

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE CONTEXT OF BUKUSU CIRCUMCISION MUSIC**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Bukusu circumcision music is deeply rooted in the Bukusu cultural fabric that embodies its meaning, significance and function. Therefore, its characteristic creative-compositional-performance style and, the effect and affect resulting from it are informed by the cultural context. Therefore, this chapter addresses the contextual cultural elements such as: the mythical origins of Bukusu circumcision ceremony, the significance of the main phases of the ceremony, the role of parents and close relatives, and significance of taboos, beliefs and symbols related to the ritual.

#### **4.2 MYTHICAL ORIGINS OF BUKUSU CIRCUMCISION RITUAL**

The origin of Bukusu circumcision ritual is mythical and it is attributed to a man called Mango. According to informants (Henry Wanyonyi Kibebe, Timothy Kusolo, and Titus Nyongesa) interviewed in course of this study and Makila (1986:170-179), Mango was the son of Bwayo, Omukhurarwa by clan. His father, Bwayo was the son of Fuya; and Fuya was the son of Makutukutu who led the Bukusu in earlier migrational movements, dying of old age at Esiliangilile. As a young man Mango was very brave and daring. He made himself popular with his age mates because of his amicable disposition and resolute character. At that time Wakhulunya was the tribal leader and Mango's father was *omukasa* (elder) of Bakhurarwa clan. His family lived at Ebwayi. When he grew up and got married he moved to Mwiala, a little further to the north of Bwayi Hills. At Mwiala there lived a notorious serpent called *khururwe-yabebe* that used to devour beasts and human beings that came within the proximity of its lair, which was located in a large cave overgrown with trees. Many people lost their children, goats and even cows to this serpent but nobody dared to hunt it. Barwa and Bayumbu tribesmen who lived in the neighbourhood were so scared of

it that they chose to endure its scourge rather than attempt to get rid of it.

Myth has it that *khururwe-yabebe* was a really monstrous serpent, being enormous in size and frighteningly vicious in appearance. It had deep-set red eyes that flashed like a pair of flaming cinders and could see any object at night however tiny it was. Its jaws were overgrown with whiskers like a he-goat, and its throat was criss-crossed with red, black and white stripes. Its head looked like a rough-hewn rock while its grotesque mouth concealed deadly venomous fangs. It moved about swiftly by crawling and half flying in the air like an oversized raven. Wherever it moved it caused a lot of commotion, hissing, bleating like a goat, rumbling like thunder and breaking down trees that stood in its way. One day the serpent killed Nakhosi, the son of a man called Khakula. The serpent picked up the young man while he was looking after his father's cattle. Khakula being an influential leader (*omukasa*) was able to stir up the Bukusu into the idea of launching a mass hunt for the killer of his child. After a few days, news came round that Mango's son called Malaba had also been killed! Mango was so enraged that he swore to kill the murderous monster single-handed. People were amazed to hear of his solemn declaration. Nevertheless, knowing that he was a resolute and obstinate man they had no doubt that he meant what he said. According to the myth, Mango's neighbours (Barwa), who by then, unlike the Bukusu, practiced circumcision, laughed derisively saying: "Mango, if you can kill that serpent we will circumcise you and give you one of our daughters for a bride for you shall have proven yourself an indomitable warrior whose crowning achievement should be circumcision."

Early one morning, Mango started making preparations for his battle with the killer serpent. He sharpened his sword (*embalu*) and spear - *wamachari* (sharp pointed spear used for fighting at close range) until they were razor sharp. He then took his shield and long spear (*lisakha*) and headed for the serpent's abode in the cave. Mango's neighbours,

Barwa, who had learned about the movements of the serpent, described to him in detail how and when it retired following a day's hunt. They revealed to him that it usually retired into the cave after midday, curling itself into a massive coil and resting its head at the entrance of the cave. While the serpent was away, Mango cut a log of wood and placed it at the spot where it usually rested its head. He then stripped naked and entered the cave, hiding in the dark corner of the entrance. Meanwhile, crowds of people gathered around observing from a distance. Some climbed on trees, while others stood on hilltops. All were shivering with fright, looking in every direction lest the serpent came upon them unawares. Mango stayed in the dark cave until his eyes began to see clearly all around him. He held his breath tight when he heard strange sounds and movements at the entrance of the cave. Suddenly the serpent appeared from its day's hunt thrusting forth and back its forked tongue and snorting like an angry dog. It stopped for a while at the log which Mango had placed at the mouth of the cave, and then turned back sharply without peeping into the nooks of the cave. It made one inspection trip outside the cave, breaking trees, before going back to the cave. Those who saw from afar what was happening around the cave concluded that Mango had been killed and that is why the bloodthirsty serpent was running around breaking trees. On being satisfied with the security of its lair the serpent dashed into the cave and, after curling up its body into a heap it rested its head on the log. Without wasting any time, Mango lashed out a mighty blow with his sword severing the serpent's head. The head flew out and fell against a nearby tree with a tremendous noise. It is said that because of the deadly venom the tree dried up instantly. The remaining body of the snake whipped from side to side, finally curling itself round Mango and almost killing him with constriction. As life began to ebb out of the serpent, Mango pulled out his double-edged sword and cut it into pieces, thus managing to free himself. After resting for a little while, however, he regained his senses and dashed out of the cave, shouting with a great joy his heart had never known before. He gestured and beckoned to the unbelieving crowds, shouting: "Come and rejoice,

come and rejoice! The serpent is dead, come and rejoice. I have killed it; *khururwe-yabebe* is no more!”

