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Original Article

### The Effects of Adaptation of Circumcision Age Set System into the Lineage System of the Tigania in the Pre-Colonial Period Circa, 1850-1908

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set system.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the context of the adaptation of the circumcision age set system on the lineage system of the pre-colonial Tigania circa 1850s-1908. It investigated the cultural dynamics which resulted in the adoption of the circumcision age set system and how it adapted itself in a lineage society. Specifically, the study examined the effects of such adaptation on the social-cultural organization of the pre-colonial Tigania which was a predominantly lineage-based society. The research was interpreted within the theories of social structuralism and instrumentalism theories, which were used to analyze the functionality of the circumcision age set system and the impacts of circumcision age set adaptation by the pre-colonial Tigania. The study employed a descriptive research design. The study location was in Tigania, Meru County with a population of 316, 341 targeting the population with knowledge of the age set system. A sample size of 40 respondents aged 60 years and above based on the concept of data saturation was selected. This sample was selected from the target population through purposive and snowballing sampling procedures. The respondents at this age possessed less diluted information as they acquired it from their parents or grandparents on age-set adaptation. The study also collected data from individuals who were younger but seemed resourceful as a result of education and community leadership experience. The interview guide was used for data collection. Due to the nature and the scope of the study, the data was mainly collected from secondary and oral sources and then corroborated. The data collected was analyzed qualitatively and presented thematically. The research was carried out with strict adherence to the ethics of research. The study found out that when pre-colonial Tigania adopted circumcision the existing lineage system was significantly affected in such a way that, the age set system played a complementary role in pre-colonial Tigania. The age set system expanded the scope of social functions as it cut across the clan boundaries. The clans became more organized, stronger, and safer. Consequently, the adoption and adaptation of the circumcision age set by the pastoralists' communities strengthened their clan system hence, their survival. This study sheds light on academia and society on how such cultural adaptations

influenced the existing structures of the recipient African societies. Hence, contributes to knowledge of the social and cultural history of pre-colonial Tigania and explains how cultural adaptation in pre-colonial African societies unfolded.

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## INTRODUCTION

Different societies in pre-colonial Africa had various social institutions which served to regulate institutions political, economic and social aspects of these societies buttressing order and stability. The modes of organisation of such social institutions in African societies were influenced by the nature of social-economic patterns and to some extent, the physical environment of the community (Ambler, 1988). However, these organisational units were not universal. The Bantu communities traditionally leaned towards descent forms and had social organisation based on kinship/clan. Conversely, the pastoralist communities tended towards anti-descent and had age set as their dominant social organisation (Bernadi, 1962). Ambler (1988) stresses that among the Bantu communities, incorporation, adaptation and inter-mixing of new ideas and practices was universal. It was a gradual process involving small groups of kinsmen and families. This might explain the differences in structures of the age set adopted by various pre-colonial agriculturalist societies. Instances of inter-mixing of these systems existed, as the present study explored with the case of the Tigania.

Age-set-based organisations were largely associated with pastoralist communities. The communal organisations based on age sets were structured differently from those of the family and descent groups. In these societies, the age set system rose and functioned because the basic allocation of roles was not determined by membership in kinships (Eisenst, 1954). The age-set systems acted as integrative mechanisms beyond the descent groups. The Bantu communities who were predominantly agriculturalists were organised into clans/kinship which could be attributed to their sedentary way of life. Parkin (1997) avers that Bantu descent groups determined their inheritance patterns between generations whereas residence rules governed the location a couple moved to after they married. Parkin observes that residence patterns among the Bantu farmers determined other key relationships such as alliance, trade and marriage partners. Therefore, the residence pattern of Bantu farmers made their kinship stable compared to the one for hunter-gatherer communities which was flexible.

The adaptation of age set by the Bantu communities from the non-Bantus was majorly attributed to the

need for survival (Wolf, 1980). Wolf, for instance, attributes the adoption and adaptation of age set by the Gusii from their pastoralist neighbours to the constant warfare situation. During these wars, the Bantus associated the victory of their pastoral neighbours with their age-set organisation. Therefore, these communities were motivated to adopt this practice (Robert & Sangree, 1962). Such corporate groups which could cut across kinship ties were encouraged in order to foster more unity and solidarity.

Studies show that the need for self-defence and discipline associated with the age set could be the motivating factor for its adaptation by the Meru people. According to Rimita (1988), the Meru could have borrowed and adapted the practice of circumcision and age-set formation from the Maasai and Samburu. The Tigania age set organisation is however cyclic and not linear as the case with Maasai and Samburu. The highland Nilotes (Kalenjin) who exhibit a similar cyclical age-set system are presumably geographically too far to provide a possible cultural adaptation explanation. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the circumcision age set in Tigania, a Bantu community, and its subsequent adaptation in one way or another impacted their kinship structures as shown by Mahner (1970). However, how the process of age-set adaptation unfolded has not been extensively addressed in these scholarships which made the current study necessary.

