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The African Traditional Beliefs & Practices

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Abstract:

Every ethnic group possesses its own distinct understanding of the life cycle and its own elaborate set of rituals to mark life's stages. Many cultures in our traditional Africa have initiation rites to mark each phase of a person's life and their progressive entrance into a new social category. In many cultures, a child goes through several graduation stages which recognize one's growth and assigns him or her a place in the community. Each stage is marked by a specific ritual to introduce a new-born to its ancestors. It is in preparation for adulthood, those of marriage and of death. These moments marked important phases in the human life cycle and they were moments used to transmit complex messages about identity, such as social, political and religious roles. Initiation in the African setup was a central bridge in life; together one's youth and adulthood, the period of ignorance and that of knowledge. In initiation, the bridge between male and female, fatherhood with motherhood was created and this signaled the official permission for one to get married and bear children. It joined the living with the departed, the visible with the invisible. Puberty rites were also a gateway to marriage; it gave young people an opportunity to prepare for marriage. The period spent at the initiation school was used to teach them many things concerning the life of their people, their history, their traditions, their beliefs, and above all how to raise a family.

1. Views of Religion

1.1. The African Understanding of Religion

Mbiti (1975:10) identifies five elements as being constitutive of all religion: 'beliefs, practices (ceremonies and festivals), objects and places, values and morals, and religious officials'. He analyses the nature of religion seen through the African lens along these lines. Religion, for Africans, is the normal way of looking at the world and experiencing it, for it is so much part of human existence that it is not seen as something separate.

The African understanding of religion is an understanding of the connectedness of all things. This also becomes clear from an African worldview. There is a close relationship between all things. There is one reality, with no distinction between physical and spiritual. The meaning of life is derived from unity and the rituals performed are an expression of this unity. Morals and ethics are concerned with maintaining unity. Religion, therefore, does not keep this unity intact – it is the expression of this unity. Religion is not the method by which to create unity but the celebration of unity.

An African understanding of religion holds that religion is reality and reality are religion. There is no separation between spheres of reality. The transcendence (God, powers, and spirits) is just as much part of reality as the visible elements in the world. Religion can never be perceived as a separate fragment focused on a different 'reality'. Magesa (1997:52) illustrates this by pointing out that, for Africans, 'the universe is perceived as an organic whole'. In African religion, 'humans maintain the bond between the visible and invisible spheres of the universe' (Magesa 1997:72). Wernhart (2003:269) also supports this by stating that 'the concept of the unity of body and spirit is true not only of ancient Greek philosophy and Hellenistic anthropology but also applies to African Religion'.

Okot p'Bitek, a staunch protector of African culture, describes 'African Traditional Religion as a religion not concerned with metaphysics, but with the world' (Maluleke 1998:127). African Traditional Religion experiences religion as being actively part of the experienced world.

Religion is not a structure created to reflect a metaphysical (virtual) world. In his research Wernhart (2003:265) notes that 'the African understanding of religion draws no distinction between reality and virtuosity'. P'bitek (cited in Maluleke 1998:127) goes further and says that 'there is no such thing as animism. Animism creates the idea of a second, virtual, plane of existence'. There is only one world, one reality, and religion is part of this reality. Sundermeier (1999:11) in his analysis says that 'a distinction between culture and religion betrays a Western understanding of religion' - (African Traditional Religion sees religion as the foundation of all life, and to explain this position further Thorpe (1992:3) uses the term 'an integral part', referring to religion. It is, therefore, true to say that everything in life has to do with religion. Mbiti (1990:1) further states that 'religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully

that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it'. To this one could add Thorpe's view (1991:28) that nature is invested with a mystical, religious quality'. Everything (animate and inanimate) forms part of a living community. This holistic understanding of reality holds that all elements in nature (i.e. animals, plants, rivers, mountains etc.) have religious significance and must be treated with respect. Of course, this creates a dilemma as Thorpe (1992:112) observes in his statement that 'the traditional African understanding of religion acknowledges the existence of an invisible spiritual world and simultaneously maintains that all things are united and interconnected'.

Having this background in mind, one is able to understand why initiation rites were so important in the African setting. They celebrated and acknowledged life as a gift and each stage was accompanied by some religious rituals and symbols. The fact that there was a supernatural element was a sure sign that there was seriousness in the matter and the transformative outlook could not just be overlooked.

1.2. How the African Religion and Rites were viewed from the West

Over the centuries there have been attempts to define the phenomenon of religion. These attempts according to (Momen 1999:52–73), have come from various perspectives, ranging from the psychological, sociological and anthropological to the philosophical and theological and today many believe that they have come from a biological perspective. Crosby (1981:5) says that 'these attempts cannot only be arranged according to perspectives but also according to theories' (providing definitions for the groups of definitions). Although varied, the theories and definitions became fixed in stereotypical forms. As a result of the confusion caused by the plethora of definitions, Figl (2003:71) observes that 'there have even been suggestions to discard the most dominant Western term 'religion' altogether'.