The response to Mango’s call was of mixed feelings. Some people ran away thinking that Mango was fleeing from the serpent, whilst others thought that he was crazy. Some Barwa were so shocked that three of them fell from a tree and crashed among its branches; one of them being killed on the spot. A few people, who were curious enough to know what the result was, rushed to congratulate Mango for being alive. When they reached the cave and saw for themselves what had actually happened, they carried Mango shoulder high and started singing jubilantly. Women in the village screamed and ululated until they could be heard far away. Barwa spectators said: “How can *omusinde* (an uncircumcised person) achieve such an incredible feat? We the circumcised ones have been scampering away from this thing (the serpent) like frightened chicks. Mango must be circumcised now”. So Mango agreed to be circumcised, and when he was being led to the circumcision ground his old mother burst into tears and cried: “Wooeii, wooeiii! My only son. Ahaa, hooh, Mango did I not tell you that this circumcision is painful? You have chosen it yourself. There you are!” The Bukusu are said to have turned these fateful words of Mango’s mother into a song, thereby composing the now famous *sioyaye* chant (see example no. 4.1 on the next page, appendix no. 7.10, DVD video clip no. B2 and CD track no.10) that is sung when the initiate is being escorted from the river (*syetosi*) to the circumcision ground in front of his father’s house. It is noteworthy that on video clip no. B2, the song, *Sioyaye*, at the beginning of the clip is performed to signify to the initiate the imminence of the circumcision ceremony. In the song, the initiate is encouraged prove his manhood by being brave when being circumcised. He is for instance told that if he fears circumcision he should go to Luo-land where circumcision is not practiced. Therefore, for him to be accepted as a full member of the Bukusu community, it is mandatory for him to be circumcised.

**Example no. 4.1: SIOYAYE**

<b>Soloist</b>	<b>Response</b>
1. You, you, you, the uninitiated one	hoo o
2. You the uninitiated one	ho o
3. You the uninitiated one	hoo oo
4. You, you, you, we have started	hoo o
5. This song	ho o
6. The one of our forefathers	hoo oo
7. The initiate who fears should go to Luo-land <sup>1</sup>	haa ho
8. Go to Luo-land	ha ho

**4.3 MAIN PHASES OF BUKUSU CIRCUMCISION RITUAL**

The Bukusu circumcision ceremony (*sikhebo/sisingilo*) entails performance of circumcision music by almost all the participants. This makes the ceremony a social event. The ritual takes place in the month of August, the harvesting season in Bukusu land. As mentioned earlier in section 1.1.2, there is normally plenty of food for visitors, the initiate and his relatives. The ritual takes place in every even year (for example, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2004, etc.). Bukusus believe that even numbers are associated with good luck. No circumcision takes place in odd years (*sikumanya*), as it is believed that this would lead to bad omen such as the initiates bleeding profusely or being cut wrongly and injured in the process.

Prospective initiates start practicing the performance of Bukusu circumcision music – by using instruments improvised from dried maize leaves – as early as from about four years of age. During the circumcision year, initiates acquire the basic musical instruments, *chinyimba*, from blacksmiths, or they may borrow the used ones from whoever owns them by paying a small fee (see photo no. 4.1 and DVD video clip no. B3). *Chinyimba*, the plural of *enyimba*, are metallophones made by curving a single thin piece of iron plate (of about 20 by 10 centimetres) into a bell shape. The two slits, each directly opposite the other, are not sealed. They are clapperless (without the centre rod) and

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<sup>1</sup> Luos neighbour with Luyias and they do not practice circumcision.

closely resemble cowbells. They produce a sharp sound when knocked on metal rings – *birere* the plural of *sirere* - worn on both of the initiate's wrists. The initiates start practicing how to play them as early as April. Earlier on, at the beginning of the year, between January and April, the initiate who makes the decision to go for circumcision initially informs his mother about it. The mother discusses with the father about their son's intention to be circumcised and she goes ahead to inform the close relatives such as the maternal uncles and aunts. By early August, the initiate, in the company of singers and dancers travels to homes of his close relatives to inform them of his circumcision date and invite them to participate in the occasion.

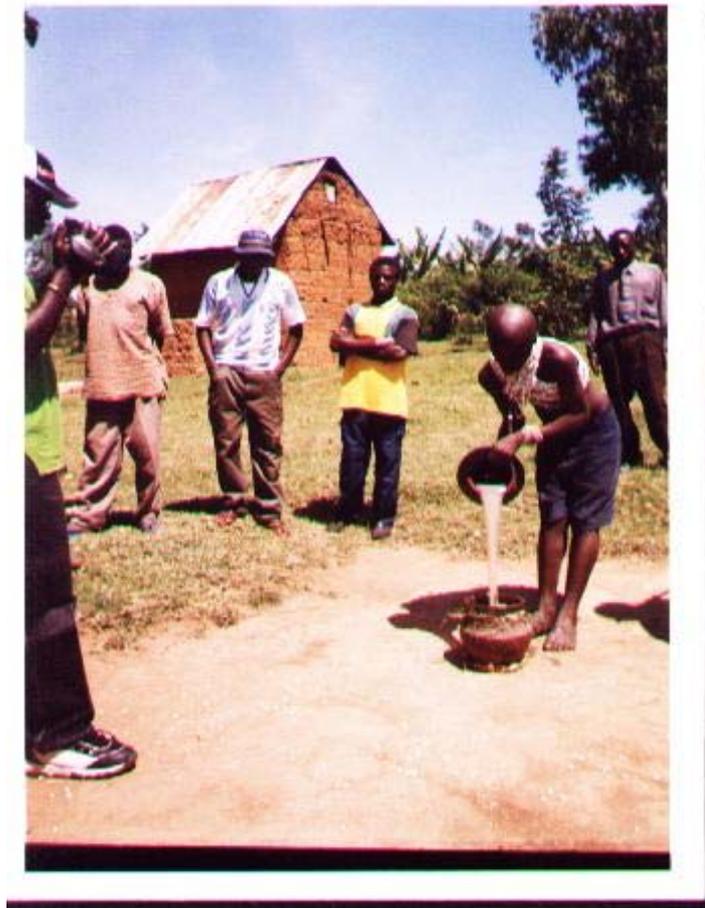
However, before the initiate sets off to invite his relatives, his family conducts an initial ritual, *khuchukhila*, that involves preparation of traditional brew (*busaa/kwete*) by the initiate (see photo no. 4.2 and DVD video clip no. B1). Escorted by his brother or relative who has at one time undergone traditional circumcision, the initiate goes to the river to fetch water in a small pot. Immediately he arrives home he pours water into another pot containing *chimuma/kamalwa kamakhalange* (roasted/fried dough).