What excited the current study therefore is how the Tigania was able to adopt and adapt the circumcision age set system. It should be noted that the roles played by the circumcision age set system were initially played by the clan system. The current study investigated the context into which the Tigania borrowed this new practice. It revealed how the Tigania adapted to the use of this new practice alongside the clan structures. Consequently, the study revealed the impacts of the adoption and adaptation of the circumcision age set among the Tigania in the pre-colonial period a task which has

not been extensively addressed by the previous studies. It has shown how the adaptation of the circumcision age set strengthened the clan system of the Tigania.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Wolf (1980), Eisenst (1954) and Bernadi (1962) suggest that circumcision age set systems have their roots in pastoral societies while lineage systems have logic in agricultural societies. Where these two systems were present in one community, questions of cultural exchange and adaptation inevitably emerge. Such questions have interested researchers for a long time but rarely have we had focused studies on a particular community regarding exactly how the process of adaptation of the circumcision age set system occurred and its effects on the lineage system. Even where this is attempted, the actual analysis of the adaptation process is almost always never wholly attempted. Partial studies of such elements of cultural exchange and adaptation exist but they do not tell the whole story. This study sought to fill the gap in the dynamics of the adaptation process of the age set system and how it impacted the already existing clan structures among the Tigania of Meru.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study contributes to knowledge of the socio-cultural history of pre-colonial Tigania. It demonstrated how adaptations occurred due to cultural exchange within the societies. Such adaptations influenced the already existing systems in the recipient communities. The study, therefore, sheds light on the society on how the processes of adaptation of new practices occurred in African societies. Consequently, the study demonstrated how the dynamics of adaptations impacted the already existing cultural organisation of recipient communities.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study covered the period, circa 1850s to 1908. The 1850s marked the period of Tigania contacts

with Maa-speaking people such as Maasai and Cushitic groups which led to decades of warfare, interspersed with periods of peace, intermarriages, adoptions, and adaptations. This view of cultural interactions was supported by the works of scholars such as Sandberg (1969), Fadiman (1993), Mahner (1970) and Goldsmith (1994). The year 1908 marked the time the Meru came under colonial rule leading to the establishment of colonial authority.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by two theories: structural functionalism theory and instrumentalism theory. Structural functionalism theory was used to analyse how the age set system and clan system actually worked among the Tigania in the pre-colonial era. Instrumentalism theory, on the other hand, was employed in understanding the rationale and the process of change after the adaptation of the circumcision age set system by the people of pre-colonial Tigania.

The proponents of the structural functionalism theory; Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons view society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. The age set is a social institution and as an organ of society, works with other organs (institutions) to achieve social equilibrium. Structural functionalism sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation which focuses on the social structures and social functions. It addresses society as a whole in terms of the functions of its constituent elements namely, norms, customs and institutions. Parsons adds that the change of social institutions should not be radical but should occur relatively in a smooth way. The adaptation should occur in a controlled manner to minimise instances of collision or total disruption. Thus, the borrowed practices need to suit the recipient society for them to achieve the intended goals. It is largely noted that

for the better part of the pre-colonial times, change was gradual and usually consensual or negotiated. Therefore, Talcott Parson's theory enabled the study to enunciate the process of adaptation of the circumcision age set system by the pre-colonial Tigania.

In relation to instrumentalism theory, the tribal organisation in pre-colonial African societies has always been in the process of change. However, this change has been gradual and usually negotiated as observed by Talcott in his Structural functionalism theory. Most African societies had to embrace change in order to adapt and suit the new environment. It was important to analyse how the environment settled by pre-colonial Tigania influenced the need to adapt to the use of age set system.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Location of the Study**

This study was carried out in Tigania, Meru County. Tigania is made up of three sub-counties: Tigania West, Tigania Central and Tigania East. It occupies an area of 1030 square kilometres (KNBS, 2019). Tigania society borders Igembe to the North, Imenti to the West and Tharaka to the South. Tigania was selected as the study location because a number of scholarships and oral traditions point out that Tigania was the dispersal point of the Meru subtribes. It also noted that circumcision age set systems among the Tigania have not been affected much by the modernization as the case in other Meru subtribes. Tigania also hosts the headquarters of NjuriNcheke at Nchiru, made of senior elders of the Ameru who are responsible for social, cultural and political functions of the community.

