Without the Cut : Alternative Rituals for Female Circumcision in Kenya

Abstract

The study examines alternative rites of passage (ARPs) which have been created to replace traditional initiation rituals (i.e. female circumcision) in Kenya. The first alternative ritual was arranged by a women’s group called the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization in 1996, and since then many other organisations have mimicked them. The central question of this thesis is whether ARPs can be regarded as rites of passage. The question is answered by examining data that compares alternative rituals with traditional initiation rituals.

Fieldwork for the study was carried out in Western Kenya in two development projects of a Christian relief and development organisation called World Vision. Most of the material was gathered in a Pokot community in West Pokot District. The main part of the data consists of interviews with project workers and local people, ethnographic observation of rituals, and project documents. The ethnographic material was gathered during a two month period between October and December in 2004.

Theoretically, the study relies on anthropological discussion of rituals and what makes them effective. The main theoretical sources consist of classics such as works of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and Audrey Richards, and later writings on rituals by such anthropologists as Gilbert Lewis, Maurice Bloch, and Catherine Bell. The Pokot girls’ initiation ritual has been researched by Elizabeth L. Meyerhoff.

The study shows that the objectives of ARPs and traditional initiation rituals are contrary. While the traditional ritual aims at preparing a girl for her new role as a wife and mother, the ARP aims at preventing her from stepping into this role too early. Several aspects demonstrated that ARPs were not understood as a rite of passage by the community. There were, for instance, girls who had participated in the ARP several times. However, the new ritual was still a very popular event and many community members said it supported the work against female circumcisions.

This study shows how difficult it is to replace an established ritual with a newly transplanted one, since rituals are intertwined into the whole society and ways of living. Initiation rituals, arranged on the threshold between childhood and adulthood, are particularly difficult to replace, since they are so closely connected to marriage, the foundation of these societies. Marriageability of uncircumcised women, communality of the traditional ritual and its importance as a channel of reciprocity remain issues which have to be addressed in the eradication efforts of female circumcision.

Keywords
rite of passage
circumcision
women
development cooperation
West Pokot District
Kenya