According to Figl, (2003), it is good to keep in mind that the majority of definitions of, and theories on, religion and any African practice have originated from a Western background. Even the whole existence of the term 'religion' is seen as a '*eurozentrischen*' (Eurocentric) term. Sundermeier (1999) also points out that the mere question about what religious practices are being portrayed in a Western background. Thus, a whole world of Western-determined references is implied when talking about religion, but as such, a so-called Western understanding of religion is not necessarily homogenous.

The dominant religion of the West has been Christianity. The result is that a Christian (Western) understanding of religion dominated the scholarly field. There are those who now believe that there are no proper equivalents to the term 'religion' in other cultures. A Christian theology of religions led Western scholars to arrange religions in a hierarchical structure, implying that some religions were inferior to others. The term 'primal religion' came up and it will be further described below.

1.2.1. Primal Religion

Western thought on the above led to the creation of a category named 'primal' or 'traditional' religions. This category was used to group religions together that showed similarities in structure. The premise for this categorization was the acceptance of the evolutionistic development of religions. As Thorpe (1992:5) observes. 'the earliest religion in 'original' form which could be discovered by studying religious practices of contemporary tribal societies'. The assumption was that some religions progressed in development and others did not. The underdeveloped religions were pejoratively referred to as primal, traditional or primitive, or even tribal, religions. This meant that any practice connected to that primal religion was somehow considered pagan or primitive.

Even in efforts to try to understand African religions, scholars have 'abstracted African religions from their cultural and historical contexts' (Westerlund 1993:59). Scholars of religion, as well as anthropologists, had a tendency to "Westernize" African religions and practices.

Magesa (2002) points out that Western scholars defined African religion in terms of Western philosophy. He says that 'if there was such a thing approximating religion at all in Africa, they "Western scholars" argued that, it was "animism" or "fetishism", a multiplicity of ritual actions with natural objects as deities' (Magesa, 2002:14). The purpose of missionaries in such conditions was to do away with this religion based on superstitious practices and convert Africans to the God known by the Europeans.

Thus as Momen (2009:356) observes in his analysis, 'African Traditional Religion is part of the category designated as primal religion' A major characteristic as Thorpe (1992:5) of primal religions is 'the fact that they originated and developed in relative isolation from other cultures' He lists the following as further characteristics of a primal religion:

- it is a religion found among societies consisting of relatively small groups of individuals who are heavily dependent on one another, and they are referred to as 'tribal societies'.
- society is dependent on nature.
- it does not have a (long) history of written culture.
- metaphors, symbolism, and art play an important role in that culture.
- the religion does not have a specific founder.

1.2.2. The Misrepresentation

Unfortunately, African traditional religion which should be employed for its potentially salutary effect has been misunderstood and is still misrepresented. The misconception is amply evident from the many wrong names by which traditional religion has been described. These descriptions mostly came from the beliefs and practices (eg rites of initiation) that the missionaries tried to discard without a proper scientific research. It is difficult to understand the tenacity with which African traditional religion has been termed a *primal religion*. Evidently, the use of the term is to distinguish it from the so-called great or world religions. A *primal religion* is supposed to have no founders. It is without a literary source.

Having this misinterpretation, it becomes easy to discard all that the African religion contributed. One of the most important concept (which is related to our topic) for the African traditional religion is that of respect for the *sacredness of life*. At the core of all the initiation rites done in any African setup, the main theme was the celebration of the human life and its sacred nature. Life must be given, it was supposed to be lived, to be enjoyed, to be whole, to be honorable, to belong and peaceful. This is why there were distinct initiation rites to mark every stage of life.

The modern world plays around with life. It places the cart before the horse, equates good life with productivity and ingenuity. It has lost the sense of the true humanity of the person. It has allowed itself to be dominated by crude technocracy. We are in the civilization of science and technology. While nobody can deny the importance of these things in our lives, it must be obvious that science and technology without humanity are simply tyrannical. Wrongly handled, they are capable of destroying the whole of humanity.

In my view, therefore, those who fight for and rejoice at the death of the African initiation rites and other African practices, are failing in their cultural mission. It is true some rituals needed purification, but the deeper meanings and importance should not be underestimated. The elements that promoted human and communal values should be adopted. Wrong approaches have been applied to stop Africans from practicing their beliefs, and it has been proved that the more they are condemned, the more they are practiced. Some of these practices are done in secret, in the night or in certain places where they feel free to do.

2. Puberty Initiation Rites and Their Meaning

2.1. *The Meaning of Initiation in the African Traditional Religion*

Initiation represents one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of humanity. Coined from the Latin word *initiate*, to begin or beginning, "initiation" means to 'enter upon', 'to introduce', or 'set going'. It means to admit with necessary introductory rites or forms into some society or observance, especially, of occult character. In the Christian parlance, 'initiation designates the complex of sacramental rites which comprises the final stages of becoming a fully enfranchized Christian, a member of the Church or one of the faithful' (The New Dictionary of Christian Theology, 1983: 299).

It is a universal rite, an archetypal form that surfaces and influences events that have the spirit of beginning or the weight of an end. Initiation exists, in one form or the other, almost in every culture and religion. According to Manu, initiation features in different and diversified forms, which aims, in the religious sense, to bring the individual (the initiate) in contact with the sacred. It involves not only the religious life (in the modern meaning of the word "religion"); but also the entire life of the individual. It indicates a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person. In order to determine its various types, there is need to distinguish between an inexpressible mystery and an esoteric truth.