### **Research Design**

The study employed a descriptive research design. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) averred that descriptive research had the purpose of determining and reporting things the way they are or they were. Thus, descriptive design enabled the researcher to

carry out the study on the adaptation of the circumcision age set among Tigania. The purpose of descriptive research design was to give a description of affairs as they existed (Kothari, 1985).

### **The Target Population**

The target population was the informants with knowledge of the adoption and adaptation of the circumcision age set by pre-colonial Tigania based on age, gender and socio-political positions such as Njuri Ncheke elders, church elders and political elites. The study also targeted the younger population who had knowledge of the age set system as a result of education and experience. Borg and Gall (1982) defined the target population as all the members of the real or hypothetical set of the people, events or objects to which the researcher wishes to generalize the results of the study. Therefore, the researcher used the selected population in generalizing the findings of the study.

### **Sample Size**

The researcher sampled 40 participants as the sample size for the study. Kathuri and Pals (1993) indicated that the minimum sample size can be 100 subjects for a major sub-tribe and a minimum sample size should be between twenty to fifty people for a minor sub-tribe. Oso and Onen (2005) indicated that the sample size needs to be selected procedurally to represent the target population.

### **Sampling Procedures**

The criteria for selecting the sample size were based on age, gender, educational background, age set, clan and social-political positions in the society. The data was collected mostly from participants above 60 years of age. The respondents at this age possess less diluted information as they acquired it from their parents or grandparents on age-set adaptation. The respondents in this category constituted the major subgroup of the sample size. The study collected data from individuals who were younger but seemed resourceful as a result of education and community leadership experience. However, this

category constituted the minor subgroup of the sample size.

The researcher employed purposive sampling with the Snowballing technique to select the 40 respondents rich in information as per the objective of the study. In snowball sampling the study was guided by the sample frame technique in identifying the first respondent. The concept of data saturation was used to arrive at this sample size. The data saturation was guided by the grounded theory of (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which states that to ensure the credibility and validity of the study, the researcher needs to collect information to a point where no new information can be collected from informants. Therefore, when major themes based on the interview schedule became repetitive and no new information was given the data was deemed to have reached saturation.

### **Interview Guide**

The study employed an interview schedule in collecting the information related to the study. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) added that interview schedules are useful because they give an extensive enquiry which resulted in achieving fair and reliable results. The interview schedule was used to conduct both closed and open-ended questions. A closed-ended interview guide was used to obtain specific information. An open-ended interview guide, on the other hand, allowed more exploration of the adaptation of the circumcision age set issue as observed by Kombo and Tromp (2006) who note that, the use of an interview schedule that is formal, open-ended and closed-ended enables the researcher to get complete and detailed understanding of the issue under study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The study involved oral sources whereby the oral interviews were carried out guided by an interview schedule. The interview schedule was guided by the objective of the study. The secondary data included library books, history books, the internet, journals,

articles, thesis, E-books and other written materials related to the adaptation of age set from, Nairobi University, KEMU, MKU and Chuka University libraries. The researcher visited the Kenya National Archives, Kenya National Library Services and Meru Museum for the archival sources. The information from oral sources, secondary sources and archival sources was corroborated and analysed critically. To ensure the reliability and validity of the secondary sources the information was subjected to internal and external reliability tests to minimize subjectivity.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Adaptation of Circumcision Age Set System into the Lineage System of the Tigania in Pre-Colonial Period Circa, 1850-1908

#### The Origin of Circumcision Age Set System among the Pre-Colonial Tigania

On the origin of the circumcision age set system, an oral informant said, *“People of Tigania were not practising the circumcision age set system initially. It’s after the Tigania people moved from the Mbwa that they learnt circumcision age set from interactions they had with Nilotes and Cushitic communities”*. The oral informants argued that Tigania mostly could have borrowed this practice from the Maa communities such as the Samburu and the Maasai. The age groups of Maasai and Nandi according to Robert and Walter (1962) are easily adoptable because of their universalistic recruitment nature, they can also exist alongside descent groups without changing their kinship structures. The age group of Nilotes became models for Bantu adoption because the Nilotes and Cushites occasionally attacked the Bantu successfully. The Bantu attributed their success to age group organization. The respondents averred that the practice of the circumcision age set system was adapted from the Maa communities to the people of pre-colonial Tigania. Scholarships by Bernadi (1952), Hollis (1909) and Spear (1981) agree that inter-cultural

exchange enabled the agriculturalist societies to adopt practices associated with the pastoralists.

