

Understanding Missio Dei in the Context of the Churches' Prophetic Role Against Female Circumcision

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INTRODUCTION

Female Circumcision is harmful and traditional practice that has been done on girls and women from generation to generation in Kenya. Not only the practice being dangerous but it is a kind of abuse violating their rights. The question is to highlight how the Church is addressing and not addressing the issue of female circumcision and also how to eliminate or reduce practice through creating awareness, education or through the law of the Land and how that can be seen as part of Christian mission. In real sense the Church is not giving enough importance in addressing the issue of Female Circumcision. I will use Missio Dei approach as a critic and also to try to reinterpret the understanding of mission in order to that the church might promote awareness of female circumcision and thus try to eliminate it. I will start by giving an overview of the Methodist Church in Kenya and Kaaga Synod then describe female circumcision, the prevalence and dangers of the practice. I will engage with the Church to use other models in the light of Missio Dei and take Female circumcision elimination as part of Christian Mission, and I will involve the Government and then come to my conclusion.

METHODIST CHURCH IN KENYA (overview)

Being among the Ordained Ministers of the Methodist Church in Kenya (MCK) from our Deed of Foundation, "Methodist Church in Kenya has grown out of the United Free churches, whose missionary committee agreed to send a mission to East Africa and whose missionaries first reached Mombasa in the year 1862."¹In 1967, Methodist Church became autonomous from the British Methodist Church. At present there are eleven Synods in the connexion including Mission areas in Tanzania and Uganda which means the church is very much involved in mission work which is "To respond in obedience to the divine call of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ and to proclaim the Holistic Gospel in word and deed in the power of God's Holy Spirit."² Through church doctrinal standards first, the church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church. Secondly, rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic faith and the finally the church ever remembers that in the providence of God, Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural Holiness through the land by the proclamation of the Evangelical faith, and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its Divinely appointed Mission. It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the spirit, the grace and the fruit, which indicate those whom he has chosen.

For this reason the church holds to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and consequently no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men or women. But in the exercise of its corporate life and worship, special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required, and thus the principle of representative is recognised. The church feels that it has no strength of its own, but have laid the foundation on the word of God and through the revelation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The faith and believe in Jesus Christ the son of God, who died and his resurrection and this is the Gospel that the Church preach. "The

¹Methodist Church in Kenya, *Deed of foundation And Deed of Church Order* (Nairobi : New Lengo Press,1967) p.1.

² Joseph Michuki, *Methodist Church in Kenya 2011 Pocket Diary and Directory* (Meru :M.C.K Bookshop, 2011) p.2.

overall authority is the written word of God, put down by people through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Witnessing is central to the Methodist in Kenya's vision and life. It is her core business. This means sharing the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God".³And the Church up to date puts a lot of effort to be faithful in spreading the Good News.

Kaaga Synod is one among the eleven Synods of the MCK. It is situated in Meru County which was formerly known as Eastern Province. God has blessed the area with tourism sites like Meru National Park. In terms of hospitality, there are fairly good Hotels and restaurants. Having said that looking what I may call the face 'outside' of the region it is good and attractive to the eyes and of course it is, but inside the voice of the crying women draws nobody attention. The cry brought out of the horrifying female circumcision.

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Although the church has made efforts in fighting illiteracy and has built schools and other learning institutions and the action is good, however it has not yet addressed the issue of the girl child and women at large from the cultural belief and practice, of female circumcision which has damaged majority of them. In Kenya and especially the entire Meru region is where the practice of female circumcision which is also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) took deeper roots. All the girls are supposed to be circumcised at puberty as a rite of passage from childhood into womanhood.