In the Christian religion, for instance, the believers are initiated in the ineffable mystery of faith. Yet, this is an open secret, which one understands by faith. One who believes and accepts the Christian faith is baptized and taught the mystery of the kingdom. In the fifth century, only the initiated possessed the knowledge of the Christian mysteries.

Initiation integrates, involves and incorporates the initiate existentially in the mystery. It makes one an active member or partaker of the communities rituals. By undergoing the process of initiation, one acquires the knowledge of the secret mysteries of a religion. This consists in the privilege of attending the actualization of a certain religious truth in the activity, giving a person the right to behold and participate in certain dramatic acts of mysterious character. The aspect of secrecy occurs in most initiations. In the African Traditional Religion, every initiate knew the truth which was dramatized in the rituals carried. Nevertheless, it was a mysterious truth. Its actualization was so sacred and so secret, that only a limited number of people were allowed to attend to it. Moreover, it was strictly forbidden to depict or describe the initiation act in question.

2.2. *Why Puberty Rites were Done in the African Set up*

If the African rites are viewed with a Christian or western approach, it is easy to call them 'harmful habits' (cf the article of Cynthia in the Seed Magazine July 2014 no. 7, Issue 268, p. 17). In the reflection of the view of religion from the Western point of view, we have noted how the west gave a negative tone on issues concerning the Traditional African religion and the issue of rites seemed to have a central place in the African living. So, the question is, why were these rites done? Did they have any value to the African person? Despite the efforts do away with them, why do they still persist? These questions can be answered if we look critically at their importance in the African perspective. These results below are from a field research which the researcher did in the year 2011 among the Kamba people – who still hold on to their cultural practices. The results of the practices of those rites had many hidden meanings and without an in-depth research, it is almost impossible to understand especially from a Christian perspective. This study on these rites brought out the following points:

- *Celebrating and recognition of growth in humanity* – Any rite that was performed was a person-centered and all that was done was aimed at celebrating life and reminding the initiates that they were growing. One of the values that Africans were known for is that they viewed life in a very sacred way. Initiates thus were made aware that they were entering a different ground and had to be aware of this.

- *Identification*– Anthropologists working in African societies have described the various rites marking the transition from one critical stage of life to another. Rites of passage play a central role in African socialization, demarking the different stages in an individual's development (*gender and otherwise*), as well as that person's relationship and role with the broader community. The major stage in African life is the transition from child to an adult when they become fully institutionalized to the ethics of the group's culture. Rites of passage are for this reason critical in nation-building and identity formation. Sexual identity and the roles of gender identity are enshrined through rites of passage; - the males are prepared for their responsibilities in the community as men, and the

women prepared for their responsibilities in the nation as women– with no confusion. It is also important to note that each community performed these rites in their own way and in this way; one would identify him or herself with a certain ethnic group. Mr. Masivo (a traditional doctor and operator of initiates), said that a Maasai for instance who was qualified to do this operation, would not be allowed to operate on Kamba initiates and vice versa. Mbiti (1975: 92), also says that ‘the operation for girls was done by female operators while that boy was done by male operators’. During the operation, the sexes were not allowed to mix. This was followed by a big feast prepared by the community or clan and the initiates were congratulated and given gifts.

- *Marking the important phases of life*– In the African worldview, the human being is at the centre of the African universe and as James Cox (1998: x) confirms, ‘communities comprised of social systems with clearly defined properties, rights and obligations of their members and hence there were the markings of the transitional phases which reinforced these roles clearly defined in the ceremonies of the rites of passage’. There were three phases that constitute the rites of passage namely: the rites of separation, the rites of transition, and the rites of incorporation. It was a time for new life and empowering them to take responsibility for the decisions that set the course of their future. This empowerment helped them to discover their potentials and exploration of their own personal values. Through this self-exploration initiates emerged with a stronger sense of personal responsibility to all aspects of their lives – stretching all the way out to the larger world of which they were apart.

- *Educational Approach*– The puberty rites had some educational and formative perspective. This would be equated to a school (informal) where initiates were traditional customs, attitudes, moral standards and behavioral patterns were taught. The community expected to see results after the initiation and they were also were treated differently by the clan. This was thus space for the community to transmit its core values and confer the role- responsibilities appropriate to the initiate's stage of life, thus ensuring cultural continuity, a sort of knitting together of the generations.

- *The sense of direction*– Apart from the sense of direction, rites gave a strong sense of belonging. It was a kind of registration to a special class. Among the Kamba people, the council of elders (*mbai*) was an important body and no one would be admitted into the group without having gone through the rites required. Circumcision, knowledge of customs, and uprightness in morals were a requirement and these were taught during the puberty rites. Anyone who did not take part was a coward, outcast and a disoriented person who was not fit for offering sacrifices and performing community rituals.