While going to and coming from the river, the initiate is not supposed to look back. According to informants, this is a symbol of transition from childhood to adulthood. He is reminded that after circumcision, he should never behave like a child anymore. The same symbolism applies to the fact that while coming from the river, he must use a different route from the one he used while going.



Photo no. 4.1; taken by the researcher: *chinyimba*, the plural of *enyimba*, are the main Bukusu circumcision music instruments. The initiate is the only one who plays them. This is because it is a taboo for an already circumcised person to play *chinyimba*. This means that once a person leaves childhood it is ridiculous for him to behave like a child once more. Moreover, *chinyimba* are central in keeping the regulative beat of the music (also see DVD video clip no. 3).

By brewing the beer that will be drunk on his circumcision day, the initiate takes the first step to personally prepare the food for the visitors who will witness his act of bravery and transition from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, it is a symbol of commitment on his part.



**Photo no. 4.2; taken by the researcher: close relatives watching the initiate as he performs a function called *khuchukhila* that has a close meaning to *khukoya* which means to brew. This symbolizes the fact that the initiate is committed to be circumcised. He symbolizes this by his involvement in the preparation of the traditional brew for the visitors who would come to witness his bravery on his circumcision day (also see DVD video clip no. B1).**

After that, millet flour is mixed with water and the resultant dough is smeared all over the initiate's body after which he is further decorated with beads and rugs of different colors tied around his waist. After that his father addresses him by stressing the fact that since it is his personal decision to get circumcised, he should not give up later as such a move can embarrass his family members, relatives and other visitors (see photo no. 4.3).



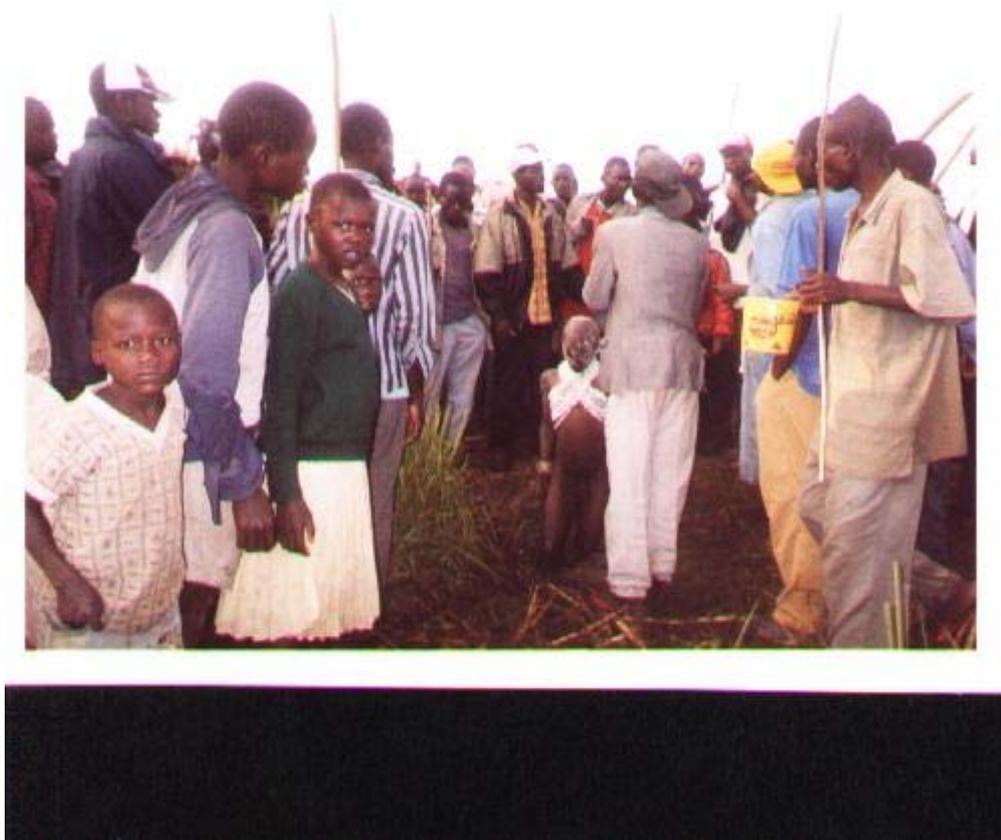
**Photo no 4.3; taken by the researcher: at home, his father gives the initiate advice (also see DVD video clip no. B1).**

