are brought together for communal initiation. The boyfriends made at the *sikiroino* ensure that they adorn their girlfriends and encourage them to face initiation. Teachers and supervisors prepare them psychologically for the rite and accompany the girls to seclusion.

During seclusion, the girls are taught the meaning of the initiation rite for them as individuals and for the community at large. For instance, they are told that the practice is an ancient custom practiced by their forefathers, one that has become a source of identity for the community. They learn that non-participation in the practice is a violation of traditional rules that would easily draw upon them the wrath of the ancestors who are the guardians of the community. They are told that during circumcision, the cutting of the clitoris is physically good for them because it is dangerous for the health of a baby. They are told that during birth, if the baby's head touches the clitoris of its mother it will die or become abnormal. They are also told that the removal of the clitoris is important because if not removed it could make their husbands impotent when it touches the penis. They are also told that a girl who refuses to be circumcised will have her clitoris grow very long and develop branches.

They also learn that the shedding of blood during circumcision is important for the individual because it binds them not only with the living but also with the living dead. It is a source of blessings from the ancestors so that in marriage girls can be fertile. The girls are also told that refusal to undergo the practice may draw upon them the anger of the ancestors, an anger expressed in misfortunes such as barrenness, stillbirths, child death, and incurable illnesses including insanity. This is the central aspect that brings into female circumcision the religious aspect that points to the deep-rootedness of the practice.¹³

¹³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 123. See also interviews with Mrs. Alice Chepkwony, Benedette Koskei, Josephine Bungei, Magdaline Langat, Esther Chepchumba, Mary Rono, Gladys Chepketer, Salome Jemtai, Florence Koech, and Ruth Kisang available from the author.

Girls who refuse to undergo the practice are warned about the possibility of ostracization and rebuke by the whole community. They are threatened that uncircumcised girls will not get husbands because no man would want to marry such a girl.

All this information is internalized without question by the initiate. Fear of misfortune and rebuke from the community are usually unbearable. The teacher who is circumcised becomes a symbol of unity and a source of strength and comfort for the girls.

After the learning process, a dance is held for the girls and their boyfriends. Meanwhile the women who assist with the circumcision process prepare stinging nettles as they wait to begin the first stage of the circumcision procedure. The dance goes on until late into the night, a time when the girls are made to sit down with their legs wide open. Their clitorises are then tied tightly with ligament. The tying is meant to prevent flow of blood to the clitoris. After this, the girls are made to dance vigorously until they are completely worn out. They are then gathered together for a blessing from a traditional elder who prays that God and the spirits of the dead guide the whole ceremony by making the hands of the circumcisers "light" so that they will carry out their work effectively.

After the blessing, the girls are teased, scorned, and called cowards by their boyfriends, an action meant to stimulate bravery and courage in them. The girls respond by singing and dancing vigorously and announcing that they will be brave. The second part of the operation involves the stinging of clitorises with nettles. This makes them numb and swollen. Initiates' breasts are also stung by using nettles. This painful action has no religious import other than helping control the amount of blood flowing during circumcision. The women who apply the nettles sing very loudly to counteract any cry from the girls.

The following day, girls are examined for virginity and taken into a clear field where the actual circumcision takes place. Relatives, friends, and other members of the community stand about 150 meters away to watch the operation. The other women participants in the circumcision form a circle. In the middle are the operator's stool and the initiate's. The operator comes with a curved knife. A virgin girl sits on a stool for the operation while one who is not sits on the bare ground. The initiate sits with her legs apart, looking up to the sky. The operator holds the clitoris with her left hand and cuts it with her right. The circumciser then pours some traditional herb on the wound that causes excruciating pain. The girls are supposed to endure the pain as proof of their adulthood. They are then made to sit with their legs straight. It is argued that there is no pain at this stage since the sex organ is numb from the stinging nettles. In most cases, little bleeding takes place but there are cases when considerable hemorrhaging occurs, especially when blood vessels have not been properly tied. This could easily

lead to death. Such deaths remain secret. Initiators together with the parents of the girl bury the corpse secretly as this is considered a bad omen.