- *The communal Approach*- Sarpong in his analysis notes that all African value and communal living was enshrined in beliefs and practices that Africans performed. He quotes Descartes saying of *Cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore I am) and says that the African would say: *Cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related; therefore I am). Those who do fieldwork in different communities will often hear of ‘age sets’, and this team had a very deep significance because it meant that there were a strong bond and a sharing of values and ideas. No boy or girl would be initiated alone, all was done in a group. This was systematically done and the issue of communal bond and living was depicted by performing these puberty rituals together. These communal values were instilled and they, in turn, were expected to nurture, guard, respect and safeguard them. Through this commitment, values and customs were passed on from one generation to another. This is one reason why some traditions still persist, up to this day, because some rituals bound the initiates and they could not betray this commitment. Rites of passages, therefore, served a double purpose; preserving the on-going community as a symbol of collective immortality and permanence as well as providing a clear and guided means for the transition from one life stage and sphere of responsibility to another’ (Davis, 2011). They thus confirmed the hierarchies of values of the community and project- an ideal sequence of personal development the individual could look forward to and upon reaching each stage, evaluate his or her maturation against a collective standard.

- *View of pain as a positive element* - In the puberty rites where the initiates were prepared for responsible adulthood, there was pain inflicted and this was viewed with a positive lens as far as the community was concerned. Cutting off the foreskin by the boys and the clitoridectomy for girls by use of sharp knives/razors was associated with endurance and courage in the life of adulthood that followed. The boys were taught on some focus on bravery and toughness, while the girls were educated on caring for the entire household and children. Mothers were expected to persevere, not to give up or argue with their husbands. As Davis (2011) notes, initiates were expected to undergo the whole operation without showing any sign of fear and without expressing any discomfort. Failure to demonstrate fortitude would bring shame and dishonor to them and their family. After the period of seclusion was over, the initiates were reincorporated into their community, and this marked the time of their rebirth.

- *A Gateway* – Puberty or adolescent rites was a gateway to marriage. This means that any initiation was a sure pathway to the next stage. During seclusion, the young were taught issues concerning marriage. As Mbiti (1975: 94) confirms, ‘no one was allowed to get married before going through initiation’. One was always considered a child. The mysteries and secrets of marriage were normally revealed to the young people during the puberty rites.

- *Religious link* – African rites were viewed in a holistic and sacred approach. Religious-linked issues were taken seriously and that is why the initiates were separated from their usual surroundings to be secluded in an isolated place away from the community. There, they were tested and the testing usually involved demonstrating physical endurance, mental strength, and intelligence. Since puberty rites were seen as a mark of solemn unity and identification, Mbiti (1975: 94) affirms that ‘this meant that the individual was sealed to his people and his people to him’. This was deeply a religious step to strengthen and give a firm emphasis to the practice, rituals, libations, sacrifices, and prayers were offered to God and blessings upon the initiates were invoked. In other places, the spirits were invited to be the witnesses and the scars of the initiates would be a permanent mark of identity and integration. In fact, clitoridectomy was considered a highly meaningful act that signified the sacred symbolism of feminine fertility. It was generally performed in sacred ceremonies by traditional female healers/practitioners or wives who held high social status.

- *Symbol of shedding blood seen as bond* – This had also a religious connotation in that, it linked the initiates with their ancestral world. This blood according to Mbiti (1975: 92) also bound the initiates to the land and consequently to the departed

members of his society. The circumcision blood acted like a covenant or a solemn agreement, between the individual and his people. Until the individual went through this rite, he was always regarded as an outsider. Thus the shedding of his blood is a mark that he joins the stream of his people and he becomes one with them.

- *Binding rituals* – This marks the cultural identity where initiates partake and in most cases, they were done in secrecy with instructions. According to Michael Amaladoss (1998), religious rituals of any social group are the occasion when its religiosity and a deeper identity become symbolically and socially visible. He further argues that it is through the promotion of rituals that the building of a community becomes a dynamic process. Arbuckle (2010), adds that a ritual is any prescribed or spontaneous action that follows set patterns expressed through symbols, a public shared meaning. There were also rituals for intercessory purposes and the ritual burning of the part of the private part that was cut and this was done by the designated people. In connection with rituals, Schmidt (1988, 392) who uses the term 'holy rites' says that 'these holy rites were symbolic actions which directed the people towards an experience of the sacred'. He added that rituals did this whether or not the sacred is conceived as a personal being (or beings) or as an impersonal 'creative process'. Sacred places for rituals and sacrifices provided an extraordinary setting and at the same time, quite ordinary activities took place.

- *An expression of African wisdom* – These rites also showed a kind of designed ways to deal with the human person. Through experience the elders took upon themselves to share with the younger ones their wisdom coming from experience. It showed the animation the creative work of man. African philosophy and wisdom were expressed through song and dance, language, artistic works, proverbs, myths, socialization, folktales poems, and riddles. During the puberty skills, these methods were used to communicate important ideas to the young people. It is also through the African wisdom that divine/sacred places were identified. These included caves, groves, riverbeds, mountains, forests – and initiates were often taken to these places where they would be linked with the supernatural world. Rivers were often used for purification rituals after circumcision while forests were places of seclusion.

