

## REASONS FOR FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AMONG SOME ETHNIC GROUPS IN BENDEL STATE, NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT** This study documents and analyses the reasons for female circumcision among 5 communities in Bendel State of Nigeria. The commonest reason given for female circumcision is the strong desire to continue the custom or tradition. Other reasons given for the practice in terms of preference are, to protect babies during delivery, for aesthetic or cosmetic purposes, to enhance reproduction, as well as to increase or decrease sexual urge of women. However, the authors hold the view that those explanations given for female circumcision are subsumed under the issue of patriarchy or male-dominance, as well as under class and gender problems. Also this study is intended to provide the basis for planning the strategies essential for the eradication or elimination of the practice.

**Key Words:** Class and gender; Female circumcision; Patriarchy; Sexuality; Bendel State; Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

Female circumcision has been the subject of considerable publicity and impassioned pleas, often emphasizing the most serious cases of excision and infibulation (Taba, 1980; Verzin, 1975). Feminists see female circumcision as oppressive and brutal custom to women and as a means by which men in patriarchal societies keep their women in subordinate, secondary position (Hosken, 1976, 1979). Health practitioners advocate for its abolition because of its medical complications (Egwuatu, 1981). Anthropologists have been accused of covering up such an inhumane practice because of their insalient treatment when describing these cultures (Lyons, 1981). Religions denominations have failed to denounce female circumcision for fear of discouraging new converts (Davis, 1971). All in all, it has been suggested that "the starting point towards a sustained programme of eradicating female genital operations in Nigeria has to be through a well-ordered research" (Ogunmodede, 1983). The underlying assumption is that an adequate and effective campaign can be raised through an understanding of the reasons why the people indulge in this practice.

This paper which is a part of an on going research on Female Circumcision document intends to analyse the reasons for female circumcision among 5 ethnic groups of Bendel State in Southern Nigeria. In the previous paper (Myers, R. K. et al., 1985) the authors examined the nature and practice of circumcision among the same groups.

This paper, however, intends an indepth examination and analysis of the reasons given for circumcision by the subjects.

The analysis is of two fold. It consists of the documentation and interpretation of the reasons for female circumcision as reported by the respondents, and of the researchers' views and interpretation of the practice.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

Bendel State, formerly Mid-Western State, is located along the western side of River Niger. The state contains a complex assortment of languages and ethnic groups. The major ones of which are Bini, Urhobo and Igbo. Others are Esan, Etsako, Isoko, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Owan. The state is a salad bowl of cultures, sandwiched between large Yoruba and Igbo populations to the west and east respectively. Considerable ethnographic works have been conducted on the several peoples and it is necessary to consult them for a fuller understanding of their customs and for interpretation of the cultural contexts of which circumcision is a part (Ita, 1971; Basden, 1966; Leis, 1972; Okojie, 1960; Bradbury, 1957, 1960; Egharevba, 1949).

The groups surveyed are located in the tropical rain forest and delta regions of southern Nigeria and share several socio-cultural characteristics. They are all patrilineal, polygynous societies where the residence after marriage is patri- or virilocal. The dominant economic activity of the forest people (Bini, Esan, Etsako) is shifting agriculture, especially the production of yams and cassava on small plots. Peoples in the riverine delta of the Niger River mix fishing activities with forest cultivations. The Ukwuani people, a member of the larger western Igbo group in Bendel State, live in autonomous villages as do Esan and Etsako, who trace their origins to the highly centralized Bini Kingdom. Historically and linguistically, the Esan and Etsako are closely related to the Bini. Age grades and age sets of males play an important role in the Bini. Esan and Etsako villages, while work groups are more important in the Ukwuani (Ita, 1971; Bradbury, 1957).

Traditional and Christian religions are dominant among the Bini, Esan, Ukwuani, and Ijaw villagers, while, due to the Nupe wars of the last century, Islam is widespread among the Etsakos (Elakhe, 1963). According to our samples 94% of the Bini and 67% of the Ukwuani follow traditional beliefs, while 75% of the Esans, 82% of the Ijaw are Christians, 94% of the Etsakos are Muslim (Myers et al., 1985).

