

## **Performing Antagonisms and Crossing Gender Boundaries through Body Praxis in the Bukusu Circumcision Ritual.**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The aim of this paper is to discuss how the Bukusu perform antagonisms and cross-gender boundaries through body praxis in their circumcision ritual. During the Bukusu circumcision ritual, participants naturally engage in ritual banter, clownish impersonations, dances and widespread transvestism, which act as both the literal and symbolic facilitators for acts of “performative” gender roles, masculinity and antagonisms. In many respects, the Bukusu circumcision ritual presents a scenario whereby the participants’ behaviours reveal a deep performance of shift of gender roles and dramatisation of antagonisms and where the ritual conversations, jokes, dances, excessive lewdness and mimics permeate all aspects of the ritual. By employing ethnographic methods and using the Carnival Ambivalence Theory, this paper explores patterns of performative antagonisms and gender boundaries in the Bukusu circumcision ritual. The reason why the ritual is central to the entrenchment of masculinity and authority through their displays as being so pronounced is suggested by considering the performances containing the contradictions between the different sexes and ages. The paper concludes that the meanings manifest in these elements thematise issues concerning personhood, masculinity, gender, status and marriage life.

**Key Terms:** Antagonisms, boundaries, gender, circumcision, ritual, perform, masculinity.

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### **How to cite this article in APA**

Changalwa, J. K., Kweya, D., Wako, F. (2021). Performing Antagonisms and Crossing Gender Boundaries through Body Praxis in the Bukusu Circumcision Ritual. *Editon Cons. J. Lit. Linguist. Stud.*, 3(1), 213-219. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjlls.v3i1.265>

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## INTRODUCTION

Participants in the Bukusu circumcision ritual naturally manipulate different aspects of bodily praxis, including nakedness, excessive verbal lewdness and the widespread transvestism to perform gender roles and antagonisms. During the dances, a few men wear women's attires while some women wear men's clothes. Each clownishly mimics the others mannerisms (see plate 1). Leach (1961: 132-6) and Stallybrass and White (2002) posit that there is a relationship between the reversal of roles where the conventional structure does not constrain behaviour during rituals as a cultural interpretation and a joyful affirmation of becoming.

The Bukusu circumcision ritual presents a scenario characterised by a shift of roles and dramatisation of antagonism. The deviations are attributed to several reasons, such as dramatising oppositions of people of different ages and genders, and role reversals expressly through their actions. They also amplify role play where men take over duties like cooking, cleaning, and serving visitors, customarily considered for females in the Bukusu culture. In the process, unity between men and women is enhanced, and a sense of harmonious living, hard work, kindness and being responsible is cultivated.

The ritual understudy presents a scenario portrayed with a shift of roles through parody. For instance, men engage in social roles such as cooking, cleaning and serving visitors with food and alcohol, some of which are regarded as a preserve for women. The Bukusu have their cultural concept pertaining to a "real man." Traditionally, males herded cattle, built homes and cultivated lands, among other arduous tasks. Women cooked, cleaned houses and washed children. The Bukusu being a patriarchal society expects the man to be the head of the family, and such a man is supposed to shun away from those activities

regarded as feminine. As a central rite of passage, the circumcision ritualises the transition from childhood to adulthood, but more than that, it indicates sexual maturity, which is also a symbol of being a "real man." The Bukusu concepts of masculinity or being a "real man" are blurred but eventually entrenched through the body relations that emerge during the shift or roles.

## LITRATURE REVIEW

Rigby (1968: 172-3), in studying the Gogo of Tanzania, viewed transvestism, often accompanied by exaggerated and comical parodies of the contrary sex, as a supplementary practical way of regarding the complex nature of the Gogo's worldview. According to Rigby, calamities such as drought, barrenness in women, crop failure, and cattle diseases are regarded as reversals in fortune, which can be mitigated by manipulating gender categories during the ritual time. A similar trend is observed in the Bukusu circumcision ritual where women dress as men, mimic male demeanour, perform male tasks, and vice-versa to induce a reversal in correlative domains of normal interactions. For instance, Crocker (1982:80) argues that by donning masks, masquerading as other people and utilising the license present in the ritual, people do things or become what they could never be in real life. Below we discuss issues of affirming and blurring gender boundaries and the antagonisms between the young and the elderly.