After the operation, the girls dress themselves as rumor spreads rapidly around the village concerning cowards—girls who screamed during the operation—and girls who are not virgins. Parents of such girls face embarrassment, and threaten to kill themselves or kill their daughters. Sometimes such girls commit suicide out of a sense of shame. Parents of cowardly and non-virginal girls burn a plant to express this. Courageous and virgin girls are congratulated and adorned with gifts. Parents of the initiates take home a climbing plant (*sinindet*) which they place at the door of the house to signify that their daughter has been initiated.

After this, the girls and the women supervisors and teachers go into a period of seclusion for three to six months. During this period initiates are given additional traditional education, knowledge, and wisdom. During the first four days, the girls—who are in much pain—are forced to drink and to eat meat to keep healthy. Since they cannot eat with their bare hands because they are considered impure, they use wooden spoons. During that whole time, they are secluded; if they have to go out, they are required to cover their heads and are warned especially to avoid being seen by men.

The instruction explains the importance of initiation to the community (both living and dead) and its relation to housework, marital life, and community. For instance, girls are taught how to be industrious, how to relate peacefully to other members of the community, how to treat their husbands respectfully, and how to submit to them always. They were also taught to refrain from sexual intercourse during pregnancy until the baby is able to walk. They were also taught how to be attractive wives and how to raise children. In accordance with the Nandi culture, men have nothing to do with children until they are ten years old. They do not even hold them. In fact, women and children are clamped together and referred to as men's children.¹⁴

After seclusion for about one to three months, the girls who have been overfed and educated in traditional wisdom come back to the village with a “complete revelation of mind, body and spirit.”¹⁵ They come out ready for marriage and other forms of adult responsibility. Most girls are betrothed and marry immediately thereafter.

Cultural Values of Nandi Female Initiation Rite

Nandi female initiation rites have distinct cultural values treasured by the community. The rite has social, religious, psychological, and sexual

¹⁴ Ibid. 123.

¹⁵ Ibid. 130.

values. Socially it is a rite of maturation, a dramatization of the break with childhood and incorporation into adulthood. It is an act of corporate existence in which every member of the community is expected to participate. It is a source of identity binding the initiate to a peer group. It symbolizes stability, respect, and continuation of the group as expressed in the obedience, docility, faithfulness, and maintenance of tradition by its females. This is a virtue cherished among women.

Religiously, it is a rite binding the individual and the community in a form of communion with each other. The sex organ is seen as a symbol of life and cutting it is like unlocking the issues of life so that thereafter there may be an unlocked flow of life. The flow of blood originating from circumcision is a binding act for the individual to both the community's living and the ancestors. It symbolizes a process of dying, living in the spirit world, and being reborn with blessings from that world. The rebirth which is the act of rejoining their families emphasizes newness in personality.

Psychologically, its communal character affects the way it is perceived by individuals. There is no individual concern as to its effect on the emotional part of some individuals such as the association of pain with difficulties in sexual experience.

Sexually, it is meant to control female sexuality by enhancing marital chastity. It thus limits possible enjoyment of sex for women. Traditionally it was explained that while men were allowed to have as many women as they could afford, women are not expected to be wayward. This practice was expected to help control their sexual desire. Some women approve of this practice since in deadening sexual desire they have no problem even when they are frustrated with their husbands.¹⁶ It served as a source of implanting fear of pain and promotion of virginity among girls and chastity in women.

These religious and psychological implications point to the fact that the rite is a communal rather than an individual activity. Community needs supersede the individual's needs. Among the Nandi, like most Africa communities, emphasis is placed on what benefits the community more than the individual. Mbiti has explained the significance of this communal aspect when he wrote that an individual African's self-understanding is that "I am because we are and because we are therefore I am."¹⁷ The emphasis placed on group solidarity and tradition over modern considerations explains why the practice persists today.

At the same time, individual needs, though submerged in the commu-

¹⁶ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, and Action*, ed. Ofelia Ortega (Geneva: WCC, 1995).

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2.

nity's needs, are important for personal fulfilment. Misfortunes and other religious implications attached to the practice explain the dilemma an individual may find herself in when faced with such a situation. It is difficult to convince a woman who is not circumcised that the death of every child of hers has nothing to do with her state and that the ancestors have nothing to do with it especially when she cannot otherwise explain what has befallen her. It is important to note that the Nandi also believe that misfortune can befall the circumcised if they offend the ancestors in other ways.