At some time in their early history which can be traced with some accuracy to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Bantu tribe as did others absorbed into their system of Hamitic culture a trait which is usually known as the age grade system. It may have come through the Galla whose southward pressure may have been responsible for the early movement related to tribal relations. In the age grade system, the community moves through life in groups divided according to age. Each group in turn is responsible for some aspect of the group life (DC/MRU/1955). This archival information resonates well with oral sources and secondary sources that the interactions between the Bantus and the pastoralist communities resulted in the adoption and subsequent adaptation of the circumcision age set system on the people of Tigania.

The information by oral informants pointed out that, when the pre-colonial Tigania arrived from Mbwa the Maasai and Samburu were occupying their present homeland and they did not allow them to settle. Therefore, they were forced to learn their social practices in order to deal with them. The instrumentalism theory avers the importance of the societies or groups' needs to change or adapt to new systems. These new changes enabled the pre-colonial Tigania to suit their new environment. Some of the circumcision age set names of Tigania resemble those of Samburu which depict their close link. For instance, the *Michubu* age set was known as *Mechop* and *Merit* which is the *Miriti* age set in Tigania and the *Lupetaa* age set which in Tigania is referred to as the *Lubetaa* age set. The close analysis of these names as evidenced in both oral sources and oral traditions suggests that there was a period of interaction between the Tigania and the Nilotic speakers. Such interactions influenced the social formations of the pre-colonial Tigania. To show the Kalenjin Tigania past link one of the respondents recalled how the people of Tigania asserted the relations by saying ‘*someone has*

*beautiful gum like that of the Rumpwa* (Nandi) a pastoralist community.

### Meaning of Circumcision Age Set System

This refers to a set of initiates circumcised at the same time from the broad cohort. They are also referred to as an age group system. The circumcision age set system was used to come with a group of circumcised warriors at a given time. It involved the removal of the physical foreskin of the male organ through a comprehensive rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The naming of the circumcision age set was determined by when one was circumcised such as *Kiramunya, Ithalii, and Gichunge. Michubu, Ratanya, Lubetaa, Miriti and Buantai*. As noted by (Keesing, 1981) an age set is a social category or corporate social group consisting of people of similar age who have a common identity, maintain close ties over a prolonged period and together pass through a series of age-related statuses. Age-set systems within which they exist can be regarded as either cyclical or progressive. In a cyclical system, there are a finite number of sets and each recurs over the course of a few generations with new memberships. In progressive systems, an age set appears once and when its members have died it ceases to exist. It's often the case that cultures with either cyclical or progressive systems have equivalent ideas about cosmology and the nature of time. However, the circumcision age set of Tigania was cyclic which comprised eight sets.

### The Context of the Adaptation of the Circumcision Age Set System in Pre-Colonial Tigania.

When the Tigania arrived in the highlands they met the Cushitic and Nilotic communities. In order to survive in a hostile environment of raids and counter-raids and have personal defence they had to learn the rite of circumcision. This information given by oral respondents on the need for community defence concurs with (Robert & Walter, 1962) that some Bantu communities adopted the age

set whereas other groups did not adopt the practice despite living in the same environment. It attributes the borrowing of age set as a requirement for survival and defence in the face of inter-tribal war. The instrumentalism theory avers that such conditions can necessitate a change in society. The need for defence and community survival therefore influenced the people of pre-colonial Tigania to adopt and adapt the circumcision age set system.

Sandberg (1969) in the pre-colonial era there was contact and warfare between the Tigania and the Maasai. Sandberg asserts that Tigania adopted the Maasai age set hence the structure of the Tigania age set reflects the Maasai Age set system structure. The borrowing of the circumcision age set was meant to produce warriors who could be used to defend the community against any external aggression. According to oral informants the first circumcision of all the Meru subtribes happened at Igaironi in Tharaka by a woman. When the Meru arrived in Tharaka from Mbwa they were confronted by the warlike communities. As the Meru people fought with these Maa people most of their people were killed. The elders came together and wanted to assess the reason why their military was weak compared to that of the enemies.

These oral sources on the adaptation are supported by various scholarships such as Sandberg (1969), Fadiman (1993), Mahner (1970) and Goldsmith (1994). These studies attribute the adaptation of the Tigania age set on similar circumstances. The instrumentalists argue that the environment can play a key role in making societies accept change and adapt to new practices. Therefore, the environment settled by pre-colonial Tigania with pastoralist communities greatly influenced them to adapt to this practice. The practice enabled them to survive in such a hostile environment as indicated by both oral sources and oral traditions.