The paper discusses the elements of the Bukusu circumcision ritual by exploring the meanings emerging from the participants' behaviours that represent the processes of antagonisms and crossing gender boundaries. It is compelled by the field experience whereby a number of observable episodes of the Bukusu circumcision ritual alongside its images of robust erotic behaviour, bawdy language and jokes about the body and body practices kept begging for an explanation. The paper offers a "thick description"

(Geertz, 1975) and an understanding of the sexual connotations of the Bukusu circumcision ritual. The paper employs ethnographic methods. Data analysis is informed by the Carnival Ambivalence Theory.

The Carnival Ambivalence Theory is suitable for this study in several ways. First, it shows how the verbal and the embodied texts manifest with sexual symbolism, prescribed curses, joking relationships, and bawdiness under investigation signify and render the cultural significance and interaction to the Bukusu. Secondly, it aids in unravelling and explaining various critical issues, including the relationship and interaction between queer behaviour as exemplified in verbal and bodily praxis in the Bukusu circumcision ritual and the implication of these messages in the life of the Bukusu. The paper explicitly relies on the tenets regarding comical verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate; oaths, curses, and vulgarity and their relation to the body as significant elements of a complex communal perception of human life (Bakhtin, 1994).

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Between the Males and Females

The issue of antagonisms is a useful point of departure for introducing the body and the conversations regarding the body as fundamental to the understanding of this paper. The performances by the Bukusu circumcision participants surface nuanced contests mostly revolving around the issue of affirming and blurring the normative boundaries between masculinity and femininity and rebellion between genders as depicted through songs (see Song 1). The other is through cross-dressing (see plate 1), where women wear clothes regarded to be for men while men put on clothes viewed as feminine as they mimic each other's behaviour. Gluckman (1954) and Taaffe (1993) provide an appropriate framework within which we can read such deviations

whereby females and males contrast sharply with that of their everyday lives.



Plate 1: A male reveller dressed in a woman's attire with semi-naked men "mounting" each other.

The women's imitation of men during the Bukusu circumcision ritual is often deciphered as a way for the female gender to take on the male's roles. Women quite often deride men, especially on matters of copulation. In that way, women are in a position to effect the needed change. The events demonstrate how, in a nuanced way, women aspire to be like men and play those roles they deem men have failed in the undertaking. Nadel (1954: 113) observed such among the Nupe initiation ritual where boys wear a piece of lady's cloth to imitate and caricature women's movements and mannerisms to elucidate the strategies the gender opponents adopt as gender antagonism. The song *Kumunie Epombo* exemplifies the notion of the antagonisms between men and women. Men deride female reproductive parts, terming them as having extremely insatiable appetites for sex. Thus:

## **Kumunie Epombo in Bukusu Language**

### **Soloist Response**

*Epombo Epombo kumunie epombo*

*Epombo Kumunie epombo*

### **Kumunie Epombo (English translation “Vagina is a Hollow Pipe”)**

#### **Soloist Response**

A pipe Vagina is a pipe

A pipe Vagina is a pipe

In this song, the vagina is referred to as wide and whoever possesses it has an insatiable appetite for sex. It is figuratively compared to a pipe. The song dramatises a continuous contest and trend between men and women. The song depicts the normal patriarchal and masculine script of denigrating the women's sexual organs. Arguably, the men also express their emasculation in the hands of a sexually demanding woman. The opposition is depicted through men expressing their concealed emotions regarding women who engage in sex with numerous men or who seem to overwhelm them in bed.