Consequences of Female Genital Mutilation

The debate about the practice of female genital mutilation arose from the perceived damaging consequences of the practice. Although there are social and religious values attached to female initiation rites, the consequences of some aspect of it, specifically circumcision, are not only a threat to a woman's physical health. They also have psychological, sexual, moral, and social implications. Here I now provide an overview of the consequences of female circumcision and efforts by various groups of people to eradicate the practice. I present the argument for the eradication of the practice by several interest groups, namely Christian missionaries, feminists and women's liberation movements, and human rights activists. I conclude by observing gaps that have not been addressed. While recognizing the value attached to the female initiation rite among the Nandi, I show how some practices in this rite are unhealthy and inimical to human dignity.

The physical consequences of female circumcision and other rituals surrounding it such as stinging the clitoris and breasts of the initiate woman with nettles are many. The surgical removal of part or all of the labia minora, clitoris, and labia majora are sources of excruciating pain and paralysing shock for the initiate. This practice is hazardous to health since it may lead to ongoing hemorrhaging and permanent damage to the sensitive and delicate organs surrounding the reproductive area. The initiate is exposed to chronic infections such as HIV/AIDS and tetanus, intermittent bleeding, abscesses and small benign tumors of the nerve that can result from clitoridectomy and excision. These cause extreme pain and unceasing discomfort. All these may lead to pelvic infection and even infertility. Even when these are undertaken under modern medical care, they are still physically uncomfortable.¹⁸

This rite also has sexual implications. The mutilation of the clitoris destroys the sensitive part of the reproductive organ and hence diminishes

¹⁸ Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, "The Sexual Experience and Marital Adjustment of Genital Circumcised and Infibulated Females in The Sudan," *The Journal of Sex Research* 26 (1989) 375-92.

sexual enjoyment for the woman. It reduces a woman's desire for sex and most importantly sexual pleasures and orgasm during intercourse.¹⁹ Mrs. Njeri, a defender of female circumcision, illustrates this point when she argues that "circumcision makes women clean, promotes virginity and chastity and guards young girls from sexual frustration by deadening their sexual appetite."²⁰ While her argument is meant to defend female circumcision, it reveals the oppressive nature of this practice on women's sexuality.

Psychological implications of the practice are also unhealthy to the individual person. Personal accounts of mutilation have revealed feelings of anxiety, terror, humiliation, and betrayal that may have long-term negative effects. It is argued by some experts that the shock and trauma of the operation may contribute to the behavior described as "calmer" and "docile," a behavior considered positive in societies that practice female genital mutilation.²¹ The painful experience leads to associations of sex with pain which diminishes pleasure. The only important positive psychological effect for the woman initiate is her feeling that she is socially acceptable for upholding her tradition.

Efforts toward Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation

Christian missionaries who came to Africa as early as the 19th century condemned female circumcision as a superstitious and barbaric African custom that should be eradicated immediately. Male converts in some churches were forced to sign that they would not circumcise their daughters or else face excommunication.²² Since this approach did not take into account the cultural and social values of this practice, it bore little fruits. Daughters of such Christians had to face ridicule and derision from their communities for failing to undergo the rite that culturally defined them as women. Teresa Hinga, an African theologian, explains that "many uncircumcised Protestant girls could not withstand the psychological torture, abuse and social ostracization that was poured upon them, and they were secretly circumcised anyway."²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ R. Katumba, "Kenyan Elders Defend Circumcision," *Development Forum*, September 1990, 17.

²¹ T. A. Baasher, "Psychological Aspects of Female Circumcision," *Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*, Report of a Seminar, 10–15 February 1979, WHO-EMRO Technical Publication 2 (Alexandria, Egypt: WHO, 1979) 105.

²² Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," in *The Will to Arise* 188.

²³ Ibid.