- *Power and Authority* – In the puberty rites the superiority of older people and the power of authority of the ones who perform the rite, in particular, are shown. Maus (1972: 99) confirmed that 'the rituals which were performed during the initiation rites confirmed the power of certain people'. Knowledge is often related to power. Authority is the recognized right to command, legitimized by appeal to principles which are part of the moral order. It is also related to status, mandated by the society given through its responsible institutions, making it legitimate. According to La Fontaine (1986: 114), 'the men and women who conducted initiation were accepting serious responsibilities and a successful outcome tested qualities in the initiators as well as the initiates'. So, successful puberty rites confirmed that the skills and methods used by the initiators were correct and they earned them some recognition and fame. One of the duties demanded from the initiates was the obedience to the elders (seniors).

3. Ways of Puberty Initiation Rites

3.1. An Overview

All rituals, including the puberty rituals, are events with social meaning and symbolic actions. Initiation rites were transition rituals, which accompanied the initiate to cross boundaries. The five rites which are *birth, adulthood/puberty, marriage, eldership, and ancestorship* were common practices in many African cultures. A rite can be defined as a fundamental act (or set of rituals) performed according to prescribed social rules and customs. Each of these rites is a key component and some societies have more elaborate and extensive ceremonies than others, but these five themes are the thread that links families and villages in traditional Africa and provide the necessary structure for individual growth and development. African is a wide continent and one finds different people using different methods of initiation.

By integrating these initiation systems the indigenous African cultures gained stability and longevity to provide a model of consistency and inter-generational unity. They represent a complete set of devices that prevent the inherent conflicts between various age groups or the systematic ill-treatment of women, children, or elders. These African cultures were not "perfect" as all human societies have problems, but they do provide a viable example in the modern world of how to solve social conflicts and contradictions and give the individual the societal support to discover and fulfill their life mission and unique contribution.

3.2. Initiation Marks and Processes

Rites of passage are an important part of a person's life because as we have seen, they mark the transition from one stage of life to the next. They exist because of the four main stages we go through in our human development namely, birth, maturation (transition into adulthood), reproduction (marriage and procreation) and death. They help young people navigate the dangerous period between childhood and adulthood and have been proven to have a positive psychological effect on the individual going through it. The absence of rites of passage in some societies has led to the youth creating their own badges of adulthood which vary from obtaining driver's licenses, 21st birthday celebrations, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, joining illegal groups, use of secret codes and other dangerous ceremonies. It is apparent that rites of passage are an important and integral part of the human psyche and that in their absence, humans will create one. In terms of African Religion, initiation has a legal, spiritual and psychological significance. Prior to initiation, a boy is not seen as responsible for his transgressions.

3.3. The Three Important Characteristics in Puberty Initiation

Bell (1997), refers to puberty rites as 'coming-of-age and agrees with Arnold van Gennep (1960), who talks of the three stages or characteristics in initiation. They are described below.

3.3.1. Separation

This stage comprises the symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual from an earlier phase in the social community or structure. According to Rasing (1995: 35), 'the initiates are geographically separated and it was symbolic that groups to be initiated were separated from one world to the other' (Can be separated from a particular world, group or state). This is what Skhakhane (2000) confirms when he says that, 'initiates would be taken to some remote place which was referred to as 'sacred place' and this period is emphasized through a very strict observance of secrecy'. At this stage, two elements constituted the process of insertion into adulthood: instruction and subjection to ordeals.

3.3.2. Transition

Puberty rites according to Skhakhane (2000) were given prime importance and therefore more attention. This transition meant that an individual was graduated from one state to the next. This is what Rasing (1995) called the 'liminal stage'. She describes and says that a person is 'between and betwixt' and this is where the initiate slips through the network of classifications that locate his or her state and position. Liminal entities of 'between and betwixt' are positions given by law, custom, convention and ceremony. Tuner (1969: 95), linked this stage to 'death, to a period of darkness, bisexuality and to the wilderness'. Some initiates were stripped naked (or left half-naked), to show that they had nothing. This liminal stage blended lowliness and sacredness. Liminal stages reminded the community that those who are high should experience what it means to be low and it was a lesson for life, due to the inequality and the equality in society. Instructions from elders followed throughout this stage. During this stage boys and girls were prepared for marriage which according to Mbiti (1973:47), 'was viewed as a sacred institution'. The other character of liminality was submissiveness and silence. Initiates had to learn to submit to an authority that represented the whole community. In tribal communities, the speech was not only communication but also power and wisdom, which was imparted in liminality – not in an aggression of words but had an ontological value.

3.3.3. Incorporation

This marked the last stage of the initiation. The initiates were taken back to the community and feasts and ceremonies were organized and this meant that the initiates were integrated into the community. It also meant that they had shed off their childhood behavior and were ready to take up adulthood roles.

3.4. The Environment of Initiates and the Methods used

Most of the initiation rites at puberty took place in a camp located in the bush. Sometimes according to Cox (1998), 'initiation huts were temporarily built'. The camp was normally 'medicated' to give it some kind of mystical protection against the influence of evil spirits, witches and dangerous animals such as lions and leopards.

These rites normally took place during the dry season, between May and October. The hot climate helped the initiates wound to heal properly. With the help of some illustrations, the researcher will name some of the methods used in different areas.