From the above example, it can be interpreted that sex is deliberately used in the Bukusu circumcision ritual to educate the initiate into another way of seeing. Largely, penetration becomes an entrance into that “other world” from which one can view all the atrocities and happening of society. In this context, the penis and its prowess are linked to exerting power not only to women but symbolic of other parties implied in the Bukusu circumcision ritual. Thus, being a “real man” in the Bukusu society represents struggle, obliteration of the former state and conquest. The masculinity entrenched in males affords them to be “openly aggressive,” “violent”, and “intimidating” because violence is fundamental to being an *omusani*, a circumcised man. On this basis, men are in better positions to influence change.

Apart from the songs and conversations, the male-female antagonism is expressed toward women through men wearing females' clothes and re-enacting copulation movements (see plate 1). Crossdressing was common in the Bukusu circumcision ritual depicting men in wigs and weaves, female garments, affected breasts and buttocks. In most cases, the scenes (as depicted in plate 1) assume the comic roles of older women or women overwhelmed by excessive sexual urges that need to be tamed. In this context, male maskers improvise massive breasts and hips made from rugs and plant materials, as they wantonly chase, dance with, and even kiss onlookers, passers-by and trees. For example, Leathem (1994:58) and Ware (2001) observed that gender inversive disguises filter the characteristics of the opposite sex for humorous effect. Thus, the scenes in the Bukusu circumcision ritual elicit humour which serves a cathartic role for the ritual participants. The typical symbolic themes emanating from these actions include complementary opposition between women and men, the celebration of masculine virility and preparation of the boys for marriage.

The swapping of garments and aping of the opposite gender's mannerisms are also viewed as ritual manipulation meant to satirise certain behaviours and reveal much about how each gender sees itself and the other whose face they temporarily assume through ritual drama. The comic gender reversals of the Bukusu circumcision ritual can be perceived as parodies. How different comic actors or masquerades exaggeratingly perform these inversions is significant to the Bukusu. By exaggerating aspects pertaining to dress code, men disguising as women underpin palpable features of breasts and hips, pregnant bellies and erect nipples, laughter is provoked, which distances the disguised and the clownish performer from his or her role. The disguised clowns dramatise promiscuous and often undesirable sexual behaviours like homosexuality which is detested among



the Bukusu on the one hand. On the other hand, they express a type of masculinity linked to sexual violence.

Taft (1997: 136) argues that gender reversals and roleplaying act as ways of asserting the power of masculinity while attempting to lessen the power of femininity. When females in the Bukusu circumcision ritual cross-dress, they focus on predictable male features such as facial hair and comic costumes and affect the possession of penises and testes. Generally, women's roleplaying seemed less aggressively sexual as compared to those of men. Unlike males, women acting like men do not exaggerate too much of their body attires, but all in all, they at times chase spectators and passers-by; kiss them as they grope their genitals. The foreskin of a boy is regarded as a woman's cloth, and by "cutting" it off, the initiate, still regarded as a child, is believed to be undressing from the woman's "attire" and putting on a man's "attire." The usage of the male garments by women denotes the culmination of the boy's identification with the social realm of children and women. Thus, the acts of antagonisms dramatise the restlessness over separation-individuation through imagery that sustains yet distorts the usual boundaries between motherhood and masculinity. Concepts that inform the Bukusu worldview, particularly on masculinity, copulation and fecundity, are presented using the unusual practices and heightened by the bawdy nature of the circumcision ritual.

### Between the Young and the Elderly

This section is built on the notion that the body in the Bukusu circumcision ritual acts as a symbolic site where antagonism between the young and the elderly is dramatised. During the Bukusu circumcision ritual, some songs, performances and talks emerge as ways the young men express their disdain for the older men. Young men get the opportunity to talk about the elderly and subject them to chastisement on discipline matters. The young

utilise the opportunity to scorn the elderly in society that has engaged in undesirable social behaviours like corruption, promiscuity and sleeping with underage girls without any reprimand. The youth feel threatened by "losing" girls who belong to the same age as the boys to the old and economically viable men. The song, *Mboro ya Mzee Haina Moto* (see Song 2), literally translated, "An old man's penis has no fire," implies the lack of sperms and sexual potency in an old man. Such an older man cannot make a woman pregnant. Thus, the song dramatises the conflict between elderly men and young boys over the scramble for young women.