The defeat of this mission was displayed in the attitude of some churches. For instance, churches that were losing those converts who still believed in female circumcision—such as the Scottish Protestant Church, established in Kenya since 1920—eventually resorted to active support or toleration of female circumcision in order to retain converts.²⁴

Feminists and women's liberation movements have argued that female circumcision is a torturous and maiming practice aimed at depriving African women of their femininity, especially regarding sexual sensitivity and pleasure. They trace its origin to the patriarchal social structure in which everything including women is used by men not as ends in themselves but as means to an end. They see female circumcision as a rite designed by men to control women's sexual pleasure. Citing reasons behind infibulation, they see the practice as purely sexist, oppressive, and meant to control women's sexuality.²⁵ This practice, originating from the patriarchal attitude that women are tools to be used by men, does not consider how women feel. Feminists argue that the practice should be abandoned. As the Christian missionaries, feminists have advocated the need to change this practice on the grounds of its sexist connotations and negative health consequences. In their analysis of patriarchy, they have charged men as oppressors promoting sexism. This approach has been ineffective in Africa as it is easily viewed as advocating revolution against men. It has been resisted in Africa because it is seen as alien to the people and is perceived as confrontational. Hinga explains that "while African women acknowledge the oppression by men they do not use the direct method of throwing stones, reasoning that would pose a threat to women's solidarity."²⁶

Similarly an approach that does not appreciate a people's cultural practice but rather regards it as inferior or primitive is bound to meet resistance. Whereas Hinga is probably correct about African solidarity as an issue in the failure of the feminists' method for condemning sexism, the problem facing African women is closely related to their dependence on men for basic needs. It is difficult to confront those who provide the source of one's food. Economic power is an important factor in the success of a confrontational method. That is why it cannot work in Africa. Human rights activists have argued for the eradication of this practice on the grounds that it violates women's human rights, the rights of children, and the right to good health for all individuals. They argue that the practice is contrary to article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which

²⁴ Fran P. Hosken, "Stop Female Genital Mutilation: Women Speak Facts and Actions," *Win News* (Lexington, Mass., 1995).

²⁵ See Lightfoot-Klein, "The Sexual Experience and Marital Adjustment of Genital Circumcised."

²⁶ Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa" 188.

provides that no one shall be subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.²⁷

As a violation of women's human rights, female circumcision is an example of the general subjugation of women. It goes against the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.²⁸ In 1988, the United Nations sub-commission for the prevention of discrimination and the protection of minorities adopted a resolution declaring that female circumcision violates the human right of women and children.²⁹

Regarding the rights of children, human rights advocates argue that the girls who undergo circumcision are still children since they are normally between the ages of eight and fourteen. As children they have not formed judgment to consent to the practice. Therefore, they simply undergo the operation (which is irrevocable) while they are totally vulnerable. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which went into force in September 1990 condemned this practice under article 24(3) that states that "state parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children."³⁰

With regard to the right to good health, it is unanimously agreed both among human rights advocates and their medical counterparts that mutilation is not good for the physical or mental health of girls and women. Every human being is entitled to good health.

Admittedly, human rights advocates present very sound arguments for the need of eradicating female circumcision and genital mutilation as a whole. However, they also pay little attention to the complex religious and social values attached to the practice. Although the missionaries, feminist and women's liberation movements as well as human rights advocates have done a good job in pioneering efforts toward eradication of female genital mutilation, their ineffectiveness lies in their lack of discernment of a significant aspect in the female initiation rite, namely its religious value.

Interviews with some of my respondents regarding the reasons for the persistence of the practice revealed that although women and other members of society are becoming increasingly aware of its unpleasant physical and social consequences, the continued practice hinges on its religious value. A Mrs. Chepkwony, for instance, argued that most females who undergo the practice do it out of fear of the misfortunes that might befall

²⁷ See Alston and Steiner, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* 246; also Universal Declaration of Human Rights Document.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Michael J. Perry, "Are Human Rights Universal? The Relativist Challenge and Related Matters," *Human Rights Quarterly* 19 (1997).

³⁰ Alston and Steiner, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* 244-45.

them, such as infertility, death of children at birth or at a later stage, and unexplained illnesses usually attributed to the wrath of the ancestors.³¹ The fear of infertility in African communities is connected to the importance attached to procreation and immortality in the African community.³²

Important to acknowledge is the communal aspect of African communities and the influence it has on individual decisions. My respondents argued that some women participate in the practice merely because a neighbor or certain groups of people are doing it. The practice is important too because the ancestor practiced it. No questions are raised when it comes to traditional practices. Also, the issue of illiteracy cannot be overlooked. Since most women in Kenya are illiterate, they are unaware of the health hazards that this practice poses. Because of illiteracy they are unable to discern that infertility is not a result of misfortune but a biological factor. All these factors need to be taken into account in addressing the issue of female circumcision.

