

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Examining Knowledge Transmission in Male Circumcision Practices

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ABSTRACT

This research explores whether traditional male circumcision imparts cultural knowledge, values, and practices that medical male circumcision might not. By comparing the experiences of initiates who underwent traditional and medical circumcision, this study seeks to understand the differences in knowledge transfer associated with each practice.

Using a cultural anthropology framework, the study analyzes initiation rites as a form of cultural transmission. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how cultural practices and values are passed on during circumcision. A qualitative research methodology was employed, involving in-depth interviews and participant observation. The sample consisted of six initiates: three who underwent traditional circumcision in Willowvale in June 2024, and three who underwent medical circumcision around the Beacon Bay suburbs during the same period.

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and procedures. Participant data was anonymized to maintain confidentiality, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect initiates' rights and well-being.

The study found that traditional male circumcision significantly imparts cultural knowledge, values, and practices. Initiates who underwent traditional circumcision reported learning about their cultural heritage, community responsibilities, and traditional values. In contrast, those who underwent medical circumcision received formal health education but lacked the cultural immersion experienced by their counterparts. The findings highlight the importance of cultural context in traditional practices and suggest that incorporating cultural elements into medical circumcision could enhance the overall experience for initiates. This research underscores the need for a balanced approach that preserves cultural heritage while ensuring initiates' safety and well-being.

Key words: Cultural Knowledge Transfer, Traditional Male Circumcision, Medical Male, Circumcision, Initiation Rites

INTRODUCTION

Traditional male circumcision is a deeply rooted practice in many African cultures, serving as a pivotal rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. This ritual, which involves the surgical removal of the foreskin, is often accompanied by a period of seclusion during which initiates receive important teachings and undergo rigorous training. Beyond its physical and medical aspects, traditional male circumcision holds profound cultural, social, and moral significance for the communities that observe it. Across the African continent, circumcision marks a critical juncture in a young man's life, symbolizing his readiness to assume the responsibilities and privileges of manhood.

Recent studies have highlighted the complexities and potential health risks associated with traditional male circumcision. For instance, Palmer et al. (2020) explored the value of choice in traditional male circumcision and its impact on cultural perceptions of gender and masculinity. Similarly, Al-Maghlouth and Zakaria (2025)

examined parental perceptions of male circumcision in a Muslim community, emphasizing the balance between religious obligations and medical benefits. These studies underscore the need for an understanding of the cultural and health dimensions of circumcision practices.

Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting research on such sensitive topics. Ensuring informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and minimizing harm are essential principles that guide ethnographic research. By adhering to these ethical standards, researchers can responsibly explore the cultural significance and health implications of traditional male circumcision, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this complex practice.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this study involves a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore the impact of knowledge transfer in traditional versus medical male circumcision practices. This design is chosen to capture the rich experiences of the initiates and to understand the cultural and educational aspects embedded within each circumcision practice.

The study involves a purposive sample of six male initiates, aged 18-20, who underwent circumcision in June 2024. The sample includes three initiates who underwent traditional male circumcision in the localities of Willowvale (Eastern Cape), and three initiates who underwent medical male circumcision in the Beacon Bay suburbs (East London -Eastern Cape). The inclusion criteria for the study are male initiates aged 18-20, who underwent circumcision in June 2024 and agreed to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included initiates who underwent circumcision outside the specified period or geographic locations and those unwilling to participate in the study.

Data collection methods include in-depth interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with each initiate to gather detailed information about their experiences, the knowledge imparted during the circumcision process, and their perceptions of the cultural and educational aspects. The researchers engage in participant observation during the initiation ceremonies (with permission) to gain insights into the practices, teachings, and interactions that occur.

Ethical considerations are paramount in this research. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the purpose and procedures of the study. Participant data is anonymized to protect their privacy and confidentiality, with any identifying information removed from the research records. The study is designed to ensure that participants are not exposed to any harm or discomfort, and ethical approval is sought from the relevant institutional review board.

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the qualitative data collected from the interviews and observations. Interviews are transcribed verbatim to create textual data for analysis. Transcripts are then coded to identify significant themes and patterns related to knowledge transfer, cultural teachings, and educational experiences. Codes are organized into broader themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences and insights. These themes are interpreted in the context of the research questions, and findings are related to the existing literature on traditional and medical male circumcision.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, multiple strategies are employed. Data is collected from various sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Participants are given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations. Furthermore, the research process and findings are reviewed by peers to ensure credibility and rigor.

By employing this well-structured and articulated research methodology, the study aims to provide a detailed comparison of the knowledge transfer in traditional versus medical male circumcision practices, contributing to a deeper understanding of their cultural and educational significance.

RESULTS

The analysis of the in-depth interviews and participant observations revealed significant differences in the knowledge transfer associated with traditional and medical male circumcision practices. The findings are

presented in three main themes: cultural knowledge transfer, health education, and psychological and social impact.

