

# Forced Circumcision: Fallacies and Truth in Circumcision Songs of the Bukusu of Western Kenya

Toboso Bernard

Alupe University, Kenya

**Abstract:** *Circumcision is a cultural practice that has existed in many African societies for a long time. Many African communities have a deep value for this practice which is considered an indispensable rite of passage. Due to this, some of the communities have refused to tolerate members of their communities who defy this practice. This has led to incidences of forced male circumcision in some of the communities. The Bukusu community, a sub-community of the Abaluyia community is one community that deeply values this cultural practice. The community practices circumcision of adolescent boys every two years. The deep value for this cultural practice has led to intolerance towards defiance to circumcision. Based on field work conducted Webuye district of Bungoma County, in Kenya, the paper unravels fallacies in Bukusu circumcision songs and gives a logical solution to Bukusu forced circumcision.*

**Keywords:** Circumcision, fallacies, arguments, truth

## 1. Introduction

Logic is the organized body of knowledge, or science that evaluates arguments [7]. He posits that the aim of logic is to develop a system of methods and principles that we may use as criteria for evaluating the arguments of others and as guides in constructing arguments of our own. While discussing logic, [5] define it as the study of methods and principles used to distinguish correct reasoning from incorrect reasoning. They say that the aim of the study of logic is to discover and make available those criteria that can be used to test arguments and to sort good arguments from bad ones. Circumcision is significant to communities that practice it due to its role in transforming children into adults.

Forced circumcision is viewed as a form of sexual violence that affects both men and women. Forced circumcision of women has been addressed by many scholars and institutions which have insisted that it is a form of gender violence [13]; [1]; [15]. Forced circumcision of men, although not as rampant as female circumcision, has also been condemned in many societies including Kenya [2]. For example, a man from Meru, in Eastern part of Kenya was sentenced to hang for causing death after forcefully circumcising another man [11]. In Kenya, incidences of forced circumcision occur. This has forced men who have not gone through this ritual or whose communities do not practice circumcision as a rite of passage to take security measures during the circumcision period. Due to this, uncircumcised men who live within Bukusuland in Kenya, go into hiding during the circumcision period so as to avoid forced circumcision [4]. Many times, those who do not flee are forcefully circumcised. For example, a Luo man was Forcefully circumcised in Limuru, Kenya during the 2008 post election violence[9]. In this paper, we discuss songs used by the Bukusu of Kenya during circumcision and posit that the arguments advanced in some of the songs which enhance forced circumcision are fallacies which lack truth.

## 2. Literature Survey

Bukusu are a sub-community of the Abaluyia community that lives in western parts of Kenya, on the slopes of Mt Elgon. The Bukusu are neighbours to Nandi and Sabaot, Sub-Communities of the Kalenjin Community. The Bukusu are not immediate neighbours to the Luo community but other Luhya sub-communities like the Abasamia, Abanyala, Abamarachi, Abawanga, Abamarama, Abashisa and Abanyore are immediate neighbours to the Luo. It is for this reason that some Bukusu circumcision songs talk about the Luo and Nandi, as it will be seen in this paper. Bukusu circumcision is an age old cultural practice which is greatly valued by the community. The value attached to this practice is evident in the passion with which the community carries out the rite. It is also evident in the practice of forced circumcision for all adult uncircumcised Bukusu and non Bukusu men living within Bukusuland during the circumcision period.