Systematic surveys were conducted in 5 rural, homogenous ethnic communities. Pretested questionnaires were administered by trained assistants in the language of the community to peoples in Obadan (Bini), Okhuesan (Esan), Ubiane (Etsako), Onicha-Ukwuani (Ukwuani) and Burutu (Ijaw). These villages were selected as representatives of their particular cultures because of their general similarity in size (population 2000-3000), and because either the authors or the interviewers had associations in the villages making interviews easier and responses more reliable. The study is a retrospective survey, data of which are subject to the problems of recall and accuracy. We did not conduct physical examination on the respondents to verify the exact nature or extent of circumcisions. Most respondents were very cooperative

about being interviewed on the topic. However, because of the imprecision in description, some questions such as “what part of the private parts is cut?” concerning the extent of circumcision, resulted in a high number of “don’t know” answers.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Age of Circumcision

Table 1 shows that variations exist in the age of circumcision of female respondents. These variations arise from cultural preferences for the time of circumcision. These cultural preferences ranged from below one year (Bini) to during adolescence (Esan and Etsako) or prior to marriage (Ijaw) to during a woman’s first pregnancy (Ukwani), among the respondents. On the contrary, the circumcision of their daughters ranged from below one year (Bini and Esan), to prior to marriage (Etsako), to during adolescence (Ijaw and Ukwani). This pattern of circumcision shows a clear tendency for the children of the respondents to be circumcised at the earlier age than their parents.

Irrespective of the variations in the age of circumcision between the respondents and their daughters, a good number of the children (290) are being circumcised. This trend shows that the number of circumcision of females is relatively high among these ethnic groups. However, the circumcision of females among the Etsako people is only symbolic because it entails an incision on the thigh or the removal of a part of the public hair. This practice reflects the desire of the men in the society to preserve the cultural tradition even in a symbolic form.

Moreover, the change in age of circumcision may have arisen from the desire of the adults to maintain the secrecy. As such, an operation performed at an earlier age will reduce the exposure of the individual and the community at large to scrutiny and ridicule from other peoples. In addition, there is a tendency for young immature girls to bear more pain than adults. Consequently, while females are still being circumcised, the age of circumcision continues to become earlier.

### 2. Reasons for Female Circumcision

Undermining the controversies surrounding female circumcision, women, girls and

Table 1. Age at circumcision of female respondents and/or 1st and last daughter by ethnic groups.

Range	Bini		Esan		Etsako		Ijaw		Ukwani	
	F	C	F	C	F	C	F	C	F	C
0-1 year	14	75	7	55	0	4	0	2	0	25
1-5 years	7	16	0	4	2	4	1	3	0	1
6-10 years	0	2	8	6	0	0	2	3	0	1
11-15 years	1	0	2	5	6	5	1	8	9	20
16-20 years	0	0	3	0	22	41	5	1	8	9
20 years and above	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	22	93	21	70	30	54	10	17	17	56

F: Adult female; C: Female child.

children are still being circumcised daily in various parts of the world. It is necessary to examine what has made such practice survive in modern ages. From the data collected, the reasons given for female circumcision can be classified into 6 broad categories (Table 2). These categories are as follows: Custom, to protect the baby, aesthetic or cosmetic, to enhance reproduction, to increase or to decrease sexual interest.

### (1) Custom

From Table 2, custom is the commonest reason given for female circumcision (44.8%). Of these respondents, Ijaw has the highest response of 60%, Etsako 58%, Ukwuani 46.0%, Bini 36% and Esan 24.0%. These respondents argue that female circumcision is the practice which links one generation to another. It is seen as an age-old practice which remains highly valued by the people. Among the Etsako people, the respondents say that the surgery is symbolically executed by either cutting a part of the pubic hair or by making a little incision on the thigh of the girl or woman. The practice continues in these communities because they are yet to identify any detrimental effect of the practice. They also believe that the failure to keep the practice going is likely to provoke their ancestors. The ancestors show their discontent by either inflicting illness or hardship in one form or another on the people. The practice, therefore, will be continued in order to keep the tradition of the people and to keep the dead ancestors in good term with the living.

### (2) To protect baby

Table 2 shows that about 21.6% of the respondents cited the safe delivery of the baby as another important reason for circumcising females. Of the respondents who cited the reason, 44% of the Bini subjects held this view, Ukwuani 28.1%, followed by Esan 24%, Etsako 6.0% and Ijaw 6.0%. In general the people believe that "the baby may fail to cry at birth or may get sick and die soon after birth on contact

Table 2. Respondents reasons in percent for female circumcision distribution by (ethnic group) community.