In an attempt to understand FGM from various point of view, Wangila points out that "Female Genital Mutilation is a social cultural practice that involves the, pricking, piercing, stretching, burning or excision, clitoridectomy, and or the removal of part of or all tissues around a woman's reproductive organs and in some cases infubulation⁴. The stitching is done using thorns which is a painful experience. Further Doctors point out that Female Genital Mutilation is the operation which "involves the removal of not only the clitoris, but also the labia minora and half labia majora, together with surrounding tissue, resulting in the permanent mutilation affecting the woman's natural functions."⁵ The World Health Organisation points out that FGM "comprise all procedures that involve removal of the Female Genital organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons...and it has been established that FGM is a practice which dates as far as 2500 years ago."⁶ This makes clear that this practice has been exercised even before Jesus Christ. Wangila points out that "early accounts of the practice can be found in an account of Herodotus in the Fifth Century B.C.E which attributes Female Circumcision to the Phoenicians, Hittite, Ethiopians, and Egyptians."⁷This has been a torture to girls and women since then up to date.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION PREVALENCE IN KENYA

Kenyan girls and women are not exceptional of the torture and the FGM is mostly practiced in various ethnic groups and prevalence rates are intermediate. According to the 2003 DHS:

32 per cent of women 15-49 years have undergone FGM/C; the 1998 reported a similar figure, 38 per cent. From the sub national perspective, Kenya reveals significant regional variations with FGM/C ranging from 4 per cent in the West to 99 per cent in the North East. These regional variations reflect the presence of diverse ethnic communities. FGM/C prevalence country wide is nearly universal among women of the Somali (97 per cent), Kisii

³Methodist Church in Kenya Available from <http://www.methodistchurchkenya.org/index.p> [Accessed 17/11/11].

⁴the stitching together of vulva in order to narrow the vaginal opening - Mary Nyangweso Wangila, *Female Circumcision; The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007) P.8.

⁵Zablon J. Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya*, (Nairobi : Uzima Press Limited, 1982) p.71.

⁶Dorcas O. Akintunde, *Female Genital Mutilation; A Social- Cultural Gang up Against Woman*, *Feminist Theology*: Jan 2010, Volume 18. 2 P.194.

⁷Mary N. Wangila, *Female Circumcision; The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007) P. 99.

(96 per cent), and Masai (93 per cent) groups and significantly lower among the Kikuyu (34 per cent) and Kamba (27 per cent) women.⁸

This is a clear picture of how much both the people and communities are engaged in the practice and Wangila notes that the types of FGM “commonly found in Kenya are clitoridectomy and excision, with about 10 per cent practicing infibulation.”⁹ This indicates that there is no fixed type of circumcision so every community has its’ own pattern. The same case with age at which the action is done, some start as early as four years or below and go up to fifteen years and above. A point to note is that this practice is not done for any medical purpose. Let me then mention reasons behind this kind of operation, which are mainly cultural which put the victims at a high risk. To begin with, women are generally termed as unclean and there is no way the society would allow them to give birth to a new born baby without purification. For her to be made clean is through circumcision. To deal away with the unclean blood hence making her pure ready to conceive and give birth. However, Gods purification in child birth does call for neither cutting nor shedding of human blood. The process of the conception and giving birth to babies was not initiated by any human being. In the same manner no human being can claim to purify by any means. Hanna points out that the work of child birth was initiated by God himself, willingly and out of his love and purpose selecting a woman “To be a co-creator with his own holiness for the holy is the essence of life, that which creates life and functions as the creative process.”¹⁰ This shows clearly that the holiness is not in human beings but in God himself and the work he is doing. And out of his unconditional love, he select women as they are, but unfortunately not so for the love of men which conditions are put first. In the Mission of God, his purification is through his love. The greatest work a mother does in giving birth is using all her strength and effort in bringing the baby out for its first cry, hence the mother on theological grounds is found to be a co-creator with the divine. Hanna when reflecting on the words of Mercy who argues that “What we need to turn our attention to, therefore is the poverty of the human spirit that ignores that the humanity of women as persons in God’s image and mothers as co-creators with God and imitators of God’s management of creation.”¹¹ God using women becomes a role model in treating them with compassion as noble vessels. For his mission of salvation to human beings, He accepted to choose Mary the mother of Jesus purifying her by himself for the conception and birth of the holy saviour. In this case the purity was in God himself and through him to the little girl and in the holy conceiving and birth of the holy child.