THE SALVIFIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST FOR NANDI FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

In what follows, I now attempt to give a Christological view of female circumcision. In particular I examine Christ's salvific mission as the atonement for sin and as liberator and mediator between God and man. In my view, this can be used to critique Nandi female circumcision.³³

Christ and Redemption of Humanity

For Christians the Christ event is of central importance because of its significance in their lives. Christ represents in time God's external expression and manifestation. The doctrine of Christology has been formulated in Christian theology as an attempt to respond to Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?"³⁴ The doctrine aims at making Christ relevant to individual persons or communities in different cultural contexts. The classical doctrine of Christ emphasizes the nature of Christ as both human and divine. More central to the person of Christ is who he was and his message for humanity. Christians throughout the centuries have connected belief in

³¹ See names cited in n. 13.

³² See detailed discussion in Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 25 ff.

³³ I am aware of the debate about symbols and images of Christ as male and White and how these symbols affect the salvific perception of Christ. However, I do not intend to enter this debate because it is beyond the scope of this study. I focus on the classical Chalcedonian understanding of Christ with the intention of interpreting him for women today.

³⁴ See, Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

Christ with benefits of his coming into the world as savior. Every section of Christian opinion affirms the uniqueness and finality of the death and Resurrection of Christ. For humanity the cross is the focus of redemption.

Christology is becoming increasingly significant because of the recognition that unless the gospel of Christ addresses a people's concrete needs, it will remain unsatisfying and meaningless. Jacqueline Grant is correct in arguing that when theology and Christology are contextualized the oppressed become actual participants in the process rather than mere recipients of theological and Christological dogma.³⁵ Aylward Shorter also argues that the death and Resurrection of Christ can be a starting point of understanding the christological bias of inculturation. In other words, in death and Resurrection Christ transcended all cultural barriers and is able to speak to all cultures. He argues further that Jesus in his earthly existence was limited in his contact with other cultures, but that after the Resurrection, he was able to identify with other cultures through the proclamation of the good news. In this way Christ affirms the continuity of Christianity with other cultures.³⁶ The meaning of salvation in Christ has been interpreted in various ways. In what follows I focus on Christ as mediator, atonement for sin, and liberator from evil.

Christ as Mediator

Christians believe that Christ is the incarnation of God. As divine incarnate, Christ is a representation of how close God is to humanity. In Christ, God revealed himself to humankind and made himself close to humanity, denouncing the need to get to him through other mediums. God through Christ entered into relationship with humanity directly. Through Christ's personality, God's reconciling work for humanity is achieved. He bridges the gulf that existed between humans and God. Humans no longer need to get to God through other mediums since through Christ they are capable of speaking to him directly. As John indicates in his Gospel, Christ is the only way. Through Christ, Christians communicate with God directly since all barriers of sin and guilt that separated them are removed.³⁷

Christ as Atonement of Sin

The word atonement as used in reference to the redemptive work of Christ means reconciliation, propitiation, and expiation.³⁸ As an act of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 84–87.

³⁷ Ibid. 71.

³⁸ Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacrament* (New York: Abingdon, 1960) 8.

atonement, Christ's death on the cross is believed to have brought humanity closer to God. Scriptures portray Christ's death and Resurrection as sacrificial for the atonement of humanity's sin. His life is described as a ransom for many. For example in Hebrews 10:5–31, Christ is said to have come as a sacrificial Lamb of God in fulfilment of the Old Testament predictions. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). This is interpreted to mean that whatever sacrificial victims were once offered under the Law in order to atone for sins were substituted by the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Christ is the substitution for all these sacrifices that were ineffective.³⁹ The blood of Christ is seen as an act of expiation to the Father, and a symbol of a new covenant between humanity and God. The sacrifice of Christ is effective insofar as believers are assured of safety in Christ and God forever. In this sacrifice, the righteous receives permanent salvation and is reconciled to God daily.⁴⁰ His sacrificial blood is seen as a perfect cleansing for all our sins. The cross is therefore a significant aspect in the salvation story of Jesus.