Reasons given for circumcision	Ethnic groups											
	Total		Beni		Esan		Etsako		Ijaw		Ukwuani	
	N*	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Custom	112	44.8	18	36.0	12	24.0	29	58.0	30	60.0	23	46.0
To protect baby	54	21.6	22	44.0	12	24.0	3	6.0	3	6.0	14	28.0
Aesthetic or cosmetic	37	14.8	3	6.0	12	24.0	5	10.0	7	14.0	10	20.0
To enhance reproduction	26	10.4	5	10.0	9	18.0	9	18.0	2	4.0	1	2.0
To decrease sexual pleasure	12	4.8	2	4.0	4	8.0	3	6.0	2	4.0	1	2.0
To increase sexual interest	9	3.6	—	—	1	2.0	1	2.0	6	12.0	1	2.0
Total	250	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0

\*No. of subjects who gave this reason for female circumcision.

with the clitoris". Infant death results from his contact with the clitoris because it can cause mystical, spiritual injury, or accidental death. There is a strong belief among these people that women with living babies must have had circumcision. The credence of this explanation becomes doubtful among the Esan respondents as some women claim their daughters are circumcised when in reality they are not. This claim is based on the belief to prevent the influence of witchcraft during child-birth.

### (3) Aesthetic or cosmetic

Aesthetic or cosmetic reason to increase social acceptance is often given for the circumcision of females (14.8%). The Esan respondents have the highest rate of 24%, Ukwuani 20%, Ijaw 14.0%, Estako 10% and Bini 6% (Table 2). The respondents argue that circumcision becomes necessary because daughters with enlarged or exposed clitoris are prone to ridicule from peers or playmates when playing under moonlight or swimming in nude. Also, an enlarged exposed clitoris is considered to be ugly. It is such urge to correct or to prevent unsightliness that calls for the practice. Therefore, the practice will save the young girls or women from ridicule. The surgery also makes the genitals beautiful.

Consequently, surgeons, they claim, aim at producing a smooth skin surface. Surgeons try to make the circumcised women cleaner and less prone to infection.

### (4) To enhance reproduction

Enhancement of reproductive ability is the fourth reason for female circumcision (10.4%). Female circumcision is believed to facilitate pregnancy. The respondents argue that sexual intercourse with uncircumcised women is difficult. Of the subjects interviewed, 18% of Esan respondents cited enhancement of reproduction as a reason, as did 18% Estako, 10% of the Bini respondents, 4% of the Ijaw and 2% of the Ukwuani (Table 2). The respondents argue that this reason is important because marriages blessed with children are more respected and encouraged to remain intact than childless marriages.

### (5) To decrease sexual interest

In the formal interviews 4.8% of the respondents mentioned that to decrease sexual interest is a reason for female circumcision. The Esan respondents have the highest rate of 8% followed by Estako 6%, Ijaw 4%, Bini 4% and Ukwuani 2% (Table 2). The argument prevailing among the respondents is that to leave women uncircumcised is to make them highly sexually sensitive and prone to early sexual relations. They argue that uncircumcised women are easily aroused as men, and this exposes them easily to sex. Therefore, the operation is done because of the importance the people place on paternity of children.

### (6) To increase sexual pleasure

3.6% of the respondents believe that female circumcision shapes a woman's sexuality by increasing her sexual pleasure (Table 2). Among the communities studied,

**Table 3.** Complication following circumcision of respondents' daughters by ethnic group.

Ethnic group	Children circumcised No.	Number of persons suffering from complications	
		No.	%
Bini	204	7	3.43
Esan	104	2	1.92
Etsako	79	1	1.27
Ijaw	22	—	—
Ukwani	83	2	2.41
Total	492	12	9.03

the Ijaw community ranked highest with 12%, followed by Ukwani 2%, Etsako 2% and Esan 2% while no Bini respondent cited this as a reason for female circumcision. This relatively high frequency is interesting, if it is compared with the fact that only 4.8% cited decreased sexual interest.

### 3. Complication of Female Circumcision

Respondents reported very few complications for their daughter. Table 3 shows that among the 492 daughters circumcised, 12 suffered from complication, such as excessive bleeding and infection. This results in the complication rate of 2.4%. Bini female children with 3.43% complication rate were at greater risk than any other group. Following Bini female children were Ukwani with 2.41%, Esan 1.92% and Etsako 1.27%. The Ijaw respondents reported no case of complication from the 22 daughters circumcised.

These reported cases of complications have the possibility of under-counting or even exaggeration. This may be the situation because of the unpleasantness of the events. Therefore, the reported cases are subjective judgements which cannot be quantified or be 100% reliable.