On the other hand, female circumcision is done to women as signs of giving them power and authority as they enter into womanhood. The people in the community seems to confuse what it means hence torturing women under the title of empowerment, in human understanding, according to the 7th Edition Oxford Learners Dictionary power means “the ability to control people or things”¹² while authority means “the power to give orders to people.”¹³ However, trying to understand what power and authority really means in the light of God, Malini points out that the power of Jesus “was the power to love, a power that liberated women, men and children to be themselves. He gave those who were marginalised an identity and brought them from the periphery to the centre, from invisibility to visibility. In society where women were not counted Jesus gave time and attention to individual women.”¹⁴ This clearly shows that there is total misunderstanding from the society to the power and authority the women are given as a sign of the ability of carrying on with duties in their future homes.

⁸ Claudia Cappa, *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Exploration* Available from <http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/FGM-c> | [Accessed 08/12/11].

⁹ Mary N. Wangila, *Female Circumcision* (2007) P.30.

¹⁰ Hanna Strack, *Women as Co-Creator with the Holy; towards a Theology of Childbirth, In God’s Image* (June 2009) Vol. 28.2, p.40.

¹¹ Hanna Strack, *Woman as Co-Creator with the Holy, In God’s Image.* (June 2009) Vol.28. 2, p.41.

¹² Sally Wehmeier [et al] ‘Power’ 7th Edition Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary p.1180.

¹³ Sally Wehmeier [et al] ‘Authority’ 7th Edition Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary p.88.

¹⁴ Malini Devananda, *Power and Authority in Church, In God’s Image* (June 2010) Volume 29.2, P.26.

Having received so called 'power and authority' which actually is the opposite, after circumcision and having gotten married, the woman becomes everything at home. This means the husband expect her to give birth, to cook, fetch water and firewood, do the washing and cleaning for the entire family, take care of the livestock and garden and, above all to meet his sexual desire. All those expectations are to be met just because she was given the ability by being circumcised. However the power that God give does not put some people into slavery. He gives the power of equality, both men and women being his image. Not only being created in his image but also being, as Sallie points it out as the "imago dei"¹⁵ that means we are the special parts of God's creation playing a great role in his created world.

Another traditional thought is the idea of controlling women sexuality. There is a belief that when the cutting is done the girl would maintain her virginity and after marriage she will continue being faithful to her husband as he continually enjoy having sex with her. This is a very clear picture that the bodies of women are damaged in favour of men. This means the girls' body is damaged so that she can maintain virginity for the future husband and to be faithful to him after marriage. This is a total torture, which the convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the bases of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women irrespective of marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedom in political, social, cultural, civil, or any other field."¹⁶ The FGM here is used as a tool of suppression and subjugation of women denying girls and women their full enjoyment of their rights and freedom. The women have been blinded to an extent of going against themselves. By this I mean, mothers instead of protecting their daughters, they force them to be cut. Grandmothers and aunts instead of being saviours they turn out to be worse. The society itself gives no respect for the uncircumcised and having no safe place the girl or the woman takes the offer of irreparable and irreversible abuse which ushers her into uncountable dangers.

DANGERS

Let me turn, then, to considering the dangers or the negative consequences of female Genital Mutilation. To begin with a point to note is that, this operation is done by old women who are illiterates but inherited their skills from other older women. Some of the instruments they use are knives, razorblades, broken glasses or any sharp object which mostly are not sterilised and can be used to cut more than one girl. Their work is just to cut and receive their pay for the service given. Out of this lack of knowledge and carelessness, the results are damages beyond repair and increasing transmission of diseases especially the HIV/AIDS. On these occasions some lose their lives out of severe bleeding and shock encountered during the cutting since no pain reliever is given during operation.