Christ as Liberator

Christ's salvific significance is also portrayed as a victor who conquers the foes of his people, namely the devil, death, sin, and the world as a whole.⁴¹ Liberation refers to the removal of all that keeps humanity in bondage, all that makes a human being less than what God intended him or her to be. In commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:5–7, Calvin for example described Christ as liberator in this way. "Christ has conquered sin," he wrote "and by his conquest has obtained the victory for us, and redeemed us from the curse of the law."⁴² Christ demonstrated his victory and authority over Satan and the forces of evil by the expulsion of demons.

His way of dealing with social political ills in his time was a demonstration of how humanity ought to deal with social, political, and economic structures of the world. His conquest of death at his Resurrection was an action affirming authority over earthly structures and forces. The result of deliverance is the liberty of the suffering children of God. In his own words, Jesus said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to announce good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery for the blind."⁴³ To accept Jesus' message of lib-

³⁹ Lucien Richard, *Christ the Self Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist, 1997) 65.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 70. See also C. F. D. Moule, *The Sacrifice of Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 7.

⁴¹ Richard, *Christ the Self Emptying of God* 46–47.

⁴² Ibid. 47.

⁴³ As quoted by Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Christology," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: S.P.C.K., 1987) 75.

eration demands a radical conversion from old ways of perceiving reality and renouncing all sinful and oppressive aspects in one's life. Liberation therefore means deliverance from fear, uncertainty, sickness, and evil powers. It means freedom from foreign domination and oppression, distortion of God's humanity, poverty and want that characterize social economic and political spheres.

Christ and the Nandi Female Circumcision Rite

The Nandi, like other African people, have adopted Christianity as part of their faith. About 80 percent of them profess Christianity.⁴⁴ At the same time the Nandi have high regard for their initiation rites. This they manifest in their retaining traditional practices despite professing to be Christians. To the Nandi therefore both Christianity and their culture are significant parts of their lifestyles. This being the case, it goes without saying that the Nandi require a Christian affirmation of their traditional way of life for them to feel at home with Christianity. It is this need that calls for contextualization of Christianity in this part of the world.

Obviously the female initiation rite is a custom that has been in existence for a long time. With it the Nandi feel a sense of claiming their identity as a people. Admittedly, it is a rite of maturation, dramatizing a break with childhood and incorporation into adulthood. It is an act symbolizing corporate existence as well as identifying the Nandi with their traditional belief in ancestral spiritual life. Appreciation is also made of the fact that non-participation in this rite can lead to social stigma, ostracization, and even a barrier to marriage for the individuals concerned.

However, given the dangerous implications of this rite for the individual woman, as have been outlined, there is a need to reconsider some aspects of the practice. Total abandonment of the practice may be difficult since it is part and parcel of a people's way of life that has significance for them. Yet, Nandi culture, like other cultures of the world, is dynamic and liable to change. Change in cultures sometimes takes place by discarding certain outdated and unimportant practices and adopting more meaningful values. The modern world, home to Christianity, is also characterized by scientific knowledge that has either invalidated or disproved some of the traditional practices. In this context, the Nandi, in my view, need to reconsider those aspects of their rites that are unhealthy, outdated, and untenable in the face of the modern world. Some aspects of the Nandi initiation rite, specifically female circumcision, should be eradicated in the light of what Christ's salvific message means for both the individual and the community today.

To establish whether Nandi women are themselves aware of the redemp-

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 224.

