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BY MIROSLAVA PRAZAK

NESSES ING

A RITE OF PASSAGE



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n the rolling hills of south-western Kenya and north-western Tanzania live the Kuria people. They make their living as small-scale farmers, cattle keepers, and petty entrepreneurs. Remote from the centers of power and development in both the nation states they live in, their life is rich in traditions, and has historically centered on a ritual cycle that individuals and the community undergo. Circumcision is a central institution in the lives of the people. As a rite of passage, it constitutes the transition from childhood to adulthood, marking the changed status of an individual and his or her family, with the concomitant changes in roles, responsibilities, control, and power. It marks the identity of an individual within the community and defines a person in relation to extended family, lineage, descent group, and ethnic group.

As much as circumcision unites people, it also divides them. It identifies those who belong to the group, and those who don't; and by extension, those who control the ritual event and its outcomes, and those who don't. To declare an open circumcision season, the elders of the secret council must judge a number of physical and metaphysical factors to be propitious, after which hundreds of early adolescent boys and girls undergo a series of culturally prescribed rituals, including genital cutting.

Over the past 16 years, I have conducted research among the Abairege clan of the Kuria people. In 1998 I was invited by one of my research assistants to join in the celebrations for the circumcision of his niece. Because circumcisions among the Abairege occur only about every three years and it is rare for an outsider to be asked to join in, I accepted the invitation. The following excerpts are adapted from my journal.

The story of Leah* began on the first day of my return to Bukuria, when her eldest sister told me that Leah had decided not to get circumcised. She spoke of Leah's decision in disparaging terms, holding up their younger sister Agnes as an exemplar of Kuria virtue, because even at nine years of age she is already interested in and willing to be circumcised. Leah is very religious, wore her cross all the time, and in a very quiet, unassuming way seemed quite intransigent, maintaining that she could become an adult without undergoing that ritual.

Public awareness of the dangers or even irrelevance of the circumcision ritual had resulted from a widespread government campaign, which also had promised to help individuals who were not willing to follow the traditional path. As the risks continued to be publicized, the inevitability of the practice was increasingly questioned. A new option had emerged for families to have their daughters circumcised at the Catholic mission by nurses using safer, more hygienic methods than those of traditional circumcisors. Some local Seventh Day Adventist churches advocated that girls not be operated on at all.

But when the circumcisions were declared open to boys, and a day later to girls, the pressure on Leah intensified. I observed it most frequently within the homestead, mounted by her sisters and mother. If Leah were sitting outside when a group passed the homestead, her sisters would tell her to run inside, to avoid being kidnapped. Or if a group of women stopped by, her sisters would tell her to hide, lest the women mock her about being uncircumcised. These ostensibly thoughtful comments were always accompanied by great hilarity on the sisters' part. If their mother were home, she would usually join in. On the occasions that I raised this issue with the girls, asking them why they tormented Leah so, they replied that this was nothing compared to the lifetime of mockery she would receive as an uncircumcised female.

I supported Leah in her decision, telling her about the millions of adult women in other parts of Kenya, Africa, and the world who are not circumcised and who lead normal, adult lives. In those parts of the world, the circumcised women would be considered the unusual ones, I told her. But I was torn. On the one hand, I felt that Leah needed and deserved support in her attempt to buck tradition. On the other, I wondered how she would fare when I, or someone else willing to support her, were not present, and she would have to deal with her tormentors on an everyday basis.

Leah stood by her decision for three days. On the fourth, I heard she had decided to be circumcised. I was skeptical about whose decision it really was. Nonetheless, when she asked me to accompany her to the circumcisor, I felt honored and in some way responsible for ensuring her well-being during the process.

On the eve of a girl's circumcision day, her mother invites relatives to *okorea obosamba*—to sing praises for the girl and encourage her to be brave, not to shame her family by showing fear or crying. As preparations for Leah's festivities began, I went into her family's kitchen hut. The fire roared in the traditional three-stone hearth, perched upon which was a huge cauldron of *obosara*, a refreshing,

slightly sour drink made of roasted, sprouted finger millet that is ground into a flour, then combined with water and boiled. This is the refreshment offered to revelers. Trufosa, Leah's mother, and Rael, her aunt, did the work, drinking bottled beers and gossiping up a storm. Leah occasionally sat in a darker spot within the kitchen (its only light emanated from the fire), listening in. Her siblings, in the courtyard, danced to a cranked-up radio. Although this revelry in preparation for the circumcision is supposed to last throughout the night, in this case, everyone went to sleep by two a.m. The short hours remaining until morning were broken up by the noise of circumcision parties walking to the circumcision ground, trying to be early in line.