On the medical point of view, doctors' point out that there are many medical dangers out of this cutting. Since it is done by traditional circumcisers, the operation is accompanied by high incidence of complications. They note that "some are immediate and others after some time. Some are physical and psychosexual, minor and serious, even fatal."¹⁷

Women have suffered inside and outside the Church and do not experience their human rights either. According to the report by the United Nations Secretary-General "violence against women and girls continues to take place in the family and the community, while trafficking in women and girls, honour killings and harmful traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation remain common forms of abuse."¹⁸ Women have remained in this situation which is a

¹⁵Sallie McFaul, *Models of God*(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) p.76.

¹⁶Claudia Cappa, *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Exploration*, Available from http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/FGM-c_fl [Accessed 08/12/11].

¹⁷Mahran M. *Medical Dangers of Female Circumcision* Available from [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1233683!](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1233683) [Accessed 4/12/11].

¹⁸ Secretary-General, *Road Map towards the Implementation of the Millennium Declaration* Available from <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/docl> [Accessed 12/12/11].

major problem today. Despite the fact that women have continually suffered, Church is busy evangelising therefore unable to address the issue.

According to the Global Dictionary of Theology, Evangelism means "sharing the good and joyful news of Jesus Christ with people."¹⁹ Taken at literally, the church has done wonders in Evangelising, making new converts and planting new churches. In a Silver Jubilee celebration day (2009)the Synod Bishop confirmed "we have over 50,000 Christians ...we have over 172 congregations and we need to thank God for the far he has brought...my vision as synod Bishop is about Evangelism, I want to reach more people and even to double the number within the next four years."²⁰From this evidence it shows clearly why the Church is not addressing this problem is simply because the main focus is on spreading the Good news of Jesus Christ. However, the Missio Dei in other words the Mission of God is not focused on one particular issue but is the concern for humanity and the whole world at large. For the Church does not have its' own mission but it is the co-worker with God in his mission for the world and for the people to have life in full. For a better understanding of mission Dei and the foundation of mission of the church, the International Missionary Conference at Willingen affirmed that "The missionary Movements of which we are part has its sources in the Triune God Himself."²¹

From this background we get a clear point that the Church is involved in the triune mission through the power of the Holy Spirit. And Bosch bringing the idea of Missio Dei, in a more modern way points out that, "mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God."²²This shows that from the starting point the mission of God is for the salvation and wholeness of the people. This was fulfilled in Jesus who became everything for human beings to be out of bondage and have life in abundance. Christ then passed on the responsibility to the Church to make people experience that freedom and enjoyment. The church cannot therefore be busy spreading the Good News of Jesus who is God himself while at the same time one part of his body has been damaged, is being damaged and will continue to be damaged, if the Church will continue Evangelising and not taking Female circumcision as part of Christian Mission. Girls and women cannot have life abundantly because they have a bad history written on their bodies through the scars they receive after the circumcision. Because of this part of the body of Christ that is being damaged, tortured, suppressed, put under pressure of fear and being denied its rights and privileges, it is where I want to call to the participation of the church in eliminating the female circumcision.

My argument it to convince the church to engage in this as part of Christian mission, since the Church and culture are inseparable, the church has a great role and in its' ability to affect the mental process of the way people in that culture acquire the knowledge of female circumcision hence change of attitudes. Putting into consideration the importance of culture in a society on the other hand, not all its beliefs and practices are good for people. There is need for bringing public awareness about this practice. To be more effective the Church can also include other models like; teacher, prophetic and shepherd models. Through teacher model the church can pass knowledge of female circumcision and its dangers. Since this is an inherited cultural practice, not many people may be having full knowledge about it and may be tempted to undergo, not because they want it but simply it is a cultural requirement. Giving an example some years ago, two of my close circumcised friends after their marriage faithfully confessed that, if they knew how sex was to be, and how circumcision would bring them problems during child birth, they could not have accepted the decisions of their mothers. Finally one of them painfully said "if it was being sold (scar of the circumcision) I can sell mine." These are few indicators among many showing that people are in need of the knowledge concerning the practice. This awareness is to be made to both men and women because the society works under patriarchal system where men demands

¹⁹ William A. 'Evangelism,' *Global Dictionary of Theology* P.296.