Cultural Knowledge Transfer: The initiates who underwent traditional male circumcision in Willowvale reported a rich and immersive experience in cultural knowledge transfer. They recounted learning about their cultural heritage, community responsibilities, and traditional values during the initiation process. The teachings were often delivered by elders and traditional leaders, who emphasized the importance of respecting cultural norms, understanding one's role in the community, and upholding the values passed down through generations. The initiates described a sense of pride and belonging that came from participating in these cultural practices, which they felt was integral to their identity as men within their community.

Health Education: In contrast, the initiates who underwent medical male circumcision in the Beacon Bay suburbs reported receiving formal health education focused on hygiene, sexual health, and overall well-being. The medical practitioners provided detailed information on how to care for the circumcision wound, prevent infections, and maintain good health practices. While the health education was thorough and beneficial, the initiates noted a lack of cultural context and a sense of disconnection from their cultural heritage. The absence of traditional teachings and cultural immersion left some initiates feeling that an essential aspect of their transition to manhood was missing.

Psychological and Social Impact: The psychological and social impacts of the two circumcision practices also differed significantly. Initiates who underwent traditional circumcision reported feeling a stronger sense of identity and belonging to their community. They expressed a deep connection to their cultural roots and a commitment to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as men within their society. On the other hand, initiates who underwent medical circumcision experienced a more clinical and individualized process. While they appreciated the health benefits and safety of the medical procedure, they felt a lack of communal support and cultural reinforcement that traditional practices provided.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of cultural context in traditional male circumcision practices. The knowledge transfer associated with traditional circumcision encompasses not only health-related education but also cultural teachings that reinforce community values and identity. In contrast, medical circumcision, while effective in promoting health and safety, lacks the cultural dimension that is integral to the traditional initiation process. These results underscore the need for a balanced approach that preserves cultural heritage while ensuring the safety and well-being of initiates. Integrating cultural elements into medical circumcision practices could enhance the overall experience for initiates, providing them with both health benefits and a sense of cultural identity.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study reveal a landscape of knowledge transfer in traditional versus medical male circumcision practices. The cultural knowledge transfer in traditional circumcision, as reported by the initiates from Willowvale, aligns with the work of Wanyonyi (2019), who emphasized the role of traditional circumcision in moral transmission and identity formation among African communities. The initiates' sense of pride and belonging echoes the findings of Vincent (2008), who highlighted the cultural significance of circumcision rites in fostering community values and responsibilities.

In contrast, the health education provided during medical circumcision, as experienced by the initiates from Beacon Bay, reflects the biomedical emphasis discussed in the literature on voluntary medical male circumcision (Govender et al., 2020). The focus on hygiene, sexual health, and overall well-being is consistent with the World Health Organization's recommendations for medical circumcision as an HIV prevention strategy (WHO, 2007)³. However, the lack of cultural context observed in this study resonates with the concerns raised by Ayako et al. (2023), who noted the potential disconnect between medical circumcision and traditional cultural practices.

The psychological and social impacts of the two circumcision practices also highlight the importance of integrating cultural elements into medical circumcision. The strong sense of identity and community connection reported by traditional circumcision initiates underscores the need for a holistic approach that combines health

benefits with cultural education. This aligns with the recommendations of Mpateni and Kang'ethe (2020), who advocated for developmental and educational approaches to traditional circumcision that respect cultural values while promoting health and safety.

Concluding Remarks

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the knowledge transfer associated with traditional and medical male circumcision practices. The findings reveal that traditional male circumcision in Willowvale involves significant imparting of cultural knowledge, values, and practices, which play a crucial role in the initiates' sense of identity and belonging within their community. The cultural teachings delivered by elders and traditional leaders emphasize the importance of respecting cultural norms, understanding one's role in the community, and upholding values passed down through generations. This cultural immersion fosters a strong sense of pride and connection to cultural heritage among the initiates.

In contrast, medical male circumcision in the Beacon Bay suburbs primarily focuses on health education, providing initiates with detailed information on hygiene, sexual health, and overall well-being. While the health education is thorough and beneficial, it lacks the cultural context and communal support that traditional circumcision practices offer. The absence of cultural teachings and immersion in medical circumcision leaves some initiates feeling disconnected from their cultural heritage and missing an essential aspect of their transition to manhood.

The study underscores the importance of balancing cultural heritage with health and safety in circumcision practices. Integrating cultural elements into medical circumcision could enhance the overall experience for initiates, providing them with both health benefits and a sense of cultural identity. This approach would ensure that initiates receive comprehensive education that includes both health-related information and cultural teachings, promoting their well-being and fostering a deep connection to their cultural roots.

In conclusion, the research highlights the need for a holistic approach to circumcision practices that preserves cultural heritage while ensuring the safety and well-being of initiates. By addressing the cultural and educational aspects of circumcision, communities can create a more enriching and meaningful initiation process that respects both tradition and modern medical practices. This balanced approach has the potential to strengthen cultural identity, promote health, and enhance the overall experience of initiates as they transition from boyhood to manhood.

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