## How did the Borrowing of Circumcision Age Set Occur?

The oral respondents noted that borrowing of the circumcision age set happened in the pre-colonial Tigania. When the Meru were coming out of the land of bondage (Mbwa), they were led by Koomenjoe assisted by Kaura O Bechau. This young man called Kaura O Bechau was sent to the Maasai and he lived with them and secretly learnt their ways and reason for their success in battles. He was initiated in their ways and also underwent their military training. While with the Maasai Kaura O Bechau learnt that once the warriors of the Maasai were circumcised they became very brave and courageous. This was the reason they always defeated them in the battles. Then he escaped and returned to his people and taught them the initiation rites as done by the Maa people. After the circumcision, the Tigania warriors became very brave and courageous and were able to fight the Maasai, drove them away and even extended their boundaries.

## The Structure of the Pre-Colonial Tigania Circumcision Age Set System

The Tigania age set system was cyclic and started to be formed after they came from Mbwa. It started with the adoption of the *Gitiba* system by the earlier ancestors namely; *Michubu* and *Ratanya*. The naming is usually done in parallel order and it depended on the *Gitiba* which was on the line of the circumcision. The parallel structure was *Michubu-Lubetaa-Buantai-Kiramunya* and *Ratanya-Miriti-Gichunge-Ithali*.

This circumcision age set structure was cyclic and each set comprised of three age grades namely the Nding'uri, Kobia and Kaberia. However, the Kaberia age grade was a more recent grade. The oral tradition has it that Nding'uri and Kobia of Miriti went to fight and they were all killed. The elders then decided to circumcise all the young boys and named them *Kabirra* (stand for the killed warriors) the name later changed to Kaberia. From that time henceforth this age grade started to be circumcised being the last grade in every age set. The circumcision age set of the Tigania was organized as follows.

**Table 1: Pre-colonial Tigania Circumcision Age Sets**

The male age set	The parents	The wives age set
Buantai	Lubetaa	Nkoroi
Miriti	Ratanya	Nkoyai
Lubetaa	Michubu	Nkirinathi
Ratanya	Ithali	Nchororo
Michubu	Kiramunya	Mukubu
Ithali	Gichunge	Nchechenga
Gichunge/Gichubiri	Miriti	Nculubi
Kiramunya/Kubai	Buantai	Thirindi

**Source: Oral Informants**

## Social Cultural Roles of the Circumcision Age Set System

The age sets were critical pillars among pre-colonial African societies. These institutions as per structural functionalism theory regulated the affairs of all sections of the people. They were responsible for making and enforcing customary laws and time-

tested policies that bound all members of society. They enforced discipline, and obedience and ensured continuity of social cohesion from one generation to another. In pre-colonial Africa, an individual belonged to his family, clan and ethnic group. The African societies were bound together by their participation in common social functions and ceremonies in their societies. All these

functions were accomplished through age sets and age set mechanisms in which both males and females were socialized. The relationship between men and women in both pastoral and agricultural communities depended on their age, kinship, clan and age-set affiliations which were based on mutual respect. Age grade prescribed roles and responsibilities for each person in society though it differed with age set in that it didn't form a basis for corporate actions by their members as a group. Elderhood plays a significant role in the social cohesion and stability of the community (Ndung'u et al., 2016). The age set system in which one was circumcised had a lot of significance to the individual (DC/MRU/1937). Such information demonstrates how the age set was perceived as an important social aspect of society.

## CONCLUSION

Oral informants and oral traditions averred when the Tigania migrated to their present homeland, they faced hostility from the Nilotes and Cushitic communities they came into contact with. These groups seemed to be militarily superior and the Tigania had to learn their tactics. After the interactions especially with Maasai in Circa 1800s, the Tigania realised that their strength was due to the institution of circumcision and age set system. The Tigania borrowed this practice and they were able to fight the Maasai and other enemies from pastoralist communities.

It was noted from the respondents that the age set played an important role in pre-colonial Tigania. They ensured discipline, courage and brought the various clans together. The age set was important during marriage and the defence of the Tigania community. The leadership of the community stemmed from the age-set system through the Ntwiko. The pre-colonial Tigania also dated various occurrences in the community by use of the age sets. Therefore, the adaptation of the circumcision age set system strengthened the clans of Tigania. This is because the age set system was

cutting across the clan boundaries. This study established that the scope of social functions was expanded. This is because most of the functions were now carried out based on age set irrespective of the members' clan. There were norms, values and practices which ensured that the practice of circumcision age set was sustained. The institution of Njuri Ncheke solved the conflict which arose between the age set and the clan. In doing this, the harmony and stability of this hybrid system was achieved. The study concludes that the hybrid system made the pre-colonial Tigania society to be more organized, secure and stable.

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