By eight a.m. our group was ready to set out. Dressed in her school uniform and wearing a little, white, crocheted hat that might be suitable for a baptism or an Easter Sunday, Leah had bathed and seemed quite collected, if a bit nervous. She was accompanied by two orphaned sisters of a neighboring family. The decision had been made to have the girls circumcised at the mission, a distance of half a mile or so. In silence, I walked as close to Leah as possible. My mind reeled: She had asked me to accompany her, so I wanted to let her feel that I was there to support her, to give her courage. Yet I had not forgotten that she had not wished to be circumcised; my presence there was proof that I hadn't been able to help her maintain her stance against the community.

One of Leah's older sisters ran off a few times during the walk to inform people of what was happening, and thereby increase the size of our group. By the time we reached the mission there were four initiates and about a dozen spectators. As the first group to arrive at the circumcisor's, we didn't have to wait. The girls were taken in and seated side by side in the tiny anteroom. The nurse performing the operation arrived and started organizing the tools of her task. Once ready, she led everyone in prayer.

She took Leah first, led her into the tiny operating room, and reclined her on the table. I could see Leah struggling to keep her legs together as the attendants tried to pry them open, while her mother admonished her to cooperate. At that point I left the room, in fact, left the building. I had to fight tears, as my mind kept returning to the thought that this twelve-year-old child was being altered irrevocably, that her life could never be the same again. Values and judgments from my own culture—thoughts of castration, subjugation, altered reality—fought in my brain with the ideas current in the Kuria community, the notions described to me so often as a step towards respect, the transition from childhood to adulthood, the pride and the proof of strength and courage. I wept nonetheless, glad for the privacy my dark glasses afforded me.

Leah did not cry. The entire procedure couldn't have taken more than five minutes. As the nurse finished, Leah resumed her seat in the anteroom. By the time the four circumcisions were complete, a pool of blood lay under each of the chairs.³ Though not fundamentally different from the trails of blood that mark the routes from circumcision grounds during this season, the red pools on the wicker chair seats and concrete floor of the clinic seemed much more dangerous, even sinister, to me.

A half hour after arriving, we were ready to leave. In unison, the girls stood up, had their *kangas* tied around their necks by their escorts, lined up in the order in which they were circumcised, and set off on the walk home. In the meantime, a very large and noisy group of greeters had arrived at the mission. Heavily armed and heavily costumed, the greeters threatened anyone they encountered, their efforts aimed at warding off evil spirits and potential malevolents. Many people were smeared with red ochre, designs painted on their faces. Some men wore Maasai headgear; others sported red, clay-encased braids. Musicians played instruments, *ekegoogo* and *iritingo* especially, and boom boxes blared. People wore flowers or branches, and banged sheets of *mabati*, making sounds like corn popping, or blew whistles, trilled, sang, and called.

Women sprinkled powder on the faces of the *abasamba*, the initiates; its whiteness served to mask the girls' expressions. As we made our way home, people repeatedly stopped the column to greet and praise the initiates, thrusting money into the hands of the escorts or pinning it to the hats and clothes of the girls. The crowd steadily increased, as did the jubilation and the exuberance of the escorts. In the market square, the celebration was frenzied—women paraded with mylar from cassettes as head-dress; men dressed in women's clothing gyrated and shouted—and many people came out to honor the *abasamba*, to give them money, to dance in their faces. Leah's brothers popped up at many locations, looking fierce and vigilant, guarding against dangers that might lurk in the crowd.

The return walk took at least an hour, and before being allowed to enter the homesteads, even the initiates had to dance. As the first in the column

of initiates, Leah was the last to get home. She came into the house, went to her room, and lay down on the mattress that had been placed on the floor. The focus of the event then became the serving of *obosara* to the escorting group.

Soon after lying down, Leah was served a meal of *ubukima* and soup, which she ate propped up on



Newly circumcised initiates often must walk miles to reach their homesteads.

her elbows, lying on the mattress. She counted her money. On the walk home she had been given more than 600 shillings, or about ten dollars—the equivalent of a month's pay for many in the community. I gave her the watch I had brought from America, and she was thrilled.

Later that evening I was greatly disturbed by the news that the United States had begun bombing in Iraq. Large-scale, anti-American sentiment is the last thing anyone wants to have happen while overseas. That night was the first in the week to be undisturbed by circumcision revelers, since no operations are performed on Sundays. Still, I didn't sleep well; I had nightmares about not being able to get back to my children.

Miroslava Prazak is currently writing a monograph, provisionally titled, "Negotiating Identity: Circumcision and Witchcraft in Kuria Life," which examines circumcision as the locus for negotiating identity, status, and power. She publishes her research on the Kuria people regularly in a variety of journals, and has taught at Bennington since 1996.

*All names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.