## 3. Methodology

This research was made successful by field research carried out in Webuye District of Bungoma County. Methods of data collection used included interviews and recording of songs. We identified five circumcised Bukusu men who are well informed about Bukusu circumcision and who have participated in singing circumcision songs during initiation between 1985 and 2015. Their role was to sing the songs used in circumcision as we recorded. A digital recorder was used to record the songs which were then analysed. The men also helped us to interpret the message in the songs because some of the songs had hidden meaning due to the stylistic devices used. Fifteen Bukusu circumcision songs were collected. Songs which were collected had been in use between 1985 and 2015. We also identified four Bukusu elders aged eighty six, eighty two, seventy six and seventy, who confirmed the songs and were interviewed about the process and significance of Bukusu circumcision.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the functional theory of language. The theory has a number of functions[6]; [12], four of which are relevant to our study. These are the informative, the descriptive, the expressive and the evaluative function. The informative function is applied by formulating and affirming or denying proposition[5]. According to this function, language used to affirm or deny propositions or to present arguments, serves the informative function[5]. The descriptive function is primarily used to give commands and orders. This function is also called the imperative function of language[12]. The expressive function, according to [5], is exhibited when one curses while alone, writes poems that are shown to no one, or prays in solitude. The evaluative function is usually used to give judgment.

### 4.1 Fallacy in Bukusu Circumcision Songs

A fallacy is a defect in an argument that consists in something other than false premise[7]. In order to achieve desired impact, fallacies involve defective patterns of arguing that occur so often [10]; [7]. Such defects comprise either mistakes in reasoning or the creation of an illusion that makes a bad argument look good. Fallacies are used to influence actions meant to achieve socio-cultural, political and economic ends. Under political circumstances, fallacies are used to influence supporters to execute actions without logical reasoning. Under cultural circumstances, fallacies are used to entrench practices that are harmful to individuals, a community or a nation. There are several different types of fallacies. For the purpose of this paper, we shall discuss three types that have been explained by [5] and are relevant to the study:

### 4.2 Argument *Ad Hominem* Fallacy

The phrase *Ad hominem* means “against the person”[5]. It is a fallacious attack which is directed, not at the conclusion, but at the person who asserts and defends an argument [5]. According to [7], this fallacy occurs in three forms: the *ad hominem* abusive, the *ad hominem* circumstantial and the *tu quoque*. In the *ad hominem* abusive, the second person responds to the first person (the person who supports, asserts or defends an argument) by verbally abusing him/her. In this fallacy, people assassinate the character of their foes, question their ability to be reasonable, question their integrity and so on [5]. In this case, the targeted person is demeaned, ridiculed and her/his character assassinated. This attack is meant to reduce or eliminate respect accorded an individual and in many cases, it is used to achieve hate towards the person.

In the case of Bukusu circumcision, a person, right from childhood, is made to believe several things about circumcision and the uncircumcised people. First is that circumcision is an indispensable rite of passage for all men. This means that just like birth and death, this stage is a compulsory rite for every Bukusu man. The Bukusu community that follows this tradition has ensured that it is inseparably intertwined with Bukusu traditional religion so as to give it meaning and strength. For example, before a

boy is circumcised, there must be a religious sacrifice. A bull donated by the boy’s uncle must be sacrificed to the Supreme Being and its flesh (*Iusombo*) tied around the boy’s neck. The initiate must also sound jingles (*chinyimba*) as he moves around the village inviting all relatives to his initiation ceremony. He must also invite his maternal uncle who will give him a bull for sacrifice. On the night before circumcision, elders (*bamaima*) must sit, meditate and chant incantations to their Supreme Being as they take local beer. On the morning of the circumcision, the initiate strips naked, goes to the river where the whole body is smeared in mud so as to bond him with the ancestors. This rigorous practice is meant to give circumcision the belief that it is sanctioned, blessed and maintained by the Bukusu Supreme Being and ancestors. This means that it is monitored by unseen forces; therefore no member of the community may avoid it, lest there be catastrophic consequences. The significance that the Bukusu attach to circumcision is evident in many songs. Look at the following:

#### Song 1

**Soloist:** Musinde

**Singers:** Raho

**Soloist:** Musinde

**Singer:** Raho bachonga

#### Translation

**Soloist:** *Initiate*

**Singers:** *Step forward*

**Soloist:** *Initiate*

**Singers:** *Step forward, let your manhood be sharpened*

In this song, the initiate is informed that circumcision is not just an ordinary act, but a significant and indispensable rite that is meant to graduate him into a better person. This is stressed in the song by use of the words, *Raho bachonga* (let your manhood be sharpened). Sharpening of the manhood in this context may refer to both physical and mental preparation to take on male adult roles. One must only qualify to do this by standing the pain of circumcision as evidenced by the entire community for the cut must be done in the open, witnessed by the entire village.