tive mission of Christ, I interviewed a group of Christian Nandi women. The questions I asked were generally about what Christ means to them and the impact of their Christian belief on their view of female circumcision. What follows is a summary of various responses. Chepkwony sees Christ as a personal savior. He frees her from fear of any evil force and tradition. For this reason, she no longer believes in female circumcision. According to Koech, Christ is a source of courage for her. He enables her to face the challenges of life. He is a friend who has never let her down. When forsaken by others, even close relatives, Christ is there for her. Because of this, she is capable of saying no to circumcision. Mrs. Rotich sees Christ as everything for her. In Christ she is able to attain anything in this world and so she fears nothing. As for circumcision, she argues that she does not mind it because it is her culture and does not condemn those who practice it so long as it is out of their own choice. Mrs. Bungei, on the other hand, argues that to her Christ is her conqueror of every evil and suffering. Although she may experience suffering here on earth she knows that her suffering means nothing to her so long as she believes in Christ. She believes that when time comes she will have peace in heaven. For her circumcision is an earthly thing and therefore does not disturb her faith in God. Participating in it or not does not make a difference in what God requires of humanity. She cites Paul's denunciation of the Jewish tradition of circumcision that was required of all Jewish believers. She believes that Christ's blood has washed all this away. Mrs. Koskei argues that for her Christ is her comforter in trouble as well as a friend who never lets one down. She does not like female circumcision because she has never understood why women are made to go through such a painful experience. However, she leaves it to the individual to choose what she wants for herself. Asked as to what she thinks about it now that she is a Christian, Koskei said she strongly feels that Christians should not go through circumcision, because it is no longer relevant to them. To her Christians belong to a different worldview.⁴⁵

These responses revealed that Nandi women are aware of the mission of Christ as redeemer and they see this mission being fulfilled in their lives. They see Christ as a savior, a friend, and a source of consolation and courage for them. This confirms what the Africa theologian Nasimiyu-Wasike discovered when she interviewed women from a community different from the Nandi. They too affirmed their belief in Christ as savior, comforter, and as a source of courage.⁴⁶

My interviews tell us how these Nandi women gained access to the

⁴⁵ See n. 13 above.

⁴⁶ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 72-73.

various images of Christ as enshrined in the New Testament. Hinga's summary of the perception of Christ by African women sums up well what the Nandi women believe about Christ. She presents three quite common perceptions of Christ in Africa. First, they see Christ as a personal savior and friend. Jesus is perceived as one who accepts them as they are and meets their needs at a very personal level. They have the image of Christ as one who helps them bear their grief, loneliness, and suffering. Second, they see him as the embodiment of the spirit, the power of God and the dispenser of the same to those who follow him. He is the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless. Third, they see him as the iconoclastic prophet who conquers and criticizes the status quo that engenders social injustices. He champions the cause of the voiceless.⁴⁷

Taking into consideration the Nandi women's perception of Christ and the spiritual witness to the mission of Christ as mediator, atonement of sins, and liberator between the human being and God, we find this message speaking to the Nandi women and the Nandi community in three particular ways. First, whereas the female initiation rite is acknowledged as significant in the Nandi community, there are aspects that are outdated in the face of Christ as mediator, guarantor of atonement for sin, and liberator. As an act of mediation between ancestors and God, communion with the ancestors that forms the most significant aspect of the female initiation rite is outdated. Nandis as Christians need not commune with the ancestors so that the latter may mediate for them. In Christ as the final mediator between them and God, the power of the ancestors is rendered insignificant. In Christ they experience the closeness of God to them through his Incarnation and so they can reach him directly.

Second, by Christ's message of atonement, he became the ransom of many including the Nandi. As the Lamb of God, his blood shed on the cross, was a seal to the shedding of any other form of blood in order to receive blessings from God. His blood is the last and final sacrifice by God and in him all the sacrifices are deemed unnecessary. Therefore, belief in Christ as the last who shed blood in suffering for the sake of humanity's salvation calls for the end of the Nandi's blood shedding. The spirits of the dead are powerless in Christ.

Christ as liberator frees the Nandi from all practices that cause suffering and dehumanize them. Any practice that perpetuates oppression of any human being is condemned. Christ says to the Nandi that "The Spirit of the Lord is upon him because he has been anointed by God to announce good news to them and to proclaim release for all who are in all forms of bondage. Cultural practices can be bondage if they are oppressive and inhuman. He seeks the empowerment of those who have not been able to

⁴⁷ Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa" 190-91.

see how oppressive their culture is.”⁴⁸ To women, Christ affirms their human worth before God. This is seen in his way of relating to women in the Scripture. Christ recognizes the fact that women too should live a fulfilling life. Through his healing ministry during which he healed a woman with a hemorrhage, it is clear that women too should lead physically healthy lives. Therefore, women need to lead lives devoid of oppression. Practices such as female circumcision though traditionally acceptable are unhealthy, sexist, and outdated in the current situation. Female circumcision as Jewish circumcision has lost its validity for those who believe in Christ.