However, it follows that these respondents do not consider female circumcision as a dangerous operation that is harmful or detrimental to one's health. Consequently, this situation may create hindrance to a successful campaign against such practice.

### 4. Initiation Rites

Unlike male circumcision, female circumcision is not widely recognized as a passage-de-rite. This situation arises because while men or males are members of age grade associations in their respective ethnic groups, women are hardly members of such age grades. In the age grade system, movement from one age grade to another is marked with certain rites. Previously, movement from infancy to childhood signalled the period of circumcising males. But, with time this situation has changed as most males are circumcised at infancy without any funfare.

However, the circumcision of females (Ukwani, Ijaw) at an older age such as before delivery or at marriage is seen as initiation rites that serve an integrative function

reinforcing the chastity of women, and also as an adaptive psychological mechanism for woman's new role as a wife and/or mother. Subsequently, the ceremonies following the circumcision reinforces the solidarity of the married women and/or mothers who admit a new member into their group.

## DISCUSSION

The findings shown above provide support for a number of probable explanations on why female circumcision is being carried out in Southern Nigeria. The authors believe that the reasons given for female circumcision can best be understood by examining how various factors such as patriarchy, class and gender permeate all areas of these communities.

### 1. Patriarchy

The communities studied are purely patrilineal societies where men have control over women including their properties. Therefore, as these communities are rural, and polygyny prevails, one finds there is need for men to control the sexuality of women. The control of female sexuality is important to these people because of the premium placed on particular male children. These children who are seen as the heir to their fathers' property, also form the link between the present and the future. They depict the status and wealth of their parents. Therefore, the desire to ensure that such children are bona-fide descendants of a man encourages female circumcision. It is practised in order to control women and show male dominance.

The practice prevails despite of all campaign or action taken against it by the government, because of the peoples' strong traditional religious beliefs which basically involve worshipping certain gods and goddesses, as well as ancestral spirits. Both men and women play significant roles in worshipping the various gods and goddess. Under the umbrella of religion, both sexes transmit this custom of male dominance, which is a factor of patriarchy, in the form of female circumcision for unsubstantiated reasons.

This male dominance in the communities results from the privileged positions men occupy. These positions give men access to the means of production, thus making women dependent on them. As a result, it becomes important to ensure that women are circumcised. The credence of this explanation lies in the findings that the custom is the commonest reason (44.8%) advanced for female circumcision. This explanation leads us to the issue of class and gender.

### 2. Class and Gender

Our discussion will be incomplete if we fail to examine this practice in relation to class and gender. A majority of men have access and control over the means of production such as land and capital. This situation occurs from the fact that a majority of the women in these societies are not allowed to own landed property because they

themselves are subjects of inheritance. This does not imply that all men own property, as there are some men who like women do not have access to the means of production. Such condition places this category of men and women at a disadvantage and make them dependents on the owners of the means of production who Marx refers to as the bourgeois.

However, these women suffer from one more form of oppression which is gender. Owing to their sex men do not see the necessity for women to express their sexuality like men. Therefore, to curtail female sexuality which in turn guarantees the paternity of children, female circumcision is practised. An attempt by the men to guarantee that the surgery decreases sexual urge may be behind the idea that the surgery protects the baby during delivery. Consequently, the importance the people place on children in the society makes them adhere to the practice even when it is known that the statement is false. This is indicated among the people where a good number of the girls are circumcised, though some women know that failure to circumcise is not dangerous to the baby.

Also, women are source of generating wealth for their families because a woman who is declared to be a virgin on circumcision attracts a significant amount of gifts depending on the status of the family of the future partner/husband. As earlier indicated, a virgin on circumcision calls for higher bride-price. Therefore, with the exchange of a girl for certain goods and services, all rights including both genetricem and uxoricem are transferred to the husband's patrilineage. In a way, this process of exchange is a means of redistributing the wealth in the hands of a few in the communities. However, the women's inability to control the destiny of their lives arises from the belief that as the weaker sex they need protection from men, first from their fathers as daughters, from their brothers as sisters and later from their husbands as wives. Hence, the respondents argue that if females are left uncircumcised, they will be easily aroused and be prone to easy sex. This means that women are considered not to be able to control their own sexuality. The increase in sexual proneness is considered to lead women to extra-marital affairs which is seen not only as woman's weakness but also as man's inability to meet his sexual responsibility and dominance. In fact, female circumcision, therefore, is basically to show that man is the superior and stronger sex while woman is the weaker and inferior sex who is subject to male dominance, control and authority.