The line, *Rao bachonga*, as used in the song is meant to disparage the manliness and character of the uncircumcised, deny their reasonableness and question their bravery as [5] posit. The initiate is in fact ordered, not requested, to step forward and face the knife, thus the use of the words, (*Rao*) *step forward*. This indicates to the initiates and the entire community that circumcision is not optional, and any member of the community who is not circumcised may be forced to undergo the initiation. These words bear an implicit threat to any member of the Bukusu community who plans to defy circumcision. The word, *musinde*, for example, as used in the song and its general use by the Bukusu, has two meanings. First, it is used to refer to the initiates during circumcision. Secondly, it is used to refer to any uncircumcised man. Consequently, it is used as an insult which is hurled at uncircumcised men. In this song 1, the word *musinde* plays both roles. First, it has the meaning of the initiate because the boy(s) in question are due to face circumcision. Secondly, its repeated use in reference to initiates is meant to insult and torment them just before they finally cross into adulthood. The implicit

message in the song is that any male adult who is not circumcised is defiant to tradition and may be punished, possibly by forcefully being circumcised. The repeated singing of this song during every circumcision season inculcates this message into the initiates and the entire community. It inculcates into them the message that all men must be circumcised.

Second, a Bukusu man right from childhood is meant to believe that circumcision is a way of demonstrating bravery and therefore all uncircumcised men are cowards. Every Bukusu boy, therefore, must demonstrate bravery by going through this rigorous and painful ritual whose process takes several days. Bukusu circumcision songs which are sung during the ritual testify to the fact that anybody who avoids circumcision is not just a coward but an enemy. The following song testifies to this argument.

**Song 2:**

**Soloist:** Mboya...

**Singers:** Eeeee!

**Soloist:** Mboya khurebe Mboya...

**Singers:** Mboya kafwa musinde!

**Translation**

*Soloist: Mboya...*

*Singers: Eeeeh!*

*Singer: Mboya, ask Mboya*

*Singers: Mboya died a coward!*

This song is meant to torment uncircumcised boys before initiation and incite them into braving the pain during circumcision. The song is also meant to torment and ridicule uncircumcised men and coerce him into accepting the act. The present song ridicules a man by the name, Mboya, who refused to be circumcised and died a coward *Mboya kafwa musinde!* (Mboya died a coward!) In this song, the word, *Musinde* means a coward. The name, Mboya, is commonly used as a people's name among the Luo community of Kenya who do not practice circumcision as a way of initiation. The name, Mboya therefore, as used in this song is symbolic and refers to all uncircumcised men and by extension, communities which do not practice circumcision.

The song, therefore, does not just ridicule a person by the name, Mboya, but any community of people who do not practice circumcision. The fallacy in this song is evident in the insult, *musinde* (coward) which is directed at Mboya, as the representative of all the uncircumcised people, Bukusu or non Bukusu. The Bukusu community is informed through this song that Mboya died a coward (*Mboya kafwa musinde!*) because he died uncircumcised. Consequently, anyone who is not circumcised dies a coward just like Mboya. In this case, all uncircumcised people are disparaged and ridiculed so as to be seen as unreasonable and cowardly. This may not be true due to the fact that some communities do not have circumcision as a cultural practice. The Luo, for example, do not have circumcision as a way of initiation. So, it cannot be claimed that a Luo man who has not been circumcised is a coward because it is not a Luo cultural practice. Look at the following song which has a similar message:

**Song 3**

**Soloist:** Ooh! Musinde, oh! Kurichanga kucha Ebunyolo!

**Singers:** Haaho! Haho! Hahoooo!

**Translation**

*Soloist: Ooh! The uncircumcised oh! He who fears (circumcision) should go to Luo-land*