Campbell (1922: 41) provides an appropriate framework for reading such performances encompassing deviations whereby the young chastise the elderly in a ritual context as channels that give participants chances to iron out their problems and seek help. In the context of the Bukusu circumcision ritual, the age conflict projected by the young suggests a possible way of understanding the participants' narrative through embodied texts with the initiate's sexual vigour, which quashes the elderly's weak body. For instance, the elderly men's penises in the text below are regarded as dead. The young women are advised to avoid them as they are considered to be weak and ineffective:

### *Mboro ya Mzee haina Moto*

*Mboro ya mzee haina moto* (an older man's penis has no fire)

*Mboro ya mzee haina moto* (an older man's penis has no fire)

Song: *Mboro ya Mzee Haina Moto* (an older man's penis has no fire)

The song is sung mostly by the youths who express their resentment toward the older men for taking young girls. The song is about the old man's penis, which is said to lack "fire." It is ridicule of old men's sexual inadequacies and,

consequently, an attack on old men who are alleged to steal young girls from young men. Perhaps a recent phenomenon whereby young girls are going for the rich old men but who are sexually weak instead of the financially poor young males who have great sexual vigour. "Fire" symbolically refers to sexual potency. So, the young males are alerting young girls that the old men do not have the sexual strength needed to satisfy them. This song, referring to body parts, exemplifies a dramatised conflict between different figures of established hierarchies, particularly between the youths and the elderly in the Bukusu community.

In most cases, the elderly members of society lecture the young as a way to chastise them for non-conforming to the Bukusu desire of masculinity. The elders utilise language frequent with taboo words and vulgarity to presuppose a well-informed interactional competence on the part of the initiates and to put the initiates "in their place." From a pragmatic standpoint, the many references to bodily features, the humiliating processes manifest through the abuses directed toward the bodies of the initiates, as illustrated below, elicit laughter among the onlookers. The following is an address from an uncle to an initiate:

**Uncle:** (*Slaps the initiate twice*) *Chisaaa cholile ewe mwanawe. Sewikana sai tawe. Chisuku chawe!* *Ndolele mumoni! Ese sendi kumunie kwa mao tawe. Namwe wenya ese nifule mala khufulamile? Ewe mwanawe, ese ekhulama!*

(The time has come you boy! You can't change your mind now. It's time! Look at me in the eyes! Your mother's buttocks! Your mothers' vagina! Whom do you want to show fear? You dare, and I will beat you (*the uncle slaps him again*)! Here we do not fear the knife!)

In the above address, the uncle challenges the boy to face the pain of the circumcision "knife." The uncle mentions

the taboo words more so touching on the initiate's mother's private parts. He cautions the initiate that circumcision must go on at whatever cost as there is no turning back. The seriousness that pervades the above admonishing is meant to remind the initiate that circumcision is not for the faint-hearted. The initiate is left with no choice but to gather enough courage for the "cut." In the process, manliness is exalted while fear is lambasted as shameful to the initiate and his entire family. This rebuking of the would-be cowards was a common occurrence during the Bukusu circumcision ritual. These prescribed insults and mentioning of taboo words became segments of a multiplex perception of the Bukusu life where manhood and virtues of courage, masculinity and perseverance are cultivated. On this basis, the uncle is in a better position to influence the needed transformation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the elements of antagonisms and crossing gender boundaries in the Bukusu circumcision ritual. The paper has established that the free mingling of the ritual participants becomes necessary for conveying meanings on several subjects, including sex and manhood. The ritual arena also accords elders with an opportunity to offer advice to the youths pertaining to challenges facing the community. However, even though taboo subjects such as penis, vagina, and sex are openly sung and talked about, there is some degree of ambivalence because there are highly moralistic instructions beneath those jokes and vulgarity. Largely, the deviations in behaviour are attributed to some aspect of the expression of hostility, as a way to blur and affirm the gender boundaries between motherhood and masculinity, to dramatise the antagonisms between different groups as an intention to rid the community of vice, and as a compensation for a usually submissive role in ordinary life.

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