Immediately after the father's address, a song – *sioyaye* – that is normally sung while the initiate is being escorted from the river is sung by all the people present at the function (see beginning of DVD video clip no. B2). This signifies that in a short while, he would 'face the knife.' The song sets the appropriate mood for the candidate who then starts playing *chinyimba*, as he sets off with singers-cum-dancers to invite various close relatives selected by his father. This goes on for two to three days ending up with one of the maternal uncles. The uncle encourages the initiate and often slaughters a bull (*eunwa*) for him (see photo no. 4.4). *Luliki*, (the underside of the bull) is cut and hung on the initiate's neck for every one to see how well the maternal uncles have honored their sister's son. This piece of meat is also called *likhoni*. The rest of the meat is carried back to the initiate's home to be used as food for the many invited and uninvited visitors who normally turn up in large numbers on the eve of the circumcision day. It is worth noting that in some cases, the bull is not slaughtered but it is still given out to the initiate for him to rear it for his future use. In case there is nothing to offer, the uncle ties around the initiate's neck a special grass (*lukhafwa*) as a sign of wishing him blessings in his future life. The grass also stands for the uncle's promise that: he would hand over a bull to the initiate at a later date.



**Photo no. 4.4; taken by the researcher: at the home of the initiate's uncle, a slaughtered bull from which *luliki*, the underside meat, is cut and tied on the initiate's neck for everyone to see how well the maternal uncles have honoured their sister's son.**

The eve of circumcision is characterized by feasting, drinking beer, singing, dancing and mocking the initiate and his parents. In a few cases, the participants and the initiate go to sleep after midnight for about three hours. More often, the singing and dancing goes on up to dawn. In the morning between five and six o'clock, the initiate is taken to the river (*syetosi*) where he is smeared with cold mud and taken back home for circumcision (see photo no. 4.5). It is believed that the morning chill coupled with cold mud contribute to making the body numb and reducing the pain.



**Photo no. 4.5; taken by the researcher: at the river, *syetosi*. Everybody watches the initiate as he is smeared with cold mud.**

It is noteworthy, as shown in the photo above, that unlike the Tiriki or Xhosa circumcision rituals, the Bukusu circumcision rituals are a public function that are not a preserve for a few male members of the society. For instance, women and children are allowed to accompany the initiate in all the stages of the ritual. However, they are not given leading roles especially as song leaders. Moreover, especially on the circumcision day, they are not allowed to be too close to the initiate or even walk ahead of processions. It is arguable that this is so because women in the Bukusu community are not circumcised and hence men take a central role because of the indelible effect and affect circumcision has on their personhood. On this aspect, Henry Wanyonyi Kibebe, a key Bukusu cultural informant observes that “women and children are allowed to participate and watch all the events, including

watching the initiate when he is naked to symbolize the fact at that this stage he is still 'a child' and he deserves no respect. It is only after he bravely undergoes circumcision that he is accepted and respected as a full member of the Bukusu community. This dimension also inspires the initiate to be more eager to go through circumcision so that he can do away with the constant embarrassment."

#### **4.4 THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND CLOSE RELATIVES**

...thought processes from the so-called developed world descend from Descartes' powerful idea on which western individualism is based: 'I think-therefore I am.' Thought processes out of Africa stem from the basic idea of *Ubuntu*: 'A person is a person by virtue of other people'. These two ideas are the opposite sides of the same coin. Descartes' idea fosters strong individualism while the concept of *Ubuntu* fosters the development of communal spirit (Orhrle and Emeka, 2003:38).

The above quote supports the fact that during the Bukusu circumcision ceremony, the entire community is involved and this dimension underscores the inherent importance of communal bonding and support to the initiate. In this case, the initiate is part and parcel of the wider community to which he belongs. It is also symbolizes the philosophy of life in the African context where individuality is discouraged and communal spirit and interdependence is encouraged. The initiate's parents, close relatives and neighbors usually do all they can to encourage and prepare him for this rite of passage. Prior to inviting the relatives, the initiate informs the parents and also fixes handles made of small dry sticks (*chifufu*) and sisal fiber on bells (*chinyimba*). These are tied in place by using rubber bands obtained from used bicycle air tubes. The initiate decides the costume he wishes to put on during the entire period of two to three days when he sets out to invite several close relatives to come and witness his bravery on his circumcision day. He also assists in collecting, preparing and splitting the firewood to be used for cooking during the ceremony.

The initiate's father arranges the circumcision dates and gives orders about the routes to be followed and the relatives to be invited. He also chooses and pays the circumciser. On the circumcision day, he gives the initiate his last advice and directs him to the circumcision spot (*etyang'i*) as shown in photo no. 4.6.



**Photo no. 4.6; taken by the researcher: *etyang'i*, the spot where the initiate stands when being circumcised. This is in front of his father's house.**

The initiate's mother acts as a go-between by taking the message of intent of her son's circumcision to the father. She participates in the setting of the crucial dates of ceremony and also makes sure that there is enough food for the visitors. She makes sure that the visitors are

happy, eat well and have enough of the traditional brew (*busaa*). She is not supposed to have sexual intercourse during the month of the ceremony, as doing this, it is believed, would cause some misfortunes to the initiate in the process of being circumcised. When the actual circumcision is going on, she sits on the floor in her house with her legs horizontal to the floor until she hears the circumciser's whistle. This is when she stands up and ululates as a sign of victory and joy.