In Christ all fears are conquered. The Nandi need not fear misfortunes that supposedly arise from noncompliance with traditional practices such as female circumcision. In Christ, all evil powers are rendered powerless. Nasimiyu-Wasike reiterates this same argument when she writes that Africans believe that Christ has saved them from the reality of witches and evil powers.⁴⁹ Belief in Christ is to be under his protection from any form of misfortune or power.

As mediator between humanity and God, Christ replaces the role that the Nandi ancestors played in seeking blessings from God. Christ’s mediation surpasses all mediation from the ancestors. Through Christ, the Nandi are capable of praying to God either directly or through Christ. Either way, they will receive his blessings. Among the Nandi community, Jesus Christ therefore plays the traditional role of the intermediary. Given all the three salvific conceptions of Christ’s message for humankind including the Nandi, one can see the prophetic power of belief in Christ for the Nandi.

Christianity, it is important to stress, does not advocate the total eradication of the Nandi female initiation rite. Rather it advocates the need to eradicate the practice of circumcision that involves clitoridectomy and excision because it is physically unhealthy and does not conform to Christian teaching. The initiation rite can continue to be practiced and the actual circumcision can be replaced by some other symbolic acts not harmful to women’s bodies. This can be derived from the culture itself or Scripture that now forms part of the Nandi way of life. For example, the reading of Scripture to the initiates can be used to mark a covenant that involves the initiate, God, and the community.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to provide a theological contextualization process seeking to interpret Christ’s salvific significance in the Nandi female initiation rite. I have given a description of the Nandi female initiation rite, focusing

⁴⁸ Rephrased from the quotation in Appia-Kubi, “Christology” 75.

⁴⁹ Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christology and an African Woman’s Experience” 73.

especially on the cultural values associated with it. Apart from the rite having a great significance for the individual and community at large, I have shown that it has physical, social, and religious implications. I have outlined some of the consequences of female circumcision, highlighting the health hazards associated with it and the social pressures that make it persist. In my view, all of these are aspects that need to be considered in any discussion of changing or transforming the rite.

Secondly, I have described various efforts toward eradication of female genital mutilation of which female circumcision is part. I have shown why the Christian missionaries' effort failed, mainly because they were motivated by the zeal to redeem Africa from the state of savagery and apparent godlessness without paying attention to the cultural values that Africans attached to this practice. Feminists' efforts have similarly failed because of the approach they adopted in denouncing the practice. As Kanyoro indicates, an approach that points fingers at others with the intention of showing that a particular practice is inferior, is a non-starter in Africa.⁵⁰ Rather, an ideal method for the African would call for collective solidarity engaging every member in society. It is this gap in the feminist approach that I seek to fill by adopting a Christian theological approach that addresses the community as a whole.

Thirdly, I have also shown how human rights advocates have rightly sought the eradication of the practice on the basis of women's and children's rights, specifically the right to physical health. However, their failure to consider the religious value associated with it also left a significant gap that needs addressing if this practice is to be transformed. I try to address this gap with a theological process of contextualization.

Finally, I have argued that the female initiation rite is a complex rite embedded in a people's social religious way of life. Efforts to change or eradicate it need to take into account the cultural value attached to it. Efforts based solely on health and individual needs leave out significant communal and religious aspects essential to the African context. Such communal dimensions play a crucial role in individual decision-making.

Whereas it is important to acknowledge the worth of female circumcision as a cultural practice, I agree with those who advocate its eradication. From a theological and specifically christological view, I argue that Christ's message of redemption renders the practice outdated and meaningless. However, the same message affirms all aspects that are in line with the Christian life. In other words, while Christ in his redemptive message affirms the Nandi cultural practices as important to the people, he also condemns aspects of the same culture that dehumanize and oppress the

⁵⁰ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution" 22.

children of God. This is to say that Christ affirms the Nandi identity so long as the Nandi can also validate Christian identity in their culture.

My conclusion is that the practice of female circumcision should be changed and eradicated while the initiation rite should be continued. This could happen if the circumcision rite could be replaced somehow by scripturally affirming Christ's identity with Nandi culture. This would ensure that while the Nandi uphold their traditional values, they do so in a Christian way.