²⁰Methodist Church in Kenya-Kaaga Synod Silver Jubilee part -1-year 2009 Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?V=PRwoNAWL> [Accessed 17/11/11].

²¹ Ken Christoph M. , *God's Mission in Asia* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007) PP.38-39.

²²David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission; paradigm shifts in Theology of mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991) P.36.

girls to be circumcised so that they can marry them. This is with an idea of men having power over women. The mission of God is equality for both men and women.

Not only creating awareness to adults but also Education can be a vital tool through which the knowledge can be passed to children. As I mentioned earlier on that, the Church has sponsored many schools and other learning institutions, through the syllabus and programs Female Circumcision issue can be featured so that the pupils, students and scholars can get knowledge about it as early as possible. And after they internalise the knowledge they will have the ability of making sensible decisions of their lives and giving good advices among themselves which in turn curb the practice.

Alongside teacher model can be Shepherd model. The Church is a Sheepfold into which the children of God gather expect to be fed and looked after, and as in God's love for all extend the shepherding to the outer community. It is the responsibility of the church to take wonderful care of girls and women of God. The Church as the shepherd ought to feed and be faithful and careful in this responsibility. The final and important is the Prophetic model.

And following the example of God using the prophets to rebuke evils done on people, for example the death of Naboth (1kings 21:15-26), and the prophetic role of Jesus setting captives and the oppressed free, likewise it is the prophetic responsibility of the Church to speak against female circumcision without compromise, and show clearly that there is no biblical support for female circumcision and it is only out of human reasoning to subdue others. Through Abraham the father of faith, male circumcision alone is biblical (Genesis 17:1-27) but for Sarah his wife the mother of faith only her name was changed and no circumcision commanded on her. So if it was God's initiative he would have commanded it on females as he did to males. Moreover the Church getting engaged in this issue becomes Gods mission in the sense that, it will become an eye opener for the people to see the beauty and purpose of womanhood as it was in God's plan and to bring liberation to girls and women. Kenya "has become nearly 80 per cent Christian." This means the Church under the leadership of religious leaders has the ability, to stand on the gap to bring to an end this harmful oppression of women if only it will look deeper into the inherited social structures, beliefs and practices.

As the Church takes responsibility, the Government is not to be left behind. It is unfortunate that the government of Kenya is not active in putting into consideration the issue of female circumcision because may be, it is taken as a private affair to individuals and a family matter. But due to health reports increasing daily and especially with the spread of HIV/AIDS, there is a need to consider it seriously as other crimes and punishments to go together and above all put a Law against Female circumcision. Having said that let me then conclude the issue of female circumcision.

CONCLUSION

Female circumcision is the issue in our context and the Church is trying to engage in it, but then cannot be engaged fully because the Church does not see female circumcision as part of Christian Mission. In my argument I have made a case that they should see it as part of Missio Dei. In my main argument I suggest the Church to fully get involved and eliminate it by bringing awareness of social structure and female circumcision which also can be done through Education systems to the pupils, Students and Scholars. I have also argued that the Church to include other models like; Teacher, Shepherd and Prophetic models to be eye openers for people to see the beauty and purpose of womanhood in the light of God as they bring liberation to girls and women. I have called upon the Government to pass special legislation to prohibit the female circumcision and on the other hand the criminal courts to open proceedings against those who are found practicing or encouraging it. With the combined effort female circumcision can be eliminated in Kenya.

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