*Singers: Haaho! Haho! Hahoooo!*

The present song, just like song 1, ridicules individuals and communities which do not practice circumcision. In this song, uncircumcised people are insulted by being called cowards (*musinde*). The reference to the Luo community in this text means that the Bukusu have no respect, not just for the Bukusu uncircumcised men, but also any neighbouring communities which do not circumcise their men. That is the reason why the song advises any Bukusu boys and men who have the intention to avoid circumcision to immediately seek refuge among the Luo (*Kurichanga kucha Ebunyolo!*). The initial morph, {ku} in *kurichanga* removes name and the uncircumcised people from the noun class of human beings and instead places it in the group of things. This furthers the fallacy that the uncircumcised are not human beings.

**4.3 Appeal to Emotion Fallacy**

This fallacy is also known as appeal to people. This fallacy is used by people in the effort to excite the emotions and enthusiasm of a crowd so as to win acceptance [7]. It is a strategy used mainly by propagandists. It replaces the laborious task of presenting evidence and rational argument with expressive language and other devices calculated to excite enthusiasm, excitement, anger or hate [5].

The appeal to emotion fallacy is evident in Bukusu circumcision songs. Whereas many of the songs bear the message of encouragement to the initiates, some of them carry messages that excite emotions of, not only the singers and initiates but the whole Bukusu community. Some of the songs used during this ceremony are war songs which were initially sung by warriors during armed conflicts with neighbouring communities. Such songs have now been adopted to take on new roles in circumcision songs although they still carry the same war message. Look at the following:

**Song 4**

**Soloist:** Hamba Mutalia!

**Singers:** Haaa hoooo! Hamba Mutalia! Hamba Mutalia!

**Translation**

*Soloist: Get hold of the Italian!*

*Singers: Haaa hoooo! Get hold of the Italian! Get hold of the Italian!*

This song was initially sung by Bukusu Warriors during armed conflict with Italians during the Second World War. The song was used to incite the emotions of Bukusu warriors to get hold of, and kill, the Italian enemy. In the context of Bukusu circumcision, the song is sung to incite the emotions of the Bukusu community against a common enemy, which is defiance against circumcision as a cultural

rite of passage. The fallacy in the song is evident in the fact that an originally war song is now used to arouse emotions of hate and anger against men who are not circumcised. In this case, the message passed across is that men who are not circumcised are enemies and deserve to be fought. It is for this reason and this fallacy that forced circumcision of men is practiced in the community. The following song bears a similar message.

#### Song 5

**Soloist:** khwera Omurwa

**Singers:** Haaaah

**Soloist:** Khwera Omurwa

**Singers:** Haaaah

#### Translation

**Soloist:** We have killed a Nandi warrior!

**Singers:** Hao!

**Soloist:** We have killed a Nandi warrior!

**Singers:** Hao!

This is a war song initially sung by Bukusu warriors during armed conflict with the neighbouring Nandi community. It is a victory song which warriors sang after battle. This song has been adopted into Bukusu circumcision to serve the same purpose as it did during war. Currently, it serves to incite people emotions against defiance to circumcision. This song is sung after a boy has been circumcised so as to signify victory against in-circumcision. By singing this song, the people's emotions are incited against the uncircumcised people within the Bukusu nation. It is such incitement that eventually leads to forced circumcision of any mature Bukusu or non Bukusu found within the boundaries of Bukusu land.

Use of song and dance is a powerful tool in driving home an incitement message. As [7] argues, use of flags and blaring music are successfully used by propagandists and demagogues in achieving overall effect of incitement. In the case of these two songs, music is used as an effective tool in inciting the community against uncircumcised men of Bukusu and non Bukusu orient. The result has been forced circumcision of non Bukusu immigrants and business men especially in urbanizing areas like Bungoma town.