3.4.1. Boys

As far as boys were concerned one method which is very common in was (and is) carried out and varies considerably among ethnic groups and families and is dependent on religious affiliations is circumcision. The phenomenology of initiation, especially that of circumcision, presents four phases, namely: (a) the circumcision in the strict sense, (b) a period of strict seclusion lasting from several weeks to several months in a male environment. (c) Periods of the study of secret languages and key-words, and (d) occasionally very liberal glimpses at the life of the adults. The initiation finally takes place normally through a rite of passage intended to symbolize the death of the former juvenile life and the life with new forces in the tribe.

Apart from this, there were other methods that were practiced to mark the puberty stage for boys. In some communities, various methods were combined on the same initiation and this differed from one ethnic tribe to the other. The table below shows some of the ways that different ethnic communities performed these puberty rites.

There are many initiations for boys that were done and are not mentioned above. The ones represented in the above illustration, however, will give a clue of how the Africans valued initiation ceremonies and the varieties of methods that were used to mark this rite of passage.

3.4.2. Girls Initiation

Many girls in traditional Africa went through the rite of clitoridectomy which according to Davis (2011) was performed for was performed for social as well as spiritual reasons; the practice denoted that the female was making a transformation into womanhood. He further says that the practice was instituted at the onset of puberty, incorporating two age ranges for the female candidates: 7 to 15 years and 15 to 19 years.

Other spiritual notions reveal that the practice was related to the duality of males and females and the need for gender differentiation. Therefore, clitoridectomy functioned to eliminate the male aspect in females. It reinforced the cosmological ideas that acknowledged the dual or androgynous nature of the Gods. The act was much more than an operation on the flesh, removing what is considered the traits of the opposite sex; without it, people could not marry or have socially sanctioned sexual activities, nor could they have access to the secret or hidden information that gave them the right to function as adults.

Thus, clitoridectomy symbolized the death of the girl and the emergence or rebirth of a new person--the woman. As a result, females were believed to experience greater fertility and more live births. As a spiritual ritual, clitoridectomy ceremonies were performed as a

significant rite of passage for females. It has been described as an archetypical activity of the ideal feminine. Gachiri (200: 33) in her research mentions the other types known as 'excision (excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora) and infibulation (excision of the clitoris, labia minora, and the labia majora). Also, others were the pricking, piercing or incising the clitoris or labia'.

According to Mbiti (1965: 128), 'the Nandi girls stung their clitorises and breasts with stinging nettles. It was a painful process and there was loud singing to counteract the cry of the girls. The next day the circumcisers did their operation with their sharp knives. The virgins were circumcised when sitting on special stools while the ones who were not, lay on the floor'.

In Malawi, girls were also taught how to elongate their labia minora. According to Cox (1998:159), 'the elongating of the labia minora is very much encouraged in Malawi because it was believed that, that played an important function during the sex play'.

Apart from this rite, girls also underwent other forms of initiation. The ones named below were combined with clitoridectomy, while others were done on their own. Each ethnic tribe defined the methods, the timing and the place of operation.

3.5. Ending the Initiation Ceremony

Most of the African tribes had an elaborate way of ending the puberty rites. Some ended by having the place cleaned by diviners, others had their seclusion huts and clothes burnt (cf the table above). In some communities, some were ceremoniously escorted by the elders and a big celebration was done in their honor. Animals were slaughtered to mark the occasion and each ethnic group designed a way of welcoming the initiates (whether by offering them gifts or by performing well-planned dances) and congratulating them for their victory. The initiates were from that time permitted to engage themselves in courtship issues and thereafter marry or get married.

4. Puberty Rites in ATR and a Modern View

4.1. How Religious Aspects were Depicted in the African Puberty Rites

The period of Adolescent as Alister and Eliya (2007) Observes, has been described as a period of storm and stress arising out of, among other factors, the dramatic physical maturation processes. The experience of pubertal changes may be associated with excitement, anxiety, distress and other psychological problems.

Africans in their own wisdom were quite aware of this and that is why the puberty rites in some communities were quite dramatic. To stress their importance, the process was marked with religious rituals and tunes that made the initiates mark every step with the seriousness that it deserved. To illustrate this, the researcher has analyzed some of the aspects that depicted that these rites were viewed from a religious angle.

4.1.1. Animal Sacrifices and the Symbolism of Blood

Cox (1998) notes that 'during these rites, animals were slaughtered'. The Agikuyu, for instance, slaughtered a goat and this was to invoke blessings from *Ngai* (God) and the ancestors – who were invoked and invited in the participation in the process of transition. Laydevant (1975: 9) in addition says that 'the Basotho slaughtered a bull for sacrifice and offering'. These offerings had deep religious implications.

Apart from the animal blood, there was also the shedding of the human blood which according to Omondi (1986:12), 'was poured onto the ancestral land and was intended to bind the initiate to the departed members including the ancestors who were/are the intermediaries with the sacred deities of the peoples' spiritual life'. The puberty rites were thus important in that, they emphasized the relationship of the initiate and the sacred dimension of life, that is physical and the spiritual.

Audrey (1982: 161) also notes that 'the series of ceremonial acts that followed the initiation rite gave assurance to the initiates that they were fit to assume their new role and showed the community that this process was complete'. After having gone through the prescribed rituals, the initiate had the right weapons to protect him/herself from the magical dangers of his/her new life.