It follows from this discussion that for female circumcision to be eliminated or eradicated, there is a need to restructure the society. This restructuring of the society implies:

- (1) To make women like men have access and control over the means of production. This will provide them certain measure of authority.
- (2) Through the elimination of class differences the issue of gender and oppression will be reduced or eliminated.
- (3) Such action will make the non-significance of female circumcision more glaring and acceptable to both sexes.



## PROPOSALS FOR ERADICATION OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

### 1. Research

Research studies of varying capacity are the starting point to eradicate female circumcision in the southern part of Nigeria. In addition, a reliable and efficient method of recording the number of operations, the age of circumcision, the surgery and the complications arising is urgently needed. These studies can be mainly of two forms:

#### (1) Psychological and epidemiological studies

These studies are needed to ascertain the extent of incision of the clitoris and the psychological and physical damages caused by the incision. Also, there is a need (a) to ascertain the problems and complications associated with female circumcision. In the previous paper, the authors showed the complication rate for female circumcision as 2.8%. The onus lies on further research to objectively quantify the actual complication rate of the surgery in Nigeria. (b) To find a suitable method of communicating these complications and dangers of female circumcision to the people. It is only when a meaningful far reaching campaign technique is designed can we have successful elimination or reduction of the operation.

#### (2) Socio-anthropological studies

There is an urgent need for socio-anthropological studies in order to identify the meaning of the practice in relation to the socio-cultural patterns and values of the people, in particular reference to females. For instance, it is important to know the basis for supporting such operation by both sexes. Also, to ascertain whether un-circumcised girls are more unmarriageable than circumcised girls. These knowledge which can be provided by gynaecologists, social scientists, psychologists are essential in advocating and planning programmes for its eradication. Until this knowledge is available it is too early for any open and far-reaching campaigns to get started. There is more likelihood that open campaigns will simply enrich such practice: the worst, the practice will be executed in greater secrecy as this operation is a deep-rooted custom and tradition.

For instance with the WHO insistence on the Nigerian government to stop the circumcision of females, the operation was stopped in the hospitals. As such, the operation has once again moved to the traditional operators and some desperate medical practitioners. The unsafe and non-sterile conditions in which operations are taking place raise the need to focus more attention on the issue. It is far better to have the operation done under hygienic conditions if they are going to be carried out at all.

### 2. Health Education

Health educators, community and social workers need to start educating mother

or would-be mothers about the potential damage and non-importance of female circumcision on their daughters. This could go hand in hand with health talks on pregnant mothers, child care, feeding during and after pregnancy, general health care and healthy environment. Films, leaflets and posters on hospital walls are essential in combating female circumcision.

### 3. Schools and Colleges

There is also a need to establish the sex education class in schools. But, this will bring a series of negative responses from parents and society at large. Therefore, it is better to incorporate female circumcision or circumcision in general into subjects like: Health science, biology, zoology, general studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology. It is also essential that relevant educational aids-films and posters are available to support these teachings.

### 4. Voluntary Associations

In most African societies, voluntary associations are the place for socialization and mobilization of their members (Little, 1971). Hence, their far reaching influence is essential in combating the operation. In addition, these associations with cultural, social and religious organizations will act as transmitter in carrying the campaign against female circumcision to most areas in the country. The limited resources of these organizations will raise the need of providing funds and necessary back-up for combating the operation.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we have dealt with the practice of female circumcision in some communities in the southern part of Nigeria. We have found out that certain unsubstantiated views are still prevalent in interpreting female circumcision. These views persist in these communities, because they are influenced by their own social-cultural organization.

We put forward the framework for viewing female circumcision as part of the society in which women find themselves. Female circumcision is a trap from which women cannot escape precisely because of their dependence upon men. We attempted to point out the influence of male dominance arising from patriarchy, as well as from class and gender to clarify female circumcision in these communities. Consequently, this explanation shows that to eliminate female circumcision, the issue of class inequalities, gender and male dominance must be curtailed.

Finally, it would not be productive if we are to focus on female circumcision in isolation when there are so many problems of maternal, child health or health in general to be discussed. Ultimately, it is the problem of which few Nigerians are aware and which must be solved by them alone. Hence, there is an urgent need for adult literacy programmes, special educational policy for women as the disadvantaged group, to

create equal opportunities and access to education for both sexes, as well as to provide the means of production so that women can think and act for themselves. It is then that we are likely to have strategy for the elimination of female circumcision in Nigeria, in particular Bendel State.

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