#### 4.4 Missing the Point Fallacy

Missing the point fallacy illustrates a special form of irrelevance. This fallacy occurs when the premises of an argument support one particular conclusion, but then a different conclusion, often vaguely related to the correct conclusion, is drawn [7]. Among the Bukusu, avoiding circumcision is one way of showing cowardice. For example, in text 3, the song orders the uncircumcised to seek refuge in Luo-land. It says:

#### Song 6

**Soloist:** Ooh! Musinde, oh! Kurichanga kucha Ebunyolo!

**Singers:** Haah! Hah! Hahoooo!

#### Translation

**Soloist:** Ooh! Uncircumcised coward oh!

*Let the coward seek refuge in Luoland*

**Singers:** Haah! Hah! Hahoooo!

The reason for the order is that the Luo community does not practice the culture of circumcision. No Bukusu song talks about forced circumcision. However, the result of the incitement by the emotive words used in the songs has been forced circumcision of both Bukusu and non Bukusu men. This means that the action of forced circumcision is not relevant to the premise of the arguments in the songs. According to [5], that this fallacy arises when an argument purporting to establish a particular conclusion is instead directed to proving a different conclusion.

#### 4.5 Cause of Disagreement between the Bukusu and Uncircumcising Neighbours

Many words and phrases of any language have both a literal or descriptive meaning that expresses some positive or negative feeling about them [10]. Thus, the choice of which words to use in making a statement can be used in hopes of evoking a particular emotional response. This happens because speakers would wish to convey some portion of their feeling along with information. [7] argues that every communication has poetry, and poetry rendered without emotive meaning is can be very dull. Songs are in fact poems, and that means that songs are laden with emotions just like poems. Use of songs during Bukusu circumcision evokes emotions, both positive and negative.

Negative emotions are normally directed at defiant members of the Bukusu community and neighbours who do not observe this cultural practice. As evident in the songs cited above, the words are carefully chosen to ensure that the songs serve the purpose of eliciting anger and hate towards people who do not practice circumcision. This is what eventually leads to forced circumcision of Bukusu and non Bukusu men who have not gone through this practice. Evidently, the songs have sentences that are not only informative but also expressive. The sentences in the songs do not only express feelings. They also have emotional suggestiveness. The emotional impact of the sentences in the songs is what leads to hate towards uncircumcised men and subsequent forced circumcision.

It is therefore evident that the cause of the cultural disagreement between Bukusu and their neighbours who do not practice circumcision; and the resultant forced circumcision, is songs that excessively rely on emotively charged language. This has led to disagreements that are not based on facts or truth. The fact that the Bukusu circumcision songs are laden with emotively charged language means that the message in the songs lacks truth. The disagreement can be referred to as disagreement in attitude and disagreement in belief [10]. In this disagreement, the parties have so little in common that communication between them often breaks down. The songs that are used during circumcision are laden with fallacies rather than truth. This means that hate exhibited towards uncircumcised men and the resultant forced circumcision are not based on truth.

#### 5. Conclusion

The circumcision ceremony of the Bukusu community of Western Kenya is one of the most elaborate in Kenya. The



reason for the elaborate nature is the value attached to the ceremony which from ancient times has been held in high esteem. The ceremony is a rite whose process involves many songs sung by initiates, friends and families. In this article, it has been demonstrated that the Bukusu circumcision is indeed a highly valued cultural practice. It has also emerged that the songs used during this circumcision are laden with emotions rather than facts and truth. The message carried by the songs is in fact meant to incite members of the Bukusu community against defiance towards circumcision. It is in fact this incitement that has led to hate and the resultant forced circumcision of any uncircumcised man found within Bukusuland.

## 6. Future Scope

This research looked at fallacies and truths in circumcision songs of the Bukusu of Western Kenya, and the role of the songs in enhancing forced circumcision. The issue of forced circumcision is intricate. There is need for further studies about circumcision songs of other communities that still practice forced circumcision. Further to this, there is need for studies that aim at unraveling power relations in circumcision songs and their role in enhancing forced circumcision.

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## Author Profile



**Dr. Toboso Bernard** is a PhD holder in Kiswahili and other African Languages. He is currently the Chair of Language and Literature Education Department at Alupe University, Kenya.