4.1.2. The Presence of Diviners and other Religious Specialists

Before and after the puberty rites, religious specialists were invited by the elders to cleanse the designed places where the initiation was to take place. Some did it in forests, while others constructed special huts (eg the Maasai and the Pokot), where the initiates were confined for 3-4 months. After this period the huts were burnt down in the presence of the diviners and this symbolized the solemn ending of the childhood life and the embracing a new life of adulthood. This, therefore, means that the places that were designed for initiated were considered sacred - in fact, herbalists and diviners ritually treated the places before the occupants were allowed in. The incised potions were buried with care so that sorcerers/witches would not take them for their paraphernalia for witchcraft or evil spells because it was believed that the initiates were very vulnerable and weak at this time.

Diviners, herbalists, priest and traditional doctors were also required to prepare some magical medicines (rituals), for the purpose of keeping the evil spirits at bay and protect the initiates from evil. Certain charms for anointing the initiates were prepared and most of the initiates in Africa had to go through certain rituals which were means of signaling incorporation.

Kyallo (2013), in his research names some of them removing certain teeth, filing teeth to points(e.g. Akamba in Kenya), piercing earlobes and the septum for the insertion of ornaments, tattooing, scarifying the body, ornamenting the body with special clothing and bracelets, and haircutting and dressing (as shown in table 1-2). These charms were applied on the body of the victims for protective purposes. Sorcerers and witches were not allowed to participate, and thus some religious rituals and medicines kept evil spirits and diseases at bay. Thus it was believed that once these rituals and proper surveillance were done, the initiates were safe until the end of the initiation period.

4.1.3. The Communal Link and Beliefs

Initiation is a rite of passage marking entrance or acceptance into a group or society. It could also be a formal admission to adulthood in a community or one of its formal components. In an extended sense, it can also signify a transformation in which the initiate is 'reborn' into a new role. Psychology experiments have also shown that initiations increase feelings of affiliation

The initiation of the young as Mbiti (1969) observes, is one of the key moments in the rhythm of the individual life, which is also the rhythm of the corporate group of which the individual is a part. What happens to the single youth happens to corporately to his parents, the parents, the relatives, and the living dead. The youth was thus introduced to the art of communal living. They were withdrawn from the community to be instructed on important matters, experience the process of dying and live in the spirit world.

The explanation above thus explains why some communities believed that anyone who refused to take part, would be punished by the spirits. The Basotho, according to Laydevant (1975) believed that those who did not go through these initiations later became sterile/important or crippled. In fact, he continues to say that the uncircumcised were not allowed to take part in the public affairs and deliberations of the tribe'. This is because they had a firm belief that initiations were approved by both the clan and the supernatural world. Having neglected any stage, therefore, meant that one had disobeyed the requirements of the clan and the spiritual realm.

Values, uprightness of character and behavior were stressed during the period for puberty rites. Girls were taught on issues concerning sex, reproduction and respecting their husband, while boys were taught on taking care of the family and the clan. Any aspect that touched on life, continuity, and belief, was always revolved around religion. Concerning women's initiation Eliade (1958: 45) commends that, 'for the woman, the revelation that she is a creator of life constitutes a religious experience that cannot be translated into masculine terms'. He continues to say that, in the Yao female initiation, the women had a tendency to organize themselves in secret religious associations and they gave importance to the rituals of childbirth.

4.1.4. Puberty Rites – A Divine Revelation

In the eyes of those who perform them, the puberty rites are believed to have been revealed by divine or supernatural beings. Hence the initiation ceremony is the initiation by gods – by performing it one lives the sacred primordial time again and together with all the initiates, participate in the presence of the gods or mythical ancestors. Initiation, therefore, as observed by Eliade (1958: 129), 'is a recapitulation of the sacred history of a particular people'. On the occasion of the age grading of adolescents, the entire society is plunged back into the mythical time of origin and therefore emerges regenerated.

Initiation, therefore, became a mark of unity, seal, and identification with the people and their gods. This is a deeply religious step. For that reason, during the initiation ceremonies and after, the leaders in charge offered sacrifices or prayers to God and asked for His blessings upon the young people. In other places, the spirits are believed or invited to be present to witness the occasion. From that occasion onwards, the initiates would forever bear the scars of what is cut on their organs, and these will be scars of identity. Through these scars, the initiated are henceforth identified as members of such a people. Without the identification scars, they could not be fully integrated with the people.

4.1.5. Purification Rituals

As we have seen, there were elaborate rituals and ceremonies for marking the end of the initiation rites as seen in table 3. This depended on each individual ethnic community and since they were part and parcel of the initiation period they had to be done. In some communities, according to Mbiti (1969), the initiates were considered religiously unclean, until the purification ritual was done. These rituals in many communities had a strong religious message in that they were meant to cleanse, regenerate and renew the individual, the entire community, and the environment.

According to Laydevant (1975), the diviners and healers were responsible for these purification rituals. They included a complete abstaining from sexual intercourse, being immersed in a river and shunning the company of the opposite sex until the whole ceremony was over. This showed that all social acts and practices in the African setting had a sacred angle. Initiations were sacred activities and they had to be accompanied by rituals, abstinence, and sacred symbols. This explains why initiates were taken to some sacred places, like shrines, forests, mountains, wilderness or rivers. It is here that they would be linked with the supernatural world.