The maternal uncles of the initiate are regarded with high esteem as regards the Bukusu circumcision ceremony. It is assumed that since, at one time, they got a share of the dowry paid in favour of the initiate's mother, it is mandatory that they offer a bull or a he-goat to the initiate's family during the ritual.

The maternal uncle confirms the readiness of the initiate early in the year by asking him whether he (the initiate) is serious and ready for circumcision. Thereafter, he sets aside a he-goat or bull to be slaughtered or handed over to the initiate on the eve of circumcision. At times, the uncle gives the initiate money or promises to give him a present of his choice latter. Apart from advising and encouraging the initiate, he also guards him and his mother against any harassment by participants who sometimes become rowdy and abusive. He also provides psychological and financial support to the initiate's family. The maternal uncle may perform some rites such as putting a piece of meat (*likhoni*) – the underside of the slaughtered bull – around the initiate's neck. This meat is a visual symbol of the uncle's commitment to the process of his nephew's transition from childhood to adulthood and his best wishes for the initiate's future life. Sometimes the initiate's uncles are often consulted for suggestions or recommendations on the choice of the circumciser for the initiate. Through the rituals he performs, he wishes the initiate long life and prosperity.

The age mates of the initiate's father (*bakokiwe/bakoki*) advise and encourage the initiate. They also often support the initiate's family

morally and financially. They are given special treatment because it is believed that they can cause harm through their utterances of bad wishes should they get annoyed with the initiate's father. The annoyance normally results from the failure of the initiate's father to meet their expectations, for instance; not slaughtering a bull to be shared among his age mates. The share (*lubaka*) can also be in terms of money. Examples of the harm to the initiate are: prolonged healing period, bleeding and any other kinds of bad luck.

The brothers and sisters of the initiate escort him to invite relatives and later, after circumcision assist (especially elder brothers) him in the application of the medicine to the wound. One of the initiate's younger sisters (*namachengeche*) is given the duty of carrying his costumes, instruments and clothes after he removes them on the circumcision day while going to the river. The same sister receives all gifts and presents given to the initiate after circumcision. She cleans up the initiate's body by removing the mud from his head (see photo no. 4.7). Lastly, she takes care of the initiate by serving him with food and drinks. Besides the sister, sometimes the initiate's younger brother (*namakhala*) also acts as his personal assistant as he learns how he would take care of himself when his time of circumcision comes.



**Photo no. 4.7; taken by the researcher: after circumcision, the initiate's younger sister removes mud (*kwa ututu*) from his head. Sometimes the initiate's grandmother may remove the mud.**

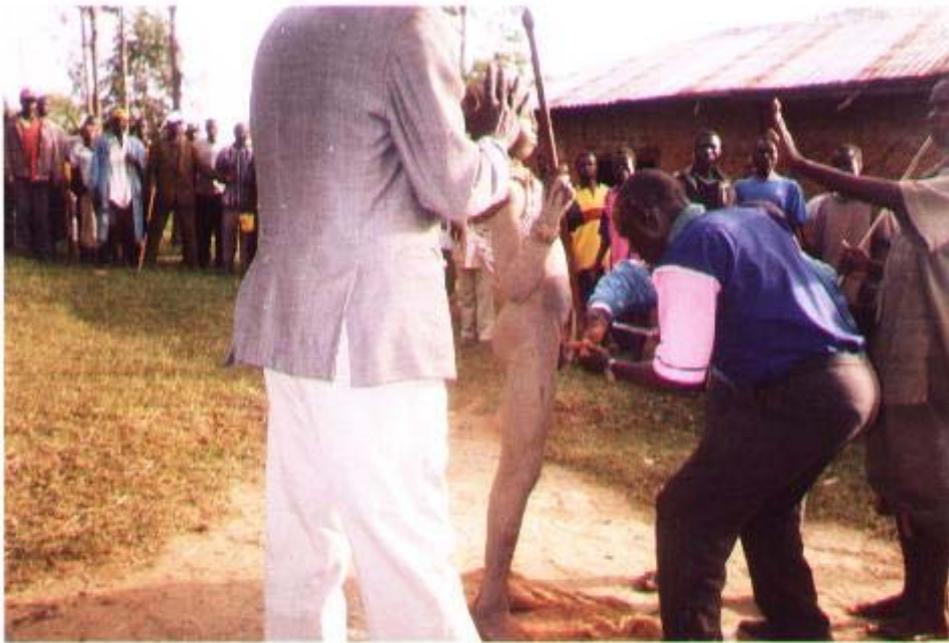
Often, apart from the initiate's sister, his grandmother may remove the heap of mud and a piece of grass (*kwa ututu*) from his head after circumcision. The grandparents advise and take care of the initiate before and after circumcision. The grandfather normally has a special duty of smearing the initiate with contents of a he-goat's or a bull's stomach on the eve of circumcision. At this point he gives the initiate his last words of wisdom. This act is taken to be a kind of blessing, best wishes and encouragement to the initiate.

Lastly, the close neighbours and the community at large generally help in the planning and organization of the ceremony by providing financial and moral support. The cohering and bonding reflected in the distribution of tasks and the involvement of family and community reinforces the importance of this initiation that serves the role of

collectively admitting the initiate into the community as a responsible member. After initiation, he is expected by the community to likewise take up significant participatory roles in subsequent similar initiations for other community members and hence perpetuate the communal cultural identity bond. This qualifies the initiation as a social and humanistic phenomenon/procedure where the initiates are trained and mandated to be useful and responsible future leaders in their community.

#### **4.5 THE CIRCUMCISER**

Among the Bukusu, it is believed that circumcisers come from specific clans such as: Bamasike, Bakhone and Babasaba. Some people from these clans who possess the 'circumcision spirit' are identified whenever the song (*sioyaye*) that escorts an initiate back from the river is sung. Such a person – a man or a woman – shivers and often faints. Although, in the Bukusu community, women cannot qualify to circumcise, the spirit affects a few from the specified clans. Since the possession of the spirit depends on inheritance, there is a likelihood of such a woman giving birth to a baby boy who may be a circumciser in his future life.



**Photo no. 4.8; taken by the researcher: a circumciser circumcising the initiate as every body watches. The whole process usually takes 10 to 20 seconds.**

A man in possession of the circumcision spirit, and if he is already circumcised, accompanies the circumciser to observe the circumcision process. Later, he is given the duty of carrying dry soil dust (*lipukhulu*) that reduces the slipperiness of the fingers of the circumciser's helper (*omutili*) while holding the foreskin of the initiate's penis in readiness for the circumciser to cut it. At this stage of carrying the fine soil dust, he is called *omubingilisi*.

After gaining experience, *omubingilisi* goes to the next stage where he is called *omunuchi*. *Omunuchi* is the person who pushes the initiate's foreskin backwards and applies the fine dust powder. At the final stage, *omunuchi* becomes *omutili* after acquiring enough experience. A qualified and practicing circumciser then systematically trains *omutili* to circumcise by giving him a few assignments under supervision. *Omutili*

only qualifies to be a circumciser if his first-born is a male and has already undergone traditional circumcision. If his firstborn is a female, he must wait until she gives birth to her first born. Should such *omutili's* firstborn daughter's new born be a boy, then, he gets the mandate to start circumcising. Before practicing, a qualifying circumciser is ordained by undergoing the 'purification of knives' ceremony called *khubita kimibano*. During the ceremony, elders bless the knives, which he would start using during his circumcision career.

Traditionally, circumcision is a respected ritual that admits a boy into manhood with responsibility and mandate to start his own family. Therefore, the main player in the process, the circumciser - who is always a man, is given due respect. He plays a special role and has high status in the Bukusu circumcision ritual.

A circumciser is expected to be a role model to the person whom he circumcises. He is expected to be always neat and well behaved in the society. Before circumcision, he has several tasks to accomplish. One of the basic things he does on the circumcision day is to check on the shape of the initiate's foreskin in order to be acquainted with the best holding and cutting style. He ensures that the knives are clean and razor-sharp. The sterilized brick-dust powder should always be readily available for use. After circumcision, he performs a ritual called *khulumia* in which he gives the initiate pieces of advice concerning how he should behave as an adult, what he should do and what he should not do while undergoing the healing process in his resting place (*likombe*) located in the initiate's mother's house. After the ritual, he officially allows the initiate to start eating. He also advises on the types of foods that the initiate should not eat. It is believed that protein food such as: meat, eggs, milk and fruits speed up the healing of the circumcision wound.

#### **4.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF TABOOS, BELIEFS AND SYMBOLS**

As reflected in the foregoing sections, the Bukusu circumcision rite is characterized by taboos and beliefs that are depicted in the actions of participants through various rituals. On the eve of the circumcision day, a shrine (*namwima*), which is believed to be the ancestors' house, is built in front of the initiate's father's house. Here, many rituals are performed. The Bukusu believe that the circumcision rite cannot be successful without the moral support of the ancestors. This is why the blood of the slaughtered animal is sprinkled in the *namwima* for the ancestors to partake of the same.

*Namwima* is a small hut of about one meter in height. It is thatched by using a special rare species of grass called *nabuyeywe*. The trees used in constructing of the shrine are rare and have special characteristics. For instance, a tree called *lusola* or *lusyola* is hard to break and its name is an equivalent to the English word 'arbitrator.' Another tree used is *likomosi*, which is known for its quick multiplication rate. Its use in this context is a pointer to the fact that it is the wish of the respective community that the initiate should fecund after circumcision. Therefore, the Bukusu circumcision ceremony entails a myriad of symbolism. It is not just a mere cut of the foreskin of the initiate's penis; rather, it entails seeking for divine wisdom and blessings from the spirits and ancestors and hence it is not a secular event but a religious one.

The animals slaughtered in the ceremony have certain characteristics. They have to be healthy and brightly colored male animals (see photo no. 4.9). They should not be castrated or deformed in any way. Such animals should not be one-eyed, with a broken leg or horn and so on. This implies that the ceremony is associated with fecundity, good health and the future success of the initiate.



**Photo no. 4.9; taken by the researcher: a brightly coloured bull being slaughtered. The bright colour symbolizes the community's wish for the initiate to have a bright future.**

Songs performed in the Bukusu circumcision ritual have specific functions and meanings. For instance, *Sioyaye*, a song for escorting the initiate from the river, addresses the historicity and origin of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony that is believed, as discussed earlier, to have been started by a man called Mango. It is a taboo to sing this song at any other time other than in the circumcision context. It is believed that if it were sung out of context, a bad omen would befall the singer or his family members. However, if the singer were uncircumcised, the ancestral spirits would circumcise him in the night. In such a case, the foreskin of his penis would swell and the circumciser would be summoned to come and circumcise him even in the year or period when circumcision is not practiced. According to most informants this belief may have been advanced and perpetuated

for reasons of respecting the ritual, highlighting its sanctity, and qualifying it as a Bukusu symbol of achievement and identity.

Another belief is related to the heap of mud (*kwa ututu*) placed on the head of the initiate together with a piece of grass (*lusinyande*). According to most informants, the mud and the single grass together symbolize a new home for the initiate, that is, after undergoing circumcision, the initiate is mandated by the Bukusu community to build or start his own home. It may be argued that these symbols signify, grass and mud, the materials Bukusus use to build traditional huts. However, according to other informants, the heap of mud (*kwa ututu*) is associated with a wild dark bird whose feathers are very poisonous. This particular bird is called *ututu*. The poison in its feathers symbolizes the bitterness of the Bukusu circumcision rite called *embalu*. Some informants also observed that the grass is used to detect whether the initiate is trembling or not. It is believed that while being circumcised, a slight shiver of the initiate's body, which is interpreted as the initiate's fear or cowardice, would be reflected/detected through the shaking of the grass. The rarity of the grass makes it special. It symbolizes the special attention and seriousness the Bukusu place on the institution of circumcision. According to Henry Wanyonyi Kibebe, the virtue of bravery is encouraged so as to psychologically prepare the initiate for his future family leadership roles.

Throughout the entire process leading to circumcision, the initiate is expected to be serious and not to laugh under any circumstances. When going to or coming from the river, he is always under guard and not allowed to look backwards or sideways. Doing this would be interpreted as a sign of fear. This matter becomes more serious when the initiate comes from the river. He is not expected to blink even once!

The initiate is not expected to put his bells (*chinyimba*) on the ground at any time. It is believed that if he does so, they would be bitten by black ants and cease producing any sound. Since *chinyimba* are the main

instruments that provide rhythm in the Bukusu circumcision music, their role in the performance of the music is so central that they cannot be done away with. Therefore, the initiate is sensitized over the importance of the instruments. The functional and the artistic-aesthetic aspect of the music would be greatly interfered with in case he places them down and probably misplace them in the process.

In the Bukusu community, twins are considered to be very delicate, special and respected children. They are also treated differently when it comes to their circumcision. They are always spotted with millet flour (*limela*) on the face, hands and sometimes all over their body. It is believed that this makes them steady and not to panic.

On the eve of circumcision, a ram is slaughtered and the contents of its intestines (*buse*) are smeared on the twins before they go to the river. As mentioned earlier, this symbolizes blessings and good luck to the initiate. Twins are normally taken to the river as early as 3:00 a.m. and circumcised by 5:00 a.m. According to most informants, the reason for this is that they are not supposed to be exposed anyhow to the public during daytime. This belief enhances the fact that twins are a rare phenomenon and they are feared and respected. For that reason, they should be acknowledged and treated specially in all respects. This is one way of recognizing the power of the Supreme Being responsible for creating them. Twins are always circumcised on the same day. The elder of the two, that is, the one who was born first (*mukhwana*), is circumcised first, followed by the second one (*mulongo*). Traditionally, the circumciser must use the same knife to circumcise both of them so as to justify the fact that they shared the same womb, were born on the same day and should always live in mutual agreement. However, according to informants, with the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, nowadays, circumcisers have been advised by government health officers to use separate knives to circumcise twins.

In the case of the twins being male and female, the female twin always follows the male one everywhere he goes during the period of inviting relatives. Although she occasionally dances with her male counterpart, she does not play *chinyimba*. On the circumcision day, she accompanies her brother to the river where she is tied with banana leaves around the waist. Unlike her twin brother, she doesn't strip naked and only her face that is smeared with mud. It is believed that her presence gives moral support to the real initiate who may psychologically feel confident; that after all he is not facing the ordeal alone. This factor is pertinent since in many cases, twins, especially identical ones, are affected by whatever happens to either of them.

On arrival at home from the river, the female twin is the first to be initiated by the symbolic act of cutting part of the banana leaves tied around her waist. The knife used to circumcise the twins is not used to circumcise any other initiate on the same day. It is supposed to be ritually cleansed before being used again on another day. After circumcision, the female twin continues to accompany her male twin and provide him with basic needs like serving him with food and drinks.

After circumcision, some people prefer to use traditional herbs obtained from a shrub called *enguu*, modern clinical medicine or a mixture of the two. *Enguu* is applied on the wound in the mornings and evenings. There are two types of *enguu*: the male one that has thin leaves and believed to be more painful than the female one which has wide leaves. The male type is used to discipline rude initiates who would be humbled and taught a lesson by the intense pain. One of the advantages of using *enguu* is that it heals the wound quickly. Moreover, it inculcates in the initiate the virtues of courage and tolerance due to endurance of the severe pain that is usually more bitter than that of circumcision itself. It is a way of preparing the initiate to face future challenges in life.

The preparation of *enguu* entails plucking of green leaves from the plant and drying them before being crushed into powder that is applied on the wound. It is believed that the male *enguu* can be made more excruciating if the person plucking it whips it as he whistles before plucking its leaves! In addition to *enguu*, the leaves of a plant called *bimeselo* are used to keep the wound clear of dirt by being wrapped on the wound and removed after every two or three days.

On the basis of the foregoing, it is arguable that in view of the fact that traditional Bukusu circumcision rite, as observed in the current research, is administered on individual initiates by using a sterilized knife in each case, the imputation about spreading HIV/AIDS via traditional circumcision should be false (see DVD video clip no. B4 and appendix no. 3).

The current research does not identify and discuss features of Bukusu circumcision ritual and/or music in the context of the old/past practices. The study captured this aspect of the Bukusu culture in the context of modernity, tradition and continuity. It is therefore imperative to point out that like other dynamic African cultural practices, the Bukusu circumcision ritual is inevitably evolving to conform to the ever-changing socio-cultural and economic situation of the society. As earlier mentioned, the dilemma and problem in the Bukusu community is centred on how to strike a balance between the traditional and modern perspectives in the form, content, organization and performance of Bukusu circumcision music. This dilemma has given rise to three protagonists: the traditionalists, semi-traditionalists and modernists. While traditionalists advocate for the traditional organization and performance of Bukusu circumcision music, the semi-traditionalists mix the modern and traditional aspects. On the other hand, the modernists have altogether done away with the traditional music. Consequently, as earlier mentioned, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- (a) What changes are evident in the organization and performance of Bukusu circumcision music and what are the main causes and functions of the changes?
- (b) In view of the emergent/current socio-economic and technological developments, is it relevant/necessary for the Bukusu to continue with the traditional circumcision ritual and the performance of the traditional circumcision music?
- (c) How has the Bukusu circumcision ritual changed and how has this affected the performance of the songs, and verbal themes in the songs, that are part of the ritual?
- (d) Which of the Bukusu traditional circumcision music traits have been selected or rejected?
- (e) How has the transformation of the music traits in (d) above been carried out?
- (f) What has been the effect of changes, if any, on the Bukusu circumcision music in particular?

In the face of the changes, matters relating to creativity, compositional style, context, practice and presentational form of the music are directly affected in various ways. Changes in the organization and administration of the Bukusu circumcision ritual and by extension, the performance of the music that accompanies it are largely associated with external agents such as colonialism, Christianity, formal education and the post independence state. For instance, many initiates no longer travel long distances on foot as modernity has introduced public transport instead. Moreover, the system of formal education leaves initiates no time to engage for long in elaborate activities leading to circumcision, as they are required to be in school the whole day for five days in a week.

Bukusu circumcision ritual was traditionally a test of maturity and preceded marriage, so it took place between the ages of 18 to 24 and above. Today, it is no longer a test of maturity and does not necessarily precede marriage. It is at the risk of losing its religious

value and becoming gradually secularized as the focus rests more on the physical than the social functions of the ritual. According to Gilbert Mauka Wandabwa, one of the key informants, “today most initiates are circumcised at the age of eight to twelve years.”

As explained above, in the past physical maturity was a prerequisite for circumcision so manhood was synonymous with adulthood. Today, due to the tender age at which initiates are circumcised, there has developed a dichotomy between manhood and adulthood where the two no longer coincide. Change has occurred to the Bukusu circumcision ritual owing to the change of worldview from the largely communitarian one of traditional life, to a new individualistic one propagated by Christianity and largely through formal education. Consequently, the Bukusu circumcision ritual is, somehow, no longer an exclusively communal and public affair as people now have the option of carrying it out quietly in the privacy of their homes or in hospitals.

However, modernity and secularism have failed to completely do away with cultural practices like the Bukusu male circumcision; instead they have only succeeded in modifying them. Thus, it has been difficult for Christianity to completely eradicate most cultural values in general and Bukusu circumcision in particular. This partially explains why Bukusu male circumcision has continued to survive, albeit in a modified manner. For instance, since the Bukusu Christian holds dual identity, he may go ahead to circumcise his son traditionally and sing Christian songs for him. Likewise, he may circumcise his son in hospital and end up explaining to him the meanings and values of traditional circumcision most of which are embodied in circumcision music. Either way, the traditional context of the form and content of traditional Bukusu circumcision music has been compromised.

It is noteworthy that in the context of this study, the changes referred to are to do with the administration and the general organization of the

Bukusu traditional circumcision rite but not changes in the structure of the music. The music, if performed, is definitely recognizable as Bukusu circumcision music in terms its characteristic framework. However, changes may be in terms of word choice whereby the soloist's words refer to the prevalent socio-economic context in the society. For instance, with the advent and spread of HIV/AIDS, the soloist may fit new texts in an already existing and/or known music framework in order to sensitize the community about the scourge and many other social-cultural matters (see appendix no. 3; appendix nos. 7.1, 7.3, 7.4 and 7.7; and CD track nos. 1, 3, 4 and 7). Urbanization has led to mixing of cultures and inter-borrowing between them. This has led to the gradually breaking down traditional social setting. The new forms of conducting circumcision have in most cases interfered with or replaced the performance of the circumcision music. In sum, the new procedures are gradually secularizing the rite and hence displacing the conducive setting for the performance of the traditional music. For instance, in some cases, a number of parents who have circumcised their children in hospital may jointly organize for a church service for the initiates. Here, Christian music is performed in the place of traditional circumcision music.

#### **4.7 CONCLUSION**

This section is an overview of the cultural, philosophical, psychological, and the anthropological background in which the Bukusu circumcision music is deeply rooted. The main areas discussed are the mythical origins of the Bukusu circumcision ceremony, significance of major phases of the ceremony, the roles of parents, close relatives and the circumciser, the significance of taboos, beliefs, symbols and an evaluation of changes in the Bukusu circumcision ritual. In summary, the focal point of this chapter is to provide the necessary background information that is crucial for the clear understanding of form, content and performance of the music in the context of this study. However, the effect of modernity on the organization of the rite and the performance of traditional Bukusu circumcision music has also been expounded.