4.1.6. The End of the Puberty Initiation

The end of the puberty initiation and seclusion was marked by a rhythm of a new generation which was dramatized and played. The young people who had been initiated together, because mystically and ritually bound to each other for the rest of their lives. As Mbiti (1969) describes it (referring to the Maasai community), they became in effect one body, one group, one community and one people. They helped one another in all kinds of ways. The wife of one may be equally the wife of the other men in the same age group. This solidarity created a sense of security, a feeling of oneness, and the opportunities of participating in corporate existence. In West Africa, as a result of initiation, men and women formed secret groups, where they would take oaths and do things together. They helped and defended each other at all cost.

Others as shown in Table 3, made a solemn procession back to community and others danced to celebrate their healing and victory. The Pokot men danced around a sacred tree before leaving their camp. When they arrived in the community other rituals were done – these were accompanied by animal sacrifices, praise songs, and dances, libations – the return home was like an experience of resurrection.

4.2. How Puberty Rites are viewed Today and Some Recommendations

Changes are rapidly taking place in Africa and the initiation rites in some areas are affected by modern changes. This is because children at the age of puberty initiation age are going to school and Christian missionaries and some government movements have attacked and discouraged the practice.

Cox (1998:168) observes that one of the most controversial issues with reference to the relationship between Christianity and culture pertains to the issues of female puberty rites, known as female circumcision. Today many writers like Gachiri Ephigenia (2000) don't use the term 'female circumcision' but refer to it as 'Female Genital Mutilation' (FGM). Recently the whole practice of traditional circumcision has come under threat by critics who claim that the practice is unhygienic and exposes candidates to unnecessary pain when one could achieve the same result clinically in a hospital under anesthetics. The issue of training of the circumcisers has also been called into question after reports of boys losing their manhood or lives, due to lack of training on the part of those who carry out the operation.

Modern writers like Gachiri (2000), say that FGM causes great damage to the female body, unlike the simple operation carried out in male circumcision. Also, the fact that male circumcision is supported by the Bible in Gen. 17:10-15 is already an encouragement, and it will certainly not be as condemned as the female genital mutilation.

In 1994 the first international document specified that FGM was one of the violations of human rights. Despite all these, these rites still persist and Gachiri (2000) says that circumcision is (still) traditionally performed in order to prepare community members to become fully active participants in all that pertains to full membership. Reasons given for this practice include custom, religious purification, family honor, hygiene, aesthetic, and protection of virginity, prevention of promiscuity, giving a sense of belonging, enhancing fertility and increasing matrimonial opportunity. It is also a formative and an educational process on how the person is supposed to live as an adult within the community.

Those who don't support it argue under the four points below:

- the FGM procedure is often performed clandestinely, usually by a local woman with no formal training.
- the knives and razors are not sterilized – the health of the victim is at risk.
- it violates the freedom and the rights of women. Women later suffer psychological trauma.
- vaginal tissues are damaged and the women don't enjoy the conjugal rights in marriage (Gachiri, 2000: 33) on infibulation method. Thus due to all these, Awuor in her article says; 'the procedure is not helping the girls at all' (Seed magazine 2014 Vol. 26, No. 7, Issue 268, p.19).

Though in the past, the Church dismissed any practice that was African, the researcher would suggest a further research on the initiation rites so that the Church and culture can have a meeting point. There are churches that have started programs for instructing young boys before undergoing circumcision, but the ones for girls has not come up yet. The Church does not support female circumcision, but this does not mean that this practice does not take place.

It is, therefore, a task for pastoral workers to look for alternative means for preparing girls to enter into the adulthood phase. Concerning this, Cox (1998: 169) argued that 'whereas female circumcision is unquestionably problematic for women, particularly from the medical point of view, and whereas the campaign to do away with female circumcision is perfectly legitimate, there is none the less a case for a reconstruction of female puberty rites as rites of passage to facilitate the transition of the girl child from childhood to adulthood'. There is a need, thus for construction of rituals which will help the child make a smooth transition, psychologically and spiritually into womanhood.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher affirms that traditional initiation rites in most of the African societies were very important because they marked and recognized a milestone in a person's journey in life and as one passes from one stage to another, each stage was celebrated with special rituals. These rituals gave value to the human dignity and life. It is also through these rituals that the initiates felt that they were able to exercise a certain amount of control over the invisible world and the forces of nature.

Puberty rites were simply meant to train young people in the skills of living a useful and productive life in society. The Africans knew that people needed direction, discipline, and instruction for a fruitful living. They needed formation and information in order to face life challenges that lay ahead and to know that they had the responsibility of protecting their traditions and upholding the morals that were defined by the elders.

The fact that the initiation ceremonies had a religious link through rituals cannot be underestimated. The religious approach gave them a sense of seriousness and the initiation marks were a constant reminder that they were in a relationship with the supernatural world. It was a seal and a covenant that reminded the initiates that morals had to be upheld.

This was also the time the vital force and the power of life generally were formally confirmed and imprinted indelibly in the initiate's rational consciousness. If there is a time in the Africa person's life during which a veritable 'forest of symbols' to use Tuner's (1967) term, was employed for the sake of instruction, it was during the period of